



Resistance to English Medium in Andhra Pradesh: A Conflict between Idealism and Pragmatism

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Abstract

The introduction of New Economic Policy in 1991 resulted in upsurge of private sector over public sector, resulting in loss of employment opportunities for the socially excluded groups in the absence of protective discrimination. The concomitant structural adjustments especially in the realm of Education at 'primary', 'secondary' and 'higher' levels were not initiated. There was large scale reduction in employment opportunities both at union and provincial level. The education system in Andhra Pradesh was ill-prepared against the emerging employment opportunities in the private sector. The economically backward people among the excluded groups depended on State funded primary schools where the medium of instruction is Telugu. Those who continued further in Telugu medium found it difficult to compete with their urban well-to-do counterparts.

The paper emphasises the need to alter the Education system in tune with the policies of liberalisation. It deals with the need for introduction of English as a medium of instruction at primary school level. It also investigates the intent of the opposition political parties and interest groups in resisting the decision of the present YSRCP Government to introduce English medium in State sponsored primary schools. It is instructive to note that 90 per cent of the students studying in Government sponsored schools are from the socially excluded groups. English medium enables them to acquire skills and global competencies.

By using and analysing the secondary data, the paper studies resistance to upward social mobility and inclusive policies of the State Government. It probes the attempts of certain political parties supporting *status quo* and opposing English medium which would otherwise engender a paradigm shift in the lives of the socially excluded groups.

Keywords: English medium, Telugu medium, Social Mobility, idealism, pragmatism, archaic principles, postmodernism.

Introduction:

Every political party unfolds its vision for the development of the State and the country at large. The YSRCP- a regional political party in Andhra Pradesh formed the government after its overwhelming victory in the 2019 General elections to the State Assembly. The Government took a decision making English medium mandatory in all the primary schools including those funded by the government.(Government Order: 2019) There came up a strong resistance to the decision of the ruling party. The votaries of tradition began to condemn the decision saying that it would erode and undermine the native culture. The Telugu Desam (TDP) party which is the leading opposition party joined the chorus against English medium. The decision of the government was challenged in the High Court of Andhra Pradesh which subsequently quashed the Government Order in April 2020. (Andhra Pradesh High Court Order: 2020)

Method:

Data is collected from secondary sources. The Andhra Pradesh State Government Order was studied and the Judgement copy of the High Court of Andhra Pradesh was studied to adopt content analysis to draw conclusions on the subject.

In the debate between the innovators and the status quoists, the latter cited glory of Telugu language and its rich cultural heritage being eroded with the introduction of English medium at primary school level. Some of their arguments in favour of Telugu or vernacular medium are:

- UNESCO in 2003 recommended for instruction in mother tongue especially at primary level of Education.
- The Indian National Congress Working Committee adopted resolutions in its annual meet in August 1949 and May 1953 to offer primary school education in vernacular medium
- The National Education Policy of 1968 also recommended that primary school education should be offered in vernacular medium
- As per Article 19(1) of Indian Constitution, i.e., Right to Speech and Expression, medium of teaching should not be imposed by the State on Citizens
- Article 21 i.e., Right to life has a bearing on the selection of medium of teaching in primary schools and hence the citizens shall have the right to choose the medium.
- Telugu or the local language of Andhra Pradesh is spoken by 60 million people and that the British linguist Halden proved that Telugu is suitable for teaching sciences.

The judgement delivered by the Andhra Pradesh High Court also quoted Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi, Ravindranath Tagore and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan who preferred mother tongue as a medium of instruction particularly at primary school level of education. Mahatma Gandhi was quoted by the protagonists of Telugu medium as saying "...real education is impossible through a foreign medium."

Here the conflict is between idealists and pragmatists. While the State Government adopted a pragmatic approach to resolve the issue of unemployment, TDP the opposition party in the State Assembly and the traditionalists adopted an idealistic approach to education and demanded for retention of Telugu medium in primary schools. The consequences of this idealistic approach need attention in the context of globalization preferred by India.

Objectively, English as a medium of instruction is a means to arrest the dropout rate in the schools. It creates hope in the masses to secure jobs in private sector. After India adopted the New Economic Policy in 1991 moving towards liberalization, privatization and globalization, the State/province of Andhra Pradesh adopted the same policies (Krishna Reddy G: 2002). However, it is instructive to note that structural adjustments in the field of education were not made in tune with the emerging employment opportunities. The New Economic Policy called for scaling down of jobs in recruitments to meet the conditionalities of international lending agencies which were offering loans to India to bail it out from the economic crisis and to address the looming financial threats. There has been an overwhelming invitation to investments in private sector. Therefore, majority of the emerging employment opportunities came from private sector. Such jobs needed knowledge of English, as the corporate companies were operating globally or in multiple countries. English remained the medium to acquire those specialised skills and global competencies to stand a chance of employment in the marketing world. The TDP boasted of inviting private investment to the State on a substantial scale especially in the software industry. But the jobs were seized by urban youth and also those youth from neighbouring States with knowledge of English. The Information Technology (IT) establishments in Cyberabad (Hyderabad) attracted competent people even from neighbouring States of Odisha, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Maharashtra. Hence, such a facility did not serve the exclusive employment needs of the natives.

