

Abolition of English at Primary Level (Class I to V) in West Bengal for the Period from 1983 to 2004 by the State Government and its After-Effect on Educational Scenario of Bengal

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ABSTRACT

Language being used as a political tool in multilingual societies has been a common occurrence throughout history, and the abolition of English by the leftist government of West Bengal is an example. Petty vote bank benefits have led to a situation wherein 2 generations of Bengali youth have been left behind in various careers and services for not being "smart enough" to converse fluently in English.

1. Introduction

The human civilisation, in all its complexities and evolution, relies most on the use and development of language for its perpetuation, innovation and augmentation. Language, thus is vital for the survival and systematic progress of the human race. Language creates the building blocks for our thought processes, our analytical and synthetic abilities, our abilities for compassion, understanding the world around us, solving problems, creating paradigms and shifting them ahead. This is the most durable chain that binds us, the entire humanity together in one common link, thereby proclaiming us as the most evolved, and intelligent beings of the living world.

So no wonder, that it can also be used as a tool for disruption, division and malevolence. In terms of power, 'the pen is indeed mightier than the sword.' Time and again, language, the biggest unifier and the harbinger of beauty and goodwill in the human world, has also been the agent of separation, marginalisation, the creation of barriers amongst communities and people. Though the greatness of language and its concomitant cultures can hardly be diminished by the petty feelings of ownership, superiority and inferiority of people, unfortunately it has been a bone of contention amongst people of different origins to create ugliness and corruption in human society, giving rise to the evils of racism and pitting man against man.

2. The language war

Our country is no exception when it comes to this abuse of language to distort a very ancient, rich and diverse culture. In a lot of instances before and after independence, language has been used as a weapon in this country, for the political and economic benefit of a few, at the cost of large number of communities and populations. The north south divide in our country over the use of Hindi is well known, tensions in this regard are frequently fomented for petty political ends. West Bengal too, has been the victim of a very fierce political survival game for the past almost 5 decades. The most deadly manoeuvre of this game was the Left Front government abolishing the teaching of English at the primary level in government and government-aided schools in 1981. The

reason that was provided for this absolutely bizarre move was the reduction of the educational and social gap between the urban and rural students of the state. They explained that the elitism inherent in learning and speaking the English language, created a gulf in society, as was the intent of our colonial rulers. It was bandied that the preference of the English education is due to the lingering echoes of the " British Raj", thus creating a generation of upstarts or 'brown sahibs', looking down upon their rural counterparts, conversing in their mother tongue.

3. The story within

But that of course, was not the real reason, as the corrupt politicians made sure their own children studied in the best English medium schools in India and abroad, whilst conveying to the majority of voters that they were all about social upliftment through equality in language teaching and use, so as to win several subsequent elections. The voters were completely cuckolded into believing that studying in the mother tongue is good enough as the youth will not have to travel, they would be sufficiently provided with government jobs right here in the state.

The electorate fell for the scam hook, line and stinker and the results of course were disastrous. An entire generation of students have lost out on, as a teacher puts it, "a window to the world". A world where more than 750 million people speak English, three quarters of communication modes use the language and half of technical and scientific journals are written in it, needs people in the employment sector to be proficient in the language. Consequently, Bengal's English-shy students have come to belong to a Lost Generation, unable to compete for the best jobs in town. "We have created a generation of students totally illiterate in English," says noted educationalist Sunanda Sanyal.

4. The present scenario

And the situation continues. Some 85 lakh students enrolled in West Bengal's 51,000 government and government-aided primary schools will only start learning the English alphabet from Class V onwards, a marginal improvement on

the original 14-year-long policy of teaching the language only from Class VI. This unless their parents teach English at home or rustle up money to get the child admitted to the friendly neighborhood coaching centre. The literate classes in the state, despite their almost jingoistic devotion to the cultural heritage of the Bengali language, now fear that by abolishing English at the primary stages the Government is in effect ensuring a lifetime of mediocrity and restricted opportunities for their children, giving the ever eager evangelists in town a dream run, wherein the biggest bargain for conversion becomes a free or subsidised English education.

Most palpably worried were the urbanites for whom the institutes of technology, medicine and management outside the state are a paradise that can be reached only by treading the straight and narrow path of an education in English, which is true too, as the corporate language, whether we like it or not is English in our country, as well as much of the West. Nobody in the Left Front government wanted to face this uncomfortable home-truth three decades back. In a sustained movement which exalted feel-good virtuousness over any virtues of knowledge, CPI(M) ideologues, egged on by eager-to-please party-friendly academics, abolished English teaching in primary schools. Reason: expanding educational opportunities, arresting the high rate of dropouts and bringing in thousands of first generation learners from Bengal's 36,000 villages where 72 per cent of its 68 million population lives. Also, they argued, a student well trained in Bengali at primary level, should have no difficulty learning English at the secondary level, which has obviously proven to be very, very wrong.

It was perceived as a noble aim for a government which felt English was scaring away a lot of potential first-generation learners. But the upper classes continued to send their children to private schools to learn the language from the primary level. "It encouraged dualism in education with children of affluent families blessed with an opportunity of English medium schools and the underprivileged majority denied the scope," says Dr Ross Mallick, a Cambridge University social scientist. A monstrous class divide has sprung up, ironically, from a move ostensibly aimed at bringing parity and egalitarianism in education. A cruel joke really!

5. Conclusion

NOTHING Marxian about it, but this overzealous experiment has gone horribly awry for West Bengal and though, a few years back, the state government did decide on a rethink, it was too little too late. This state has made a laughing stock of itself by dooming its students to a dismal future, due to a language baggage which pulls them back, when in competition with the other states and also by stalling industrial and infrastructure development to a virtual standstill. Needless to say, the result is one big mess and there are no easy solutions, but at least now, the government should focus on the English language and the regional language rigorously, encouraging remedial and enrichment instruction on a war footing, so as to bring the employable students at par with other states, and the globe.

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