

Transforming Lives: English Education and the Marginalized Women of India

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CHAPTER

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Abstract:

English, the language of the British colonizers, the erstwhile instrument of slavery and oppression, proved to be a boon for Indians. Apart from creating solidarity among the nationalists and

helping achieve a pan-Indian identity, English proved to be instrumental in transforming the lives of Indian women in manifold ways. English education has been immensely beneficial especially for those women who experience the intersection of class, caste, race and gender on an almost daily basis. Replacing the existing exclusionary system of education in India, monopoly of a few- the upper caste male, English education opened up new horizons and vistas for both the *savarna* and the *avarna* women, gave them new voices and representational spaces. This paper attempts to examine and critically analyze the impact of English education, from the days of its inception till this day, on the lives of Indian women in general and the marginalized lower-class and lower-caste women in particular. I will attempt to explore to what extent English has helped achieving a more egalitarian society in India. Along with the positive effects of English education, the other side of the coin has also to be taken into account. I will also discuss the role of English in creating a new kind of caste system, with marginalized women being its worst victims.

Introduction:

“Perhaps the most enduring legacy of the British empire in India, alongside its commitment to parliamentary democracy,” observes Tarun Timalisina in “Redifining Colonial Legacies: India and the English Language,” “has been the English language.” As an inevitable consequence of the long British colonial presence in the Indian subcontinent, English, the tongue of the colonial masters, has, far from remaining a foreign language, become one of the languages of India. The language, which was initially implemented to serve the purpose of creating a class of English-educated clerks and officials to smoothly run the British administration, and, which was, in its earlier stages, the second language of a few, gradually became an indispensable part of our daily life. As K. Suneetha Rani puts it: “People questioned, debated, adopted, manipulated and mastered over English but on the other hand admired it, followed it and owned it” (2). A language, which earlier would only had been an instrument of slavery and oppression and division on the lines of race and class proved to be immensely beneficial for Indian women, oppressed and repressed by patriarchy. English, unlike the existing Sanskrit and Persian, accessible only to a privileged few, was accessible even to

women belonging to the marginalized communities like the *Dalits* and the *Adivasis*. English, with its immense emancipatory potential, opened newer horizons and created aspirations in the minds of these wretched beings. In a nation of immense linguistic and cultural diversity as India, it is English that binds us together, that helps creating a pan-Indian identity. English, a language equidistant from all the native languages of India, is usually preferred to Hindi as a common language of communication. In the present era of rampant urbanization, globalization and digitalization, proficiency in English has become the basic prerequisite. Apart from discussing in some detail these positive impacts of English in the lives of the downtrodden Indian women, this paper will focus on the pitiable condition of those women whose aspirations for upward social mobility are being nipped in the bud owing to the inaccessibility of English to them.

Though I will, in the following paragraphs, attempt to discuss the inception, development, trajectory and impact of English education in India, my focus, in keeping with the topic of my discussion will be on the impact of English education on the lives of Indian women in general and the underprivileged and marginalized ones in particular. Women's education (here I am talking of Western education in particular) has always been a hotly debated issue in India. As K. Suneetha Rani puts it:

In all these debates, English education became the central focus, for not only was it perceived as a colonial heritage but also it was believed to corrupt Indian women and thus lead to the collapse of moral values and the institution of family in India. (3)

Any discussion on women's education in the nineteenth century cannot exclude the issue of English education since "education in the nineteenth century meant education in the English model if not in the English medium" (Rani 3).

Implementation of English Education in India: The Colonial Era:

Macaulay's Minutes:

English education in India has its roots in the British colonial era. Lakshmi Holmstrom presents the scenario/ backdrop against which English education was implemented in India:

Before the coming of the English, there were two kinds [of] schools in India: Sanskrit institutions, attended mainly by Brahmin boys and teaching classical law, literature and the scriptures, with their Muslim counterparts which taught Islamic classics in Arabic and Persian; and schools where non-Brahmins were taught in the regional languages....(quoted in Murthy pp. 1-2).