There has been incongruity between the educational structure and the demands of specific skill sets by the private industry, and for those who studied vernacular medium the new avenues seemed inaccessible. It is instructive to note that those students who studied vernacular medium in the primary schools either dropped out after primary education or predominantly opted for the same vernacular medium even during their secondary education. Low income group parents did not see a promising future for their children if they continue on the path of education. They tried to engage them as labour force at various avenues as they served the immediate financial needs of the family. Hence, dropout rate in government funded primary schools in rural areas of the State is high. Those who struggled to complete their secondary and higher education in

vernacular medium further struggled to acquire requisite skills demanded by the private sector. They could not compete with their urban counterparts who mostly studied English medium (Hindustan Times: 2019).

Given the fact that Telugu medium or the local vernacular medium of Andhra Pradesh is offered in the State funded schools where the education is free, the socially excluded groups who are financially backward preferred such schools to their children. They depended on affirmative action or reservation in education and employment for the settlement of their children. The job opportunities in government sector dwindled considerably to meet the conditionalities of international lending agencies. The rural masses awaited job notifications desperately. But they did not appear as frequently as they used to in the past. Even if the notification is issued with fewer jobs, such opportunities were grabbed predominantly by the urban youth.

Inclination towards left-wing extremism:

Despite the country boasting of gaining vibrancy in economy, Maoist activities against the State continue and the State spends substantially on special combat and combing operations to contain Maoism. The fact that Maoism is able to attract rural youth to its fold and the inclination of such youth to walk into its fold is due to lack of feasible job opportunities and obvious desperation. The harassment they are subjected to by the government officials and the rampant corruption that stands in the way for acquiring the social welfare benefits extended by the government causes frustration in the youth. Having developed animosity against the officials they scout for channels to wreak revenge against them. Often left-wing extremism offers an alternative to such frustrated youth (Dasgupta: 2006).

English instils confidence in the students of excluded groups for they can read and interpret law of the land and can apply it. The Chief Justice of India remarked that if a child in a rural area knew how to write a complaint in English, it would mark a paradigm shift in the rural society. The naïve and innocent masses in rural areas are harassed and suppressed by certain officials of police and revenue administration, for they are vulnerable and cannot invoke law, i.e., they cannot draft an effective and meaningful complaint against the erring authorities. Even if some people attempt to approach the judiciary, they are taken for a ride by some of the advocates who play the role of brokers by misleading the clients rather than advocating the cause of the victims.

Clientelism prevails in rural Andhra Pradesh where the traditionally dominant castes or the landlords maintain a vast network of clients. The clients cast their votes in favour of a patron who in turn grants them favours after assuming power in a quid pro quo arrangement. Hence, politicians welcome the reluctance of government functionaries in discharging their duties for, only then that the masses turn to them for favours. This is how politicians construct assured vote banks at various levels. The rural masses should either turn to a politician to obtain favours from government agencies or suffer deprivation. They are not knowledgeable enough to invoke the law. The politicians also perceive this condition as a fertile ground to mobilize them for, an enlightened citizen cannot be taken for a ride by them (Anderson S et.al:2006). Thus, the opposition TDP seeks to continue the status quo situation in rural areas as introduction of English medium would drastically alter the status quo in favour of the masses who if enlightened would question the systemic inconsistencies. The politicians or the people's representatives ensure that their clients are the beneficiaries of social welfare programmes sponsored by the State and this enables them to mobilize voters and construct vote banks. M. N. Srinivas in the context of social mobility observes that the upper strata resist the attempts of upward social mobility by the lower strata (Srinivas M.N.: 2000). This principle is applicable in the present context of Andhra Pradesh.

The traditionalists and certain dominant caste groups who challenged the introduction of English medium all belonged to upper strata and they expressed serious concerns over fading away of the native cultural heritage. The poets and scholars in Telugu, who belong to the upper strata of society believed that their scholarship and fame would lose its patronage if no one including the rural masses accords importance to Telugu language. M.N. Srinivas (2002) observes that the ritually dominant castes in the society, by virtue of their advancement in education were the first ones to take advantage of westernization which was in progress in India since the British rule. They are relatively well settled and some of their members even settled in western countries. Yet they cherish continuation of Telugu medium to preserve the native culture and tradition. They have conveniently shifted the burden of carrying forward the cultural legacy to the people of lower strata. This is a way to sustain the hegemony of the dominant castes over the lower caste masses.

The hegemonic and discriminatory Institutes of Law like the Manu Smriti and certain religious texts of Sanskritic tradition seemed retrogressive for the overall progress of the society (Mudgal A: 2013). Comparatively, western education and scientific temper handed down the hope and scope for the progress of the society as a whole. English helped India in sharing and accessing knowledge and technology at global level. It also helped India in integrating with the global world.

Various Institutes of Law laid down from time to time, socially excluded certain sections of the society including females to protect the dominance of ritually upper castes. But English helped in construction of level playing field in education and continues to help in bridging the gap between the affluent and the deprived. The TDP which is opposing English medium in government primary schools boasted of introducing computer education at primary school level when it was in the government. The same party has opposed the introduction of English medium at primary school level by contradicting its own agenda of development of the State through IT and computer education to remain in tune with the dynamics of the world.

