



'MOTHER ENGLISH': A TOOL OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT FOR BHARAT

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ABSTRACT :

Recently, many conferences and seminars are being organized on the theme 'Empowering Students of Bharat with English for Career Development'. The term 'Bharat' has different connotations for different people in our country, whereas concept notes of the conferences and seminars restrict the meaning of the term to rural areas. In fact, even in India, i.e. urban areas, we can see many Bharats. There is a fuzzy boundary between 'India' and 'Bharat'. In our pluralistic society, social and economic disparities prevail to such an extent that in the same city, in the same locality, in the same school or college, we may find India and Bharat residing together. Therefore, for the sake of convenience, instead of saying English for Bharat, it would be better to say English for socially and economically disadvantaged sections of the society. The present paper focuses on aspects like cultural hegemony, language and the current scenario of English learning in modern India. It also accentuates English as a tool of social and economic development with reference to a great social reformer and educationist Savitribai Phule's two poems, namely 'Mother English' and 'Learn English'. Moreover, the paper also suggests certain ways of teaching the English language to Bharat i.e. socially and economically disadvantaged sections. The suggestions are based on a case study which has been carried out for the last 17 years.



KEYWORDS : Bharat, cultural hegemony, disadvantaged sections, Savitribai Phule.

INTRODUCTION:

Indian society is a multicultural society. It is full of social and economic disparities. In order to maintain cultural hegemony, an elite group in any society uses different tools to control and manipulate the masses. One of the powerful tools of showing supremacy is a language. For instance, in ancient India, Sanskrit was the language of knowledge and its learning was restricted to a handful people. The Shudras were not allowed to take education, and consequently, they lost their social and economic status in the society. Mahatma Jotirao Phule aptly describes the root cause of the plight of the Shudras in his book titled *Shetkaryacha Asud (The Farmer's Whipcord)*. He says 'Without education, wisdom was lost; without wisdom, morals were lost; without morals, development was lost; without development, wealth was lost; without wealth, the Shudras were ruined; so much has happened through lack of education'. (Phule: 1883)

English Learning in Modern India

After independence, the Indian Constitution assures equal rights to education to all the citizens. However, the issue of quality education has been at the forefront. The situation of government schools

is disheartening. The students of these schools fail to acquire even the basic English language skills. They mainly belong to socially and economically disadvantaged sections of the society. They cannot afford to pay huge donations and fees for private English medium schools. In this context, Sabur Ali says 'A majority of the Dalit's economic status is very low, and they mostly reside in the villages and slums. For them, private institutions are a distant dream.' (Uma, et al. 2017:12) As a result, a linguistic divide has been created in the society. In the today's world, English is considered as the language of knowledge and a gateway to the world of opportunities. It has become the medium of instruction in almost all institutes of higher education. In India, like *Sanskrit*, its learning has been restricted to an elite group in the society and a large population of the nation has been deprived of its social and economic development. The neo-hierarchy has emerged from both the medium of language (English) and the access to quality education. In the movie 'Hindi Medium', the film star Saba Qamar says 'In India, English is not merely a language, but a class.' With a noble intention, the Government of India has introduced the Right to Education Act, 2009. As per the Act, 25% seats are reserved in private schools for children belonging to socially and economically disadvantaged groups. However, the available statistical data shows that the 25% seats are not filled completely by the English medium schools. On one pretext or another, the schools deny admissions to the weaker section students. In short, English has not reached everyone. It has remained a privileged language of the elite. It has not reached the socially and economically disadvantaged sections residing in slums and villages, and has not become an instrument for their development.

English as a Tool of Social and Economic Development

In the 21st century, English is the lingua franca of the global world. If we are dreaming of becoming a global power, then we cannot afford to keep a large section of the society away from learning the English language. For the socially marginalized groups, it is a tool of social and economic upward mobility. It is said that 'English is the milk of a tigress and whoever drinks it, will certainly roar.' Savitribai Phule, the legendary 19th century educationist and social reformer, recognized English as an instrument of social emancipation. In a poem titled 'Learn English', Savitribai says:

Make self-reliance your occupation,
Exert yourself to gather the wealth of knowledge,
Without knowledge animals remained dumb,
Don't rest! Strive to educate yourself.
The opportunity is here,
For the Shudras and AtiShudras,
To learn English
To dispel all woes.
Throw away the authority
Of the Brahmin and his teachings,
Break the shackles of caste,
By learning English. (Translation by S. Sardar & V. Paul)

In this poem, Savitribai Phule urges the *Shudras* and *Ati-Shudras* to learn English. She wants them to be self-reliant and independent. For their emancipation, she advises them to strive hard to gather the wealth of knowledge which is available in English. Further, she says education will make the downtrodden people aware of their existence and basic human rights like liberty, equality and social dignity. Without knowledge animals remained dumb, therefore, the poetess earnestly tells the subjugated sections of the society to struggle hard to educate themselves. As per the *Manusmriti*, the *Shudras* were not allowed to take education, but during the British Raj, there was the opportunity to learn the English language. Therefore, she appeals these people to learn English as it would equip them to dispel all their woes. It would empower them so that they can throw away the authority of the

Brahminical tenets and the social and economic restrictions imposed by the *Manusmirti*. It would lead them towards breaking the shackles of the caste system by learning English.