"A(a) single shelf of a Good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia," declared most infamously Thomas Babington Macaulay, the British historian and Whig politician who was appointed as the first Law Member of the Governor-General's Council after the passing of the Charter Act 1833 and who was elected the President of the General Committee of Public Instruction (GCPI) in June 1834 . "Honours might be roughly even in works of the imagination, such as poetry, but when we pass from works of imagination

to works in which facts are recorded, and general principles investigated, the superiority of the Europeans becomes absolutely immeasurable,” argued Macaulay in his *Minute on Indian Education* of February 1835, the treatise that prioritised Occidental education at the expense of the traditional Indian one imparted either in Sanskrit or in Persian- the languages used by Hindu and Muslim scholars respectively. The East India Company was, by then, sponsoring Indian academic institutions where either of these two languages was the medium of instruction. Imparting secondary education in the vernacular languages of India was unthinkable at that time since all of the significant texts were written either in Sanskrit or in Persian- the languages of the Hindu and the Muslim elites respectively. As becomes evident from the quotation above, the outlook of Anglicist (as opposed to the Orientalists) Macaulay was purely utilitarian. In the practical-minded Macaulay’s opinion, these two classical languages were as much inaccessible to the vernacular speakers as was English, then a foreign tongue. He further added that texts composed in these two languages were incompatible with what he called “useful learning.” Therefore, in order to “educate a people” who could not be “educated by means of their mother-tongue,” the need of the hour was to “to teach them some foreign language.” As he realised that it was literally impossible to “educate” (for him’ education is synonymous with European education) the masses with the limited resources of the British colonial machinery, they would better invest their energies in creating a class of anglicised Indians , “a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect,” who would bridge the gap between the rulers and the ruled. The chosen few would receive the Western education, and, they, in turn, would convey the same to the masses, a system of education known as “Downward Filtration Theory.”

The main aim of the British was not to Enlighten their Indian subjects. They were clearly motivated by an intent of smoothly running the administrative machinery and to indoctrinate the masses through this elite, English-educated Westernized class. All the efforts of the British East India Company were therefore directed towards gaining a strong foothold in the Indian subcontinent. But what Macaulay and his sneering peers, blinded by white supremacy, failed to foresee was that this very decision would ultimately boomerang on the British themselves. It is the “Western ideas and ideals like democracy, enlightenment and self-determination” (Kirkpatrick 170) that made a significant portion of the Indian elites aware of their fallen situation, the injustice done to their country as well as their worth and potential. All these gave impetus to the anti-British freedom struggle. The English might have attempted their best to divide Indian people, but it is English that helped forming an “all-Indian political identity” and “achieving national integration” (Kirkpatrick 170). Otherwise it would have been much difficult, if not impossible, in a multilingual country like India, to collectively resist the colonizers.

It was the phenomenal English Education Act 1835, introduced by Lord William Bentinck, the then Governor-General of the British East India Company, by which “the funds that were allocated to uplift to support the Indian languages in the country were now redirected to

‘westernize’ the country” (Saxena) that paved the way for English becoming one of the Indian languages rather than remaining an alien tongue. Administrative works were henceforth to be conducted/ carried out in English and English would eventually replace Persian as the language of the higher law courts.

Wood’s Dispatch:

The next significant step taken in this regard by the British colonial administration was the 1854 recommendations of Sir Charles Wood, the President of the Board of Control of the British East India Company. In this formal dispatch, widely and unofficially (Wiki) known as Wood’s Dispatch, sent to Lord Dalhousie, the then Governor-General of India. In this dispatch, which is considered as the ‘Magna Carta’ of English education in India, Wood suggested the use of vernacular languages as the medium of instruction at the primary level, Anglo-vernacular languages at high schools and English as the medium of instruction at the higher levels, i.e., in the colleges. Wood’s Dispatch was also put significant emphasis on women’s education which was to be supported by the government. On Wood’s recommendations, government schools in all districts and education departments in all provinces were set up. Prestigious institutions for higher studies were set up in the major Indian cities. The University of Calcutta, the University of Bombay and the University of Allahabad, all established in 1857, were to change the course of education in India, leaving everlasting impressions. The University of Punjab (1882) and the University of Allahabad (1887) followed afterwards. It was, however, not until 1876 that women could attend exams at the university (Calcutta University, 1876).

