

## What Are the Implications of the English-language Education Policy of the Andhra Pradesh Government?

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*Led by the Yuvajana Sramika Rythu Congress Party government, Andhra Pradesh has recently announced its decision to offer English as the medium of instruction in government-run schools across the state. While supporters of the move hail it as a landmark decision to correct the historical injustice meted out to the marginalised, critics fear the potential threat to Telugu language and culture.*

The debate over which language should be the medium of instruction in schools is back in the news. This time it has taken a decisive tilt towards English as the Andhra Pradesh government launched Nadu-Nedu (Then-Now) scheme on 14 November, introducing English as the medium of instruction in government schools from Class I to Class VI. The target is to make English the medium of instruction up to high school-level in a phased manner by 2022.

The Yuvajana Sramika Rythu Congress Party (YSRCP), led by Y S Jagan Mohan Reddy, came to power in May 2019 with a huge mandate, winning 151 out of the 175 assembly seats in the state. Political observers attribute this spectacular poll success of the current chief minister to his 341 days *padayatra* (walkathon) across the state during the election

campaign. During his walkathon, he consulted people on the ground in 13 districts of the state, and one of their demands was English-medium education for their children. After ascending to power, Reddy is, in fact, honouring his poll promise of English-medium schools despite mounting criticism from the opposition and a section of the society which fears the loss of identity and culture due to this move. Countering their criticism, he asked his critics to introspect as to whether they send their children and grandchildren to English- or Telugu-medium schools (*Indian Express* 2019). Most of the critics are from privileged backgrounds, and send their children to English-medium private schools. Their argument is that the introduction of English-medium schools will prove to be an onslaught on Telugu language and culture. However, it is surprising that they expect only the marginalised to take the responsibility of protecting culture and tradition while the rich continue to enjoy the fruits of modernity riding on quality education in English.

Anyone interacting with the people at the grassroots level knows that the marginalised communities want their children to learn English so as to have a level playing field in the contemporary competitive world. The 2017 Bollywood movie *Hindi Medium* sheds light on the aspirations and struggles of families in admitting their children into elite English-medium schools under the Right to Education Act, 2009, which mandates 25% reservation for weaker sections and economically disadvantaged groups (EWS) in private unaided primary schools. A large number of poor aspiring families is unable to admit their children private English-medium schools through reservation and also cannot afford quality English education due to the lack of financial resources.

Historically, English has been the preserve of the elite and privileged in India. It is a 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. One needs to note that 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.

## **A Long-standing Demand**

Demands for English-language education for the masses at various levels, especially for the marginalised, are not new. In his deposition before the Hunter Commission (also known as Education Commission of 1881), Jyotiba Phule sought quality education for the depressed classes along with English-language education for high school students of the marginalised castes (Deshpande 2002). It should be noted that the issue of language was not Phule's main concern; he wanted disadvantaged groups and women to have access to quality education. Therefore, he set up Marathi-medium schools for both the disadvantaged and women. However, marginalised groups have been demanding English as the medium of instruction for a long time in social mobility and to exercise more freedom.

Empirical studies show that students from marginalised communities in colleges and universities feel that their poor academic performance is due to the lack of knowledge of the English language (Anand 1999). The author's own experience of teaching in a minority college in Bengaluru, which privileges students from marginalised communities through its admission policy, revealed that students aspired to study in English-medium colleges, and they believed that it would help them for social mobility. The college not only privileges the marginalised through its admission policy but also creates a space for critical pedagogy by following Paulo Freire's educational method.<sup>[1]</sup> More often than not, students in such minority institutions have more social knowledge of discrimination (because of their caste and class position) and inequality due to their lived experience and critical pedagogy as compared to those studying in elite colleges in Bengaluru.

One of the students from the college who regularly participates in debates in intercollegiate festivals said,

We were having this debate, and I was very confident about the topic. As it was in English, I could hardly say anything. But this was only one such instance, and there were several others like that. Even though I knew the subject, I could not participate and speak.

Many such students shared that being able to speak in English often compensated for the lack of subject or societal knowledge. The inability to speak in English also creates an immediate and visible hierarchy (Friedner 2008).

On the other hand, the lived social experience of the marginalised was so far theorised and circulated predominantly by the elites with exclusive access to quality education in English (Guru 2012). But, there has been a change in the situation in recent times with the increasing number of writers and thinkers from the marginalised communities translating Dalit literature into English and establishing the importance of English as a means towards an egalitarian society.

## **Language: A Matter of Choice**

The freedom to choose a language as the medium of instruction by the marginalised continues to be resisted by the state, which, more often than not, sides with the interests of the dominant groups. However, the Supreme Court's judgment of May 2014 in this regard is crucial. In this decisive judgment, the apex court upheld an earlier decision of the Karnataka High Court, which had overturned the decision of the Karnataka government imposing mother tongue on private schools. The Supreme Court ruled that parents, as guardians of children, reserve the right to what the medium of instruction should be for their children. The court said,

The right to freedom of speech and expression under Article 19(1) (a) of the Constitution includes the freedom of a child to be educated at the primary stage of school in a language of the choice of the child and the state cannot impose controls on such choice just because it thinks that it will be more beneficial for the child if he is taught in the primary stage in his mother tongue (*Hindu* 2014).

