

English and The Indian Elite: A Marxist Analysis of The Development Of English Language In India.

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Abstract

The development of English as a global language has made it the language of the masses. However, for the very same reason it has also been blamed as being oppressor's language. The development of English has, in many states and regions, undeniably overshadowed many languages and dialects and there could be seen a growing indifference for these languages by their native speakers. The paper in consideration deals with the Marxist analysis of the growth and expansion of English language and how English developed as the language of the class that controls the resources of production.

Keywords

Marxism, English, Elitism, Ruling-class, Minorities, Capitalist class, Working Class.

Introduction

J.V. Stalin, in a pamphlet entitled *Marxism and the problem of Linguistics* published in 1950, refuted the claim made by many Marxists of his and the preceding ages that language has class characteristic. He said and clarified on the behalf of Marx that:

Marx merely wanted to say that the bourgeois had polluted the single national language with their hucksters' lingo, that the bourgeois, in other words, have their hucksters' jargon.

It thus appears that these comrades have misrepresented Marx. And they misrepresented him because they quoted Marx not like Marxists but like dogmatists, without delving into the essence of the matter. (11)

However, nearly seven decades after the pamphlet was published and after, what is commonly known in the world as a Late Capitalism, we can clearly refute Stalin's claim and consider the language to have a very visible class characteristic.

Politics and Education has always been the domain of the educated or those who are at the top in the social hierarchy (historically the existence of Brahminical Patriarchy in India made education a distinguished domain of the Brahmins and Kshatriyas) and the system is so designed that all the education related policies are generally made by those who themselves are at the helm and hence, what may look like a pro-people decision may, in reality, be made a decision that is taken to serve the purpose of the needs of the elite class. Hence, one can very clearly see that what was categorically planned on the Indians by the British was systematically taken forward by the Indian Elites under the garb of Various reforms that were introduced in the country from time to time but the inefficiency of the existing public sector could very well be seen in the gigantic existence of the private education sector which serves the need of the modern day Bourgeoisie.

From the very time the human existence was emancipated in the earth, there had always been oppression of one person/tribe/gender by the other. Right from the Neolithic age to the present day there is the existence of Oppression in one form or another. Various institutions had been developed by the humans to oppress the others which not only include other humans but also animals and the nature. The very idea of 'Discourse' introduced by Michel Foucault is worth considering here:

Discourse is, thus, a way of organising knowledge that structures the constitution of social (and progressively global) relations through the collective understanding of the discursive logic and the acceptance of the discourse as social fact. (Adams)

The entire politics of the Discourse formation could very well be seen in the case of English Language where the colonial discourse was formed and legitimized by the ruling class and it continues till this very day in our country.

English as the Oppressor's Language

Adrienne Rich once derided English as 'this is oppressors' language' (2) and rightly so. Given the history of colonization in the world, English can very well be termed as Oppressor's Language. The very same rationale goes in India as well. Quoting from the Macaulay's minutes of 1835 (English Education Act 1835):

I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia...In India, English is the language spoken by the ruling class. It is spoken by the higher class of natives at the seats of Government...To sum up what I have said. I think it clear that we are not fettered by the Act of Parliament of 1813, that we are not fettered by any pledge expressed or implied, that we are free to employ our funds as we choose, that we ought to employ them in teaching what is best worth knowing, that English is better worth knowing than Sanscrit or Arabic, that the natives are desirous to be taught English, and are not desirous to be taught Sanscrit or Arabic, that neither as the languages of law nor as the languages of religion have the Sanscrit and Arabic any peculiar claim to our encouragement, that it is possible to make natives of this country thoroughly good English scholars, and that to this end our efforts ought to be directed...We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, -a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect. (Minutes 28)

Hence the spread of English as a tactical move by the colonizers to form a class of people who can serve them bears testimony to the fact that English has and will always be the language of the oppressor. Even to this day, the society in India is very visibly divided into classes.

English as an Institution of Linguistic Oppression

As recent as 2019, a survey conducted by Lok Foundation and Oxford University, administered by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) gave some surprising facts about the country which are:

English is far more an urban than a rural phenomenon; just 3% of rural respondents said that they could speak English, as against 12% of urban respondents. There is a clear class element at work—41% of the rich could speak English as against less than 2% of the poor. Speaking English is also linked to education—a third of all graduates could speak English. The ability to speak English has strong religious and caste dimensions. More than 15% of Christians can speak English, as against 6% of Hindus and 4% of Muslims. An upper-caste person is more than three times likely to speak English than someone from the scheduled castes or scheduled tribes. Knowledge of English also has a gendered dimension: a higher proportion of men said that they could speak in English. (Rukmini)

The case fairly becomes clear that in general, the English has been grasped on by the ruling class as against the ruled class. English has gained a divine status symbol in India because of the fact that it has started to reflect the social status of the person. *Rather than being a mere language, English in India has become a parameter for measuring* intellect and this mindset is costing Indians dearly. Anything that comes with the tag of English attracts us. The Capitalist class is using English to sell their products at a hefty price. English has become the center of Consumer Capitalism where the need for a particular product is being created through Mass Marketing and the effective demand of taking the product is being manipulated by the Capitalist and the product is being sold then. All the Capitalist agencies like MNCs, Shopping Malls, Multiplexes use solely English as their means of communication thereby crating an impression upon the non-speakers of English that not speaking English becomes a disadvantage for them.

English and the Caste Factor

Shocking as it may appear, the usage of English language has a caste aspect as well. The survey conducted by Lok Foundation and Oxford University, administered by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) which is mentioned above further reports:

When asked, 'Do you speak English?' from the upper class the percentage of positive answer is 11% as compared to 4.8% from OBC's and 3.3 % from SC/ST/DALITS respectively. (Rukmini)

As stated above in this paper, Indian society has always been divided on the basis of caste. The ancient fourfold caste system made Indian society not only rigidly conventional on sharing the resources among all the classes of society but also it introduced an inhuman culture on the name of caste system. From there to the present time, the Indian society could never truly come out of the crooked and inhuman caste system and it is for the very same reason that when the British started educating Indians in English, among the class of people (English speaking Indians) they formed were majorly from the so-called upper class.

Conclusion

On the basis of above arguments, it could be conclusively proved that how English, though it was denied by Marxists that it has a class factor, was actually used to strategically dominate one class from the other. The Gramscian concept of Hegemony could very well be used in the context of how the standardization of English language was done to dominate the ruled/working class intellectually. In all the aspects of life that is in all the superstructures that are prevalent in the society right now, the presence of English could be seen as a mark of Elitist/Bourgeoisie/Ruling/Capitalist class. English had been used by the colonizer's as their language and implemented over the colonized. In the very same way, English has been made an international language by the first world countries and now, all the Elites in the country use English a mark of their superiority over the other classes.

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