Western Education for Indian Women: The Christian Missionaries:

Though girls’ schools started imparting education in India as early as in 1818 by Christian Missionaries, as Partha Chatterjee keenly observes, the deep-seated fear of proselytization (here conversion to Christianity) and exposure of Indian women to potentially harmful and corrupting western influence prevented most of the Indian families from sending their daughters to these schools (Rani). There were indeed women like Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922), who, oppressed and repressed by the Hindu society, and no longer being able to withstand the restrictions, chose to be converted to Christianity to break the shackles. Such threat and fear, however, started subsiding as westernized girls’ schools were being set up by Indians themselves.

Women’s Education and the New Patriarchy: Docile *Bhadramahila* and the Educated Rebel:

As a result of the endeavours taken by great social reformers like Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, there could be seen a visible growth in women’s education as westernized secular education was supposed to alleviate the fallen condition of women and empower them. But it would be wrong to assume that the contemporary Indian society wholeheartedly supported the idea of girls attending schools imparting Western education that would encourage them “to become immodest, undisciplined and un-controllable,” needless to mention the “deep rooted fear of

early widowhood.” (Rani 3). In his brilliant and path-breaking thesis, Partha Chatterjee discusses how women’s education was, after all, “a project of making ideal woman” (Rani 3). Since “a new patriarchy started to dictate the nationalist Indian woman in a colonial set up,” a new woman, the *bhadramahila*, educated yet preserving traditional Indian womanly virtues, was to be created who would maintain the purity of the inner spiritual core or the *ghar*, while the world or the *bahir* would be the domain of men. It was thus problematic as women were allowed to be educated for making the private sphere better, to become better daughters, wives, daughters-in law and mothers who would be able to nurture their children in a better way. “The private sphere was emphasized as that was considered to be the primary and the sole space and commitment for women and also that they had and they were allowed no concept of the public sphere,” observes Rani.

Despite the attempts to make better housewives, not all women were complicit in such project of making a class of *bhadramahilas*, tradition in the garb of modernity, and instead, questioned and rebelled against the codes of conduct, injunctions and restrictions imposed on them by patriarchal society. As Sanjukta Dasgupta points out in the chapter titled “Colonised: The Bengali Woman Writer in British India” in the book *Influence of English on Indian Woman Writers*, it is their English knowledge that empowered women writers like Rokeya Sakhawat and Swarnakumari Devi to “traverse intellectually and linguistically beyond the cultural lines on control.” (Natarajan). The social reform movement of mid nineteenth century Maharashtra can be considered as “an offshoot of English education” and women novelists like Kashibai Kanitkar and Indirabai Sahasrabuddhe introduced the concept of gender equality through their writings (Natarajan).

Western Education for Indian Girls by Indians:

New Hope for Subalterns: Savitribai Phule and Fatima Begum Sheikh:

The first Indian girls’ school set up at Bhide Wada in Pune, Maharashtra by any Indian was the school founded in 1848 by the renowned social reformer, educationist and Indian feminist Savitribai Jyotirao Phule (1831-1897), her husband Jyotirao Phule and her mentor, the revolutionary feminist Sagunabai (Kandukuri). For women like Savitribai, belonging to the so-called backward Mali community, who used to experience the intersectionality of gender, caste and race on an almost daily basis, English education, “the sole blessing ... to come out of centuries of toil and exploitation” became “an effective means of subverting hegemonic structures.” (Rani). It must have required a mammoth of courage, determination and resilience on her part to carve such a space for women like her amidst the strictly hierarchical, Brahminical and patriarchal society where traditional education was a male Brahminical monopoly. Savitribai, trained in two Western teachers’ training institutions, employed the Western curriculum that included mathematics, science and social studies (Wiki) instead of traditional Hindu Brahminical texts like Vedas and Shastras (Kandukuri) which were accessible

only to a few. Neither verbal abuses, nor stones and dung hurled at her could stop Savitribai whose clarion call to the subalterns was:

Throw away the authority
Of the Brahmin and his teachings,
Break the shackles of caste,
By learning English.