The apex court order privileged Articles 19, 29(1), and 30(1) of the Constitution, which enshrine individual freedom and community choice, over Article 350A that mandates state and local authorities to make arrangements for the education of children in mother tongue. Several scholars argued that the decision of the Supreme Court in 2014 indicated an important turn in the language education policy in India (Tukdeo 2014).

## **Creation of a New Social**

Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister YS Jagan Mohan Reddy's decision is historic because it has once again shifted the focus back to government schools. The Nadu-Nedu programme is in line with the Supreme Court order as it increases the scope and choice of parents and children in selecting the medium of instruction hitherto unavailable to them. There are two important aspects in Reddy's decision. First, there is a moral and an ethical dimension of honouring the poll promise he made to people during electioneering and holding himself accountable. Unfortunately, the reputation of a large pool of Indian politicians in this regard has not been very good. The second aspect is the constitutional morality as he addresses fundamental aspects of inequality, which in itself is a mandate for the elected government to fulfil as per the Constitution.

At another level, the successful implementation of the scheme has the potential to promote greater social interaction among antagonistic castes and classes. The reason for the mass departure of the elite from government schools is often attributed to the fact that these were not able to offer English-medium education, and this, many believe, has led to the deterioration of government schools. As the elite deserted government schools in favour of expensive private English-medium schools, government schools have ended up as the only option for the poor. With the falling educational standards in government schools and a consequent rise in aspirational levels of the poor, poorly-equipped private and unrecognised English-medium schools have begun to mushroom across the country. Therefore, there has been an increase in the migration of students from government to private English-medium schools at the elementary level in the last two decades after the 1990s (Mukhopadhyay and Sarangapani 2018). As a result, an unchecked private educational market, without any government monitoring and quality assessment, has become the norm across the country.

However, the introduction of English as the medium of instruction should not be seen as a panacea to revive the education system as there are many other aspects that plague government schools. Poor infrastructure, unavailability of regular and trained teachers, and

caste- and class-based discrimination are some of the most pressing issues (Ramachandran and Naorem 2013). At the same time, the introduction of English-medium schools, along with other issues taken care of, has the potential to attract more children across caste and class to government schools. It can become a game changer in addressing ever-widening inequality and increase the possibility of social interaction and dialogue across caste, class, and religious divides. While these are not stated objectives of the scheme, however, the return of the privileged to government school fold will have a positive impact.

One of the reasons for having school management committees (SMCs) is to ensure community's stake in government schools through effective participation of parents. But, the participation of poor parents is often neglected by teachers, and a balance of power is often missing. The return of the privileged can change these power equations and create a balance of power. Of course, it would be exaggerated to think that the privileged castes and classes would always cooperate in every context with the marginalised, and the existing school environment would be "neutral" of caste, class, and religious biases. In fact, our government schools are ridden with discrimination practiced by teachers, students, and parents on the basis of identity and social location. Notwithstanding these complexities, what I argue for is the promotion of dialogue among various communities to create a new social. The dominant communities along with the marginalised communities could assert themselves better in the affairs of schools. Politically, government schools are endowed with more power when carrying out negotiations with the government and would be able to pool in more resources.

The other aspect is that in most societies, the social has shifted from the community to the school. Children spend more time socialising in schools than in communities. With the majority of upper castes and classes moving to private schools, the opportunity for interactions among various groups of students belonging to different communities is lost. This reduced interaction means less knowledge of each other and more othering of the unknown. The exclusive socialisation of caste-class mediated by schools is also a hindrance for citizenship practices. While no one should be forced to socialise with each other, however, the state could play the role of a "third party" (Guru and Sarukkai 2019) and create egalitarian spaces in schools where students from different faiths, classes, castes, and ethnicities can come together and interact. There is no space other than government schools to create such avenues for open interactions. The YSRCP government in Andhra Pradesh, thus, can play the role of a "third party." However, even if the privileged do not return to government schools, the marginalised would be still benefited and emerge more confident.

## **An Uphill Task**

The real challenge for the YSRCP government in carrying out its ambitious plan is the presence of a larger number of teachers who have not been trained in English. This could be addressed by training teachers in consultation with language experts and by digitising

classrooms. The other challenge is with the parents, as most of the students from marginalised communities are, perhaps, the first-generation to study in English-medium schools and lack a home environment to complement their learning at schools. To tide over this challenge, many experts suggest bilingual education for students at the primary level and making the move to English-medium instruction gradual (Mohan 2014). This would make the journey of students and their families less difficult. My argument is to provide English as the medium of instruction in addition to teaching the mother tongue or multiple languages.

It is also wrong to assume that learning English necessarily leads to the demise of the mother tongue or that those who learn English would forget their own language. However, it is also true that languages could become extinct without institutional support. Providing bilingual or multilingual education could address this issue. An argument in favour of English-language education should be primarily seen in the context of social mobility, boosting the confidence of students by enabling them to cater to a larger audience and by gaining access to wider knowledge resources. In that sense, learning English is equated to having more freedom, confidence, and reach. Besides, protecting the mother tongue is not the sole responsibility of the marginalised groups.

## End Notes:

[1] Paulo Freire's educational method involves active and critical participation of both the teacher and the student. This is in contrast to conventional "banking method" of education where the teacher imparts knowledge and the student uncritically accepts the knowledge. Critical pedagogy, according to Freire, is being able to critically reflect on the prevailing social context of students and taking action on the basis of those reflections. This raises social consciousness of the students (Darder 2012; Freire 1968).

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