

The English Juggernaut

Regional Medium Schools in Crisis

By John Kurien

The English Hatao' movement of the 60s, concentrated mainly in north India, has gradually been replaced by a pan-Indian demand for 'English Sikhao', cutting across all classes.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. 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, educational trusts running established regional medium schools have added English medium divisions to existing classes. Some have started entirely new parallel English medium schools. Others have switched entirely to English medium instruction.

Government elementary schools continue to teach 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 five or even eight years of elementary education in the regional language, and are functionally illiterate in the regional language. In such schools, 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. 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 abysmal quality of teaching and learning in all subjects in government schools, it is little wonder that private alternatives, no more than substandard commercial teaching shops, are flourishing all over urban and rural India. Most of these private institutions teach in the regional language, though they 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. With private alternatives emerging in the villages, a process of educational differentiation is visible in rural India as well.

The response of the political and educational leadership has been 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 teaching 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.

These views are myths, according to a World Bank report. 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. This report also highlights the importance of trained language teachers.

Rote learning is not simply enough. However, no systematic teacher-training has 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 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, English teaching in these institutions must significantly improve. Public and academic discussions on this issue need to be initiated. This would include revisiting the decision to start English in Std 1.

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 buckle under the relentless onslaught of English.

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