About one hundred and fifty girls were studying in the three schools run by the Phule couple in Pune towards the end of 1851. The patriarchal anxiety and fear regarding the success of women's education and the hurt male ego rings in the voice of officials of a government school published in the *Poona Observer* dated May 29, 1852:

The number of girl students in Jotirao's school is ten times more than the number of boys studying in the government schools. This is because the system for teaching girls is far superior to what is available for boys in government schools. If this situation continues, then the girls from Jotirao's school will prove superior to the boys from the government schools and they feel that in the coming examinations, they can really achieve a big victory. If the Government Education Board does not do something about this soon, seeing these women outshine the men will make us hang our heads in shame.

True to the male chauvinists' fear, it was indeed secular education that would give birth to thousands of Savitribais who would, rather than remaining docile, obedient and subservient to men, learn to question and push the boundaries.

After the couple, supposedly engaged in sacrilege, were expelled from their house, they took shelter at the house of Jyotiba's friend Usman Sheikh. A deep friendship developed between Savitribai and Fatima Begum Sheikh, the wife of Usman Sheikh. Encouraged by Savitribai, she enrolled herself in a teacher training course and graduated, along with Savitribai, from the Normal School. She is considered as the first Muslim woman teacher of India. "Their (Savitribai and Fatima's) friendship, camaraderie and sisterhood," as Divya Kandukuri puts it, "define the core values of what we call intersectional feminism today." In the 1850s, Savitribai and her husband established two educational trusts- the Native Female School and The Society for promoting the Education of Mahars, Mangs and Etcetras and there were many schools under these two. It is the English education taught in the schools ran by the Phule couple that created such empowered girls like Mukta Salve, who, at the age of fourteen, composed a path-breaking essay on the sufferings of Mahars and Mangs.

Ram Mohan Roy, Vidyasagar and Bethune School:

Established in 1849, Bethune School, named after its founder, John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune, was the Second (the First being that established by the Phule couple a year earlier) women's school not only in India, but in the entire Asian region. The school, which started its humble journey as Calcutta Female School with financial assistance from and in the residence of Raja Dakshinaranjan Mukherjee (1814-1878), the eminent social reformer and free thinker

belonging to the Young Bengal group, acquired the status of the first women's college in India (Bethune College) in 1879.

Drinkwater Bethune was also helped by the great social reformer Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar who felt that it was only education, and not any mere legislative act that can uplift the women of his country. Vidyasagar, a tireless crusader against social injustice and dogmatic religion that oppressed women, made educating women his lifelong mission. Vidyasagar vehemently campaigned for women's education, organized a fund named Nari Shiksha Bhandar, urged families to send their daughters to schools and opened thirty five girls schools, allowing thirteen hundred girls to enrol themselves in those schools.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the champion of women's causes, who is chiefly remembered for his pivotal role in abolishing the evil practice of sati, also advocated women's education. Roy, a staunch believer in equality of sexes, urged women to come out of their cloistered existence and receive the same education as men. In the Anglo-Hindi School founded by Roy in 1822, girls could study with the boys. Ram Mohan Roy was also one of the proponents of the Brahmo Samaj movement propagated women's education.