In her another poem related to the same theme titled 'Mother English', Savitribai Phule shows her reverence for the language by calling it Mother English:

Mother English, a powerful English voice,
Emancipates the Shudras earnestly.
Mother English is not the kakistocracy of *Mughals* or *Peshwas*,
Mother English provides enlightenment and life for the *Shudras* kindly,
Mother English feeds milk to the *Shudras* and nurtures them,
Mother English breaks beastly life and provides human life for the *Shudras*. (My translation)

According to Savitribai Phule, the English language plays the role of mother for the *Shudras*. As mother works hard in many ways to make a child independent, English also performs the same role for the *Shudras*. It provides them a powerful voice to raise their issues. It helps them to emancipate themselves from the clutches of social and economic shackles imposed by the *Chaturvarna* system. Indirectly, the language provides life for the *Shudras* benevolently. As a mother feeds milk to a child to make it stronger, in the same way, Mother English empowers and nurtures the downtrodden people socially and economically. Alison Barret says, 'English is a way of accessing socio-economic advancement. English, in this country, means a language of power, and if you don't give them English, they cannot access power structures and effect changes in socio-economic policies.' (Powell & Gunashekar 2013:7)

Therefore, for the socially and economically disadvantaged sections of the society, it is not only a powerful tool of economic empowerment but also a tool of social emancipation.

Ways to teach the English language to *Bharat*, viz socially and economically disadvantaged sections

While teaching English to *Bharat*, undoubtedly, an eclectic approach needs to be followed. The modern technology must be integrated with the language teaching. In short, all the modern approaches and methods need to be incorporated in the language teaching. However, prior to that certain basic things to be kept in mind and followed, otherwise, even effective teaching tools would fail while teaching English to students from *Bharat*.

The significant points can be summarized as follows:

1. A teacher needs to understand the socio-economic background of the students coming from *Bharat*.
2. The learners need a motherly treatment from a teacher. Like mother, the teacher needs to accept them as they are. When they take admissions in colleges, due to poor school education, they lack basic language proficiency. Therefore, the teacher may feel frustrated while teaching the English language skills. At this point, the teacher needs a lot of patience and must teach at the learner's pace.
3. The language deficiency takes away the learners' confidence in the learning process.
4. The language phobia creates a mental block that the learners are not going to learn the language, however hard they may try.
5. The learners should be encouraged to use the language at ease and should not be penalized or insulted if they make errors.
6. They need constant support, love and encouragement from a teacher. Initially, they need the language for their language learning survival. They should be taught minimal responses to indicate understanding, agreement and doubts etc. (e.g. Yes/ That's true. /Absolutely/ Exactly/ Really? /Sorry/ Pardon me./ I didn't get your question./ Please simplify your question. etc.)
7. Usually, in the language classroom, there is a stressful environment, therefore, to lessen the stress, the teacher needs to have a sense of humour. He needs a lot of creativity to make the teaching and learning process a fun.

8. These learners need to know when they are doing a good job. Therefore, a teacher needs to know how to reinforce their responses.
9. In such classes, creating interest and sustaining the learners' interest in the learning process is a big challenge.
10. Teaching English to *Bharat* needs an open-mind, a lot of commitment and flexibility.

A Case Study: Development of the CEFL

The present case study is based on the long term English language teaching project carried out in the Ness Wadia College of Commerce, Pune. The project has been carried out for the last 17 years. In 2000, the project was initiated with a view of improving conversational skills of the SC/ST students. The College had received a grant of Rs. 20,000/- from the UGC to conduct a Remedial Course in English for the SC/ST students. In the very first batch of the course around 30 students registered for the course. The course mainly focused on the basic applied grammar and conversational skills. The use of a motherly treatment in teaching provided good results. The course enhanced the confidence level of students and the students who could not utter a single word started delivering speeches in English confidently at the end of the course. The same course was run for the next 10 years successfully. In 2010, a full-fledged language centre named Centre for English and Foreign Languages (CEFL) was set up with a digital language lab of 25 computers. For the basic infrastructure of the lab, the UGC had provided funds under the 11th year plan for the socially and economically disadvantaged students.

Since 2010, a Certificate Course in Spoken English has been provided at 4 levels, i.e. Basic, Pre-intermediate, Intermediate and Advanced. The duration of each level is 3 months and the course components are revised from time to time. The digital language lab helps to teach the language with the help of multimedia, improving students' listening skills, conversational skills and pronunciation skills etc.

Along with the Certificate Course in Spoken English, other courses such as Certificate Course in Business English and Foreign Languages are offered at the CEFL. The CEFL is a recognized training centre for the Cambridge Business English Certificate exams. The students of English medium take admission to the Business English courses. Now, all the courses are self-financed and the college management has taken a policy decision to give 50% discount in fees to the socially and economically disadvantaged students. Around 400 students avail the benefits of the different courses offered at the CEFL. As all the courses are open to even outsiders, the College gets substantial revenue every year. Indirectly, the Centre helps both *Bharat* and India to grow together.

CONCLUSION

In short, in the present scenario characterized by globalization and privatization, the socially and economically disadvantaged sections of the society crave for English in order to mingle with the mainstream society, for their economic empowerment and social emancipation. They strongly wish for a change in the present unfair education system and flawed educational policies. Now, the question is not which medium of instruction, but how to teach English effectively to them. Indirectly, a huge responsibility lies on the shoulders of English language trainers and teachers. They will need to devise pedagogical tools and methods which would be compatible with the language needs of *Bharat*. It would be interesting and befitting to conclude this research paper with Sharmila Rege's views on the Phule-Ambedkarite Feminist Pedagogical practice:

The challenge is to develop a method of reflexive analysis, employing self questioning as an analytical and political process-to see how experiences are socially constructed. To review how a 'normal/good' teacher, student and classroom are socially and politically constructed and thereby interrogate our different and contradictory locations within the social relations of teaching and learning. Thus, understanding and transforming the social relations of learning is a struggle that is both personal and political. What we do not have as a resource for such an exercise and need to put together is a sustained project to collect, document and analyse the diverse life stories and everyday

experiences of teachers in different contexts. This will allow 'biographising' of the social structures and processes of education and 'structuralising' of biographies of those engaged in teaching (2009:25).

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