Critical Analysis of High Court Verdict:

The resistance from the TDP and the traditionalists to English medium drove them to challenge the decision of the Government in the High Court of Andhra Pradesh. After serious arguments by advocates of protagonists and antagonists English Medium, a division Bench of the High Court quashed the Government Order dated 20.11.2019 issued by the YSRCP Government. The judgement relied on the critique of the colonial educational policy to produce personnel for subordinate and commercial services. The Court did not delve into the outcome of the government's decision. It relied upon the idealistic posturing depicted by the protagonists of Telugu medium education. Though the manifest function of the British in introducing English medium was to produce clerks and subordinates, the latent function beneficial to the Indians through English medium was not focussed at. English education marked a paradigm shift in Indian thinking and became a potent weapon in the freedom struggle. Numerous writings in English by the Indians and their trenchant critique of the British rule convinced the world of the British exploitation and the ability and preparedness of Indians to govern themselves.

The Court verdict upheld vernacular medium at Primary school level in government funded schools by citing select works and philosophies of the past and by glossing over the ground reality of emerging employment opportunities in private sector. Despite several lower caste organizations impleading in the High Court petition in favour of English medium which has the potential for social emancipation, the Court struck down the Government Order by upholding the stand of traditionalists. The government emphatically argued that Telugu as a language would be continued throughout the line of education despite English medium and that every effort would be made to preserve and uphold the glory of Telugu language. But the Court was unimpressed by the argument of the government and struck down an opportunity which would have marked a paradigm shift in the lives of the socially and economically backward classes in the rural areas of Andhra Pradesh. The verdict could be understood in the context of Karl Marx's theory of "sub-structure and super-structure" (Oyinlade, A. O: 2020) wherein the Courts constitute the super-structure and are influenced by those who control the sub-structure i.e., economy.

The Indian republic has evolved over the years yet the reference to archaic principles of pre-independence era; the observations of Swamy Vivekananda to prefer vernacular medium; the critique of Macaulay's Minute perceived in the context of Nationalism, all to oppose English medium do not augur well for the progress of the contemporary society. The First National Policy on Education-1968 itself turns obsolete given the dynamics of the society. As per the postmodernism, no single universal theory could be applied to a local issue for the factors contributing to the problems differ from place to place and time to time. Hence, spatial and temporal dimensions should be taken into consideration while studying an issue. Therefore, application of outdated reasons in the name of upholding ideology and also using the fame of a leader of the past to build up a reason to support a party amounts to using specious logic to score a point.

India evolved with over seventy years of experience. The country has opened the flood gates of its economy to the globe; there is a great deal of cultural commingling with the western world. Hence, it is necessary to tune the educational system with the global processes. The right-wing politicians who sought quashing of the Government Order on English medium, overwhelmingly supported the liberalization of Indian economy for it allowed private investment on a large scale which was in favour of Indian business class.

English medium education since primary school level, without neglecting the mother tongue constructs a level playing field for the socially and economically backward people to compete with their well-to-do urban counterparts. If the protagonists of Telugu medium are so concerned about the local language, they should strive for a level playing field by seeking Telugu medium in private schools also. There is an apprehension that the private primary schools would lose demand if English medium is offered in government sponsored primary schools. Such managements also indirectly supported the petition, for quashing of the Government Order would benefit them a great deal.

The protagonists of Telugu medium took the Constitutional route to defend their argument. They cited Article 13, wherein the Executive instructions of the State Government should not contravene the Central legislation which gives freedom to offer vernacular medium. They also stated that since schools include minority and lingual institutes, the Government Order contravenes Article 30 and 350 A of the Indian Constitution. The contenders in the petition who supported English medium stated that Social Reformer Raja Ram Mohan Roy was instrumental in starting the Calcutta College to impart western education. Social Reformers like B.R. Ambedkar (Keer D: 1990) could draft the Constitution of India having acquired western education in foreign countries. He could match with the scholarship and proficiency of other frontline leaders of the Indian National Congress due to his sheer erudition as a scholar and English was instrumental in it. He wrote extensively in English by critiquing the Sanskrit texts and exposing the inconsistencies in the traditional texts and allied literature.

Conclusion:

In a multi-lingual and multi-cultural country like India, English connects people of all regions. It may not be a native language but it is a global language which has the potential to integrate an individual with the world. In order to create hope of prospects in education and employment in the rural masses, English medium should be the order of the day in government funded primary schools of the State. A pragmatic approach should be followed while dealing with such subjects of crucial importance rather than adhering to idealism. As the compatibility between the educational structure and the emerging employment opportunities in private sector is rather thin, English helps the students in grappling with the needs and qualifications of employment. Knowledge of English since primary school level not only boosts the confidence of the rural students, it helps in bridging the gap between the deprived and the well-to-do sections of the society. The opposition political parties should give up their strategic thinking to support Telugu medium at primary school level and support English for the larger benefit of the masses as it has the potential for paradigm shift in the society.

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