English Education in Post-Independence India:

After remaining for several centuries under the cruel clutches of the foreign rulers, India was nearing her independence. Significantly enough, it was English, the native tongue of the British colonial administration, and not any Indian language, that became "a major factor in creating a pan-Indian freedom movement in the nineteenth century" (Kirkpatrick, 170). Peggy Mohan puts it most succinctly in *Wanderers, Kings, Merchants: The Story of India through its Languages* :

Meanwhile in India, the movement for swarāj, or 'independence', was gaining ground, and this was a big chance to shake off the oppressive linguistic burden the British had imposed. India could go back to an administrative structure based on Persian, as in Mughal times. Or it could go forward into a new egalitarian age based on socialist principles, where rich and poor alike spoke the same language, and the children of the rich and the poor sat side by side in class in neighbourhood schools where there were no fees, learning their lessons in Indian languages, English could be banished with the stroke of a pen.

The Parliamentary Debates Over English:

Language became one of the most contentious issues in post Independent India. It was not an easy task to choose a single national language for a linguistically diverse country like India. Such a sensitive issue had to be handled with utmost care and sagacity. Our Constitution makers, being aware of this fact, hotly debated on this issue while framing the Indian Constitution in the Constituent Assembly. Some were in favour of crowning Hindi as the national language. The were of the opinion that English, the language of enslavement and oppression should be done away with in the free country. Many others, mainly from the non-

Hindi speaking areas, immediately opposed to the idea of the supremacy and dominance of one Indian language over other regional ones. Using multiple regional languages as official languages might appease people belonging to different linguistic communities. But that could further aggravate the problem rather than offering any solution. Ambedkar argued that while one language can unite, two languages will inevitably divide people. He was in favour of adopting Hindi as the official language since it would help developing a common Indian culture and therefore unite India (Journals of India). Apart from the opposition from non-Hindi speakers, there was another problem with Hindi and that was its dialectical variations. Hindi has almost thirteen different dialects and choosing one among them was another difficult task. Since no unity could be reached among the warring factions, a compromise had to be made and this came in the form of Munshi-Ayyangar formula. English would, henceforward, continue to be the official language of India, along with Hindi.

Radhakrishnan Commission and Mudaliar Commission:

The University Education Commission, the first education commission in independent India (Slideshare.net) chaired by Dr. S. Radhakrishnan recommended in its report submitted in 1948: “English be studied in high school and universities in order that we may keep in touch with the stream of ever growing knowledge. This would prevent our isolation from the world and help us to take advantage of the wider reach of the English language.” English would be the medium of instruction for higher education. It is the Commission that pointed out the need for establishing rural universities and women’s colleges. More and more women, not only the privileged urban ones, but also those from the margins would therefore be able to shape their destinies rather than confining themselves solely to the roles of obedient daughters, dutiful wives and caring mothers. The same commission emphatically suggested development of professional education in fields ranging from agriculture administration and commerce to medicine and engineering and technology. Needless to say, the need of English will be felt like never before as most of the knowledge in these professional fields was, and is still to this date, available in English.

Mudaliar Commission or the Secondary Education Commission, established by The Government of India in 1952, put special emphasis on the organization of special programmes so that secondary education among girls and the scheduled castes and tribes could be expanded.

Giving Voice to the Voiceless:

English education has also given louder voice to thousands of voiceless Indian women. Women authors have got wider platform and worldwide recognition owing to their writings being published in English. The works of *adivasi* (tribal) female writers like Susheela Samad (Munda tribe), Alice Ekka (Munda tribe), Usha Kiran Atram (Gond tribe) and Jacinta Kerketta (Oraon tribe) would not have been accessible to thousands of readers across the globe, had these not been translated in English. Publishing houses like Adivaani and Zubaan are playing a significant role in this regard. These tribal women have come forward to represent themselves

and their communities and in their writings we get insider's perspective. On the other hand, authors like Tamsula Ao, the eminent author and ethnographer, retired English professor and recipient of 2013 Sahitya Academi Award, has penned several books in English. In a similar way, it is because of English translations that Dalit women writers like Bama Faustina Susairaj and Urmila Pawar have gained worldwide readership. Authors and activists like Meena Kandasamy has, apart from writing in English, translated other Dalit women writers' works to English.

