

The English Juggernaut

Regional Medium Schools In Crisis

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'The English Hatao' movement of the 60's, concentrated mainly in North India, has gradually been replaced by a pan-Indian demand for 'English Sikhao', cutting across all classes. Now more than ever, most Indians consider English to be the language of opportunity providing access to knowledge, power and material possessions.

Not surprisingly, the vast majority of urban and rural parents, like their counterparts abroad, want their children to learn English. This has had a significant impact on the policy and practice of primary and secondary education in post independent India.

English medium schools, private or government-aided, have expanded rapidly to meet the overwhelming demand for admission from the middle and upper classes. This has had a considerable impact on well-known government-aided schools teaching in the regional medium. Many middle and upper middle class parents, educated in these mainly urban schools, are now sending their children to English medium schools.

To cope with this new demand of parents, educational trusts running established regional medium schools have in many cases had to add English medium divisions to existing classes. Some have started entirely new parallel English medium schools. Others have abandoned their original mission of promoting regional medium education, and have switched over entirely to English medium instruction.

Government elementary schools continue to teach the large majority of children in the regional language. These students would traditionally have started the study of English, as a second language, in Std. 5 or Std. 6. By the time they appear for the Std. 10 board examinations, they would have had 500-600 hours of instruction in English. However, instead of acquiring basic communication

skills, most of them are unable to speak, read or write even basic sentences in English.

Illiteracy in government schools is not confined to English alone. Many children complete 5 or even 8 years of elementary education in the regional language, and are functionally illiterate in the regional language. In such schools, where illiteracy is rampant, teachers are not likely to be teaching regularly.

Regular instruction by government school teachers would significantly improve reading and writing in the regional language, but not English skills. The overwhelming majority of teachers, who teach English in elementary schools, do not know English themselves. Neither do they know how to teach it.

Given the abysmally low quality of teaching and learning in all subjects in many government schools, it is little wonder that private alternatives to government schools are flourishing all over urban and rural India. Many poor but ambitious parents are paying substantial fees to send their children, especially their sons, to private schools which are often nothing but substandard, commercial teaching shops. Most of these private institutions teach in the regional language, though many of them claim to be English medium schools.

Regional medium schools, especially government institutions, are facing a grave threat. The urban middle class has by now completely deserted the municipal corporation schools. The ambitious poor are following in their footsteps. And since private alternatives are rapidly emerging in our villages, a similar process of educational differentiation is becoming visible in rural India.

The response of the political and educational leadership has been symbolic, populist and inadequate. Reversing a long standing educational policy of beginning the teaching of

English as a second language in Std 5 or 6, many states have recently started teaching it from Std.1 onwards. Tamil Nadu, a progressive state in the field of elementary education, is considering beginning to teach it from the pre-primary stage.

No research has been cited to justify beginning English earlier. The rationale could be the popular understanding that young children learn languages faster, and the more time students spend learning a second language the quicker they learn it. Does research support these views which are also widely held by the general public and many educators?

These views are myths, according to a World Bank document, "The use of First and Second Languages In Education : A Review of International Experience". In fact, older children and adolescents are more skilled than younger children in learning a second language. Children who are given the opportunity to develop their first language, learn a second language more easily than children who have not had this opportunity. The former are able to transfer academic skills learnt in the first language, to the second language.

Finally, this report highlights the importance of trained teachers who need to have competence in the language that they are instructing in, as well as the ability to teach the language in a meaningful way to children. Rote learning is not enough. However, this type of systematic teacher training has not been undertaken by states who have begun teaching English in Std. 1.

The following account of a Std. 2 English class in a government school illustrates the problem. The young students were heard lustily singing "Aya thanda", but neither they nor their teacher knew what was being sung. Furthermore, the teacher did not feel it necessary to know what the song, "I Hear Thunder", meant.

The long-term vitality of our regional cultures depends on the vibrancy of our regional medium schools. And if these schools have to stem the exodus of students, and are to flourish, then English teaching and learning in these

institutions must significantly improve. Public and academic discussions on this issue, conspicuous by their absence at present, need to be initiated. This would include revisiting the decision to start English in Std.1. The core elements of an integrated plan to improve English in our regional medium schools would include teacher-training, syllabus and textbook revision.

Finally, improving English cannot be divorced from an overall strategy to rejuvenate our government schools by making them more accountable for what students learn. Otherwise, these schools will continue to slowly buckle under the relentless onslaught of the English juggernaut.

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