The importance of English education on the lives of the most downtrodden and exploited section- women from the Dalit and Adivasi communities is of paramount significance. English education, apart from granting them 'upward economic mobility, modern status and access to globality' (Paik) has helped them escape a hierarchised system of education in the vernacular schools that stigmatize them on the basis of caste. English, the common global language allows the marginalized section of India- the Shudras, Dalits and the Adivasis (aboriginal people) "to live as equal and respectable citizens of the global community" (Shepherd). It is only in English that a common intelligence pool can be created and thoughts and ideas can be exchanged not only on national but on international level. It would help achieving a pan Indian and global solidarity among the marginalized people, and particularly women belonging to those marginalized castes, classes and groups who are doubly or triply marginalized.

The desperate need and urgency to master English rings in the voice of Chandrabhan Prasad, the notable Dalit intellectual: "For complete emancipation Dalit/Adivasi parents ought to give English education- if necessary working more hours, borrowing money, selling jewellery, even mortgaging properties" (quoted in Omvedt). The primary reason for such endorsement of English education is not because English is a sacrosanct language but because it is the "language of access and power," (Omvedt) the key to the global storehouse of knowledge of all kinds, the path to emancipation. The Dalit villagers of Banka village in northern Uttar Pradesh even went to the extent of erecting a temple in black granite dedicated to the Goddess English who is, as English teacher Amarchand Jauhar aptly put it, "modelled on the Statue of Liberty, holds aloft a pen and India's constitution, and her pedestal isn't the usual lotus but a computer monitor" (quoted in Rahman). The presence of the computer monitor immediately evokes the image of digital literacy. The life changing potential of English for those occupying the periphery is understandable. But to what extent is English education accessible to these marginalized people in general and the women in particular ? That needs to be discussed.

Present Pan-Indian Scenario-English literacy and Digital Literacy:

"English has opened new horizons in every sense of the words and I owe who I am today to the ability to speak the language," says a costume designer from Venezuela. The same is true in the context of India. With increasing urbanization, a very important dimension of globalization, there can be seen an ever-increasing demand of English (Brit Council 8). As more and more people are moving to the urban areas to exploit newer opportunities, there can be found more

people exposed to English. Basic English skills are required for newer urban jobs. The hourly wages of those who can speak English is much higher than those who cannot. But whether everyone is being able to access proper English education remains a vital question.

In the contemporary pan-Indian scenario, proficiency and fluency in English has become a basic prerequisite for lucrative “skilled” white collar jobs. “Spoken English” assumes paramount importance in this regard. Despite having good command of the subject of specialization, it is English language skills of the prospective employees that is tested by the companies. (Deeksha Sharma). many of the students of vernacular-medium students, especially those from rural or remote areas, fall short here. As Subroto Dey observes most ingeniously:

Historically, English has been the preserve of the elite and the privileged in India. It is well-known fact that the first people to benefit from English education in India were the privileged and elites, who could send their children to English-medium schools and accumulate cultural capital over time. It is not only English as a language of instruction but the way it is spoken (accent) that creates a hierarchy in the society and allows the privileged to garner immense cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) to be used for social mobility (EPW Engage).

Therefore, it is the same language which has immense emancipatory potential and is a key to upward social mobility, that strengthens the already existing binaries of the urban/rural and elite/subaltern. As the Centre for Research and Debates in Development Policy in India’s 2014 report reveals, only twenty percent of the Indian population possess the ability to speak English. When it comes to “fluent” English, the kind of English desirable by the employers, it comes down to a mere four percent. Therefore, alarmingly enough, as Sunil Bhatia puts it, “4percent of the country’s population has the ability to determine, control, and oppress the majority 96 percent simply by virtue of knowing English.” Thus, argues Sunil Bhatia, English has created a new kind of caste system where the urban, English-medium educated elite caste reigns supreme. The fluent and smart English is more to do with accent, voice modulation, style of communication than with English grammar skills and depth of Knowledge in English language and literature. Parents belonging to the economically weaker section of the society, quite naturally, cannot afford to send their children to the English-medium schools where such grooming is done. The situation is even worse for the girls.

One’s access to internet and various online platforms depends on her/his English literacy. Internet has become an inseparable part of our daily lives, especially since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. As most of us were confined within the four walls of our homes during the seemingly endless nationwide lockdowns and strict social distancing norms, many of us either chose to or were compelled to go online. The pandemic has, in many ways, brought unforeseen changes in work culture and education system. People are still grappling with the changes. Classes, examinations, seminars (webinars), conferences and interviews were conducted online. Even today, when the grip of COVID 19 has loosened, so many things are still being done in online or in blended mode. The trend of online shopping has increased to a considerable extent. These latest trends are especially challenging for the majority of Indian

women constituted by those from the backward and underprivileged section of society. I would here focus on an article by Regina Mihindukulasuriya published in *The Print*. Here, Mihindukulasuriya analyses a paper commissioned by Meta (formerly known as Facebook) entitled “Collect, Collaborate and Create: Women and Social Media During the Pandemic” written by Sattva Consulting, a Bengaluru-based firm. The findings, based on “secondary research” (sources like news reports and university research) and supported by “select one-on-one interviews” with women from diverse socioeconomic background, point out a “stark gender imbalance in social media usage” among the five hundred million (approximately) internet users of India. Males constitute sixty seven percent of social media users, whereas the percentage of females are just thirty three. While investigating the causes of such gender imbalance, the issue of economic class and geography comes to the fore. The “upper class” urban elites constitute the lion’s share of Indian female internet users as they are “more aware about data privacy and cyber security” compared to their rural or working class counterparts. Indian women as a whole are digitally less literate than men and fewer of them own devices like smartphones, tablets and computers.

But what has all this to do with English? English literacy, needless to say, is inextricably linked with digital literacy. As the above-mentioned paper significantly points out, currently most of the online communication and content in India is in English and not in the regional languages/vernaculars. Therefore, it is the language barrier that bars women from economically weaker section and rural background to access and properly use the internet without help from family members or friends. “Such women”, according to the paper, “can’t read terms and conditions of social media use, privacy updates and other app updates in English”, and it hinders “meaningfully accessing social media platforms.” Things might have been different a decade or few years ago. But in this altered global scenario, and especially after the pandemic, the necessity of internet has increased to such an extent that those who cannot rip the benefits of internet and social media platforms are bound to lag behind. Thus, women who are not proficient in English, fails to “upskill and diversify their income stream” and to “develop new skills”. Their aspirations for upward social mobility emancipation from the confines of their homes are nipped in the bud.

Conclusion:

English education, which began to be imparted in the Indian colonial context to create a class of English-educated and westernized Indians who would be operational in the smooth functioning of the British colonial machinery, proved to be a boon in disguise for Indians. Substituting the existing system of education accessible to be and monopolized by a choiced few- mainly upper class and upper caste male, English education created a space for all. Which started as a mission of creating *bhadramahilas*- educated enough to become eligible and better housewives and mothers, helped women question and rebel against the restrictive norms of patriarchy that oppressed and repressed them. It is the English education that particularly

helped the *avarna* women- the subalterns without any voice, to create representational spaces where their ideas and thoughts could be articulated. The need of English, the global language that links India with India and India with the world, is forever increasing. English education, in today's global scenario, is inextricably interlinked with digital literacy, both of which are must for communication, education, commerce and employment today. However, since English is not still accessible today to many Indian women, especially those from the remoter areas and backward classes and castes, it creates another kind of caste system based on English literacy. Notwithstanding these detrimental effects, which are not inherent in the language itself, banishing English as a medium of instruction at the primary level will only cause more harm. The need of the hour is to handle the issue in a delicate yet effective manner. The vernacular and English, rather than replacing, should complement each other.

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