

ABSTRACT

The central premise of this thesis is that education was a major site of subject formation in colonial India and that it continues to be so after independence. It was a site where fierce struggles were staged against colonial domination on the one hand and caste privilege on the other. English education was at the heart of these conflicts. Although there were passionate debates about the medium of instruction the structure of education was decidedly English, in the sense that what was to be taught was English knowledge.

Such an understanding of education problematizes the link between the vernacular and the popular by showing that the vernacular education is as much a site of power and privilege as English education. I suggest that an exclusive focus on the English-vernacular debate tends to blind one to the more fundamental question of access to education. At this juncture in India's history when merit is easily conflated with education, the issue of access to education has become crucially important. A caste reading of education, I suggest, helps problematize the notion of merit. Such a reading works not only against the binary of English and the vernacular but also shows how the working of such a binary logic deflects attention away from education as the preserve of a caste/class/community.

In the first chapter I have taken up for analysis a popular perception that English education was an imposition on the native society. A part of the analysis involves a systematic reading of various educational reports to show how an English system of education was put in motion. I have argued that the elite and urban sections of the Indian population attempted to utilize the existing colonial structures to consolidate and legitimize their status. These sections were active in demanding the expansion of education in English as it was perceived to be closely linked to social mobility in colonial India. The liberal humanist agenda of such an education was established, at least partly, through the study of English literature. The offer of such an agenda was made in terms acceptable to the native elite. For example, Arnold's idea of 'disinterestedness' in literature was offered in terms acceptable to an already well-entrenched learned class of natives who had access to the brahminical notion of 'detachment.' The moral authority of the English text could therefore be established in terms favourable to the dominant groups in the native society.

The moral authority that English education arrogated to itself increasingly came under attack by an elite trained in that very system. One mode of the native critique of the colonial education was an espousal of the vernaculars. However, the terms of the critique left the liberal humanist ideology undisturbed.

Further, such elite critiques were equally silent on the question of merit which the British had instituted through a process of standardization and uniformity erasing all signs of class/caste/community.

I have argued that the status and visibility of this educated class of Indians remain unchallenged in historical accounts of Indian nationalism. Through a reading of a select group of historians and their concerns, I have tried to lay open the various ways in which the question of education has featured in their writings. In the colonialist historiography English education emerges as the chief agent of change in the domain of history, politics, culture and religion. Change in the native society is attributed directly to English education. Nationalist historiographers, on the other hand, locate instruments of change outside the system of colonial education. They stress the significance of indigenous sources in the development of national consciousness. In spite of their opposing stance on the value and role of English education, both historiographies share an elitist bias in the sense that both attribute agency to the native elite alone. Against such a position the *Subaltern Studies* group have argued that processes outside the education of an elite group were equally a part of the development of nationalist consciousness in India.

My reading of Ambedkar follows from the *Subaltern* insight that powerful critiques of education were available in terms set outside the colonial-national. It shows how issues relating to access to education were bypassed on account of an overemphasis on mainstream debates on English and the vernacular. I have argued that the struggle over education was as much within the native society as it was against the colonial state. Colonial education policy, as my reading of Ambedkar shows, systematically marginalized what Ambedkar called the 'Depressed classes' from any representation in civil-social institutions. Equally, I have explored Ambedkar's understanding that the emergence of education as a mark of 'merit' worked effectively to prevent 'Depressed classes' from acquiring representation in national institutions.

Subsequently, I have traced the formation of a national education predicated on a democratic commitment. I have contended that the democratization of education was imagined through a locking in of the vernacular with the popular. However, the vernacular that was at the core of national education was of a modernized, Sanskritized type. My reading of the debate surrounding the establishment of a vernacular university in the mid-nineteenth century shows how the elite concern with the vernacular was underpinned by an anxiety to disseminate European knowledge. Similarly, I have shown through the example of a nineteenth century Gujarati poet, Narsinhrao, that his attempts

to write lyrics in Gujarati are equally underwritten by the desire to disseminate European literary values through the vernacular. My contention is that interventions such as these modernized the vernacular in ways that rendered the vernacular as 'alienating' as English.

The valorization of the vernacular in nationalist politics had enormous effect on the way the English-vernacular relationship was conceived in independent India. The vernaculars could establish their national-popular image only by articulating themselves against the 'visibly' alien character of the English language. The nationalist interventions in the English-vernacular debate were made to show how a separation of education and life takes place on account of an instruction through an 'alien' language.

The vernacular and English emerged as competitors in the newly imagined national space. Since this competition developed as part of the anti-colonial struggle, the rhetorical strategies informing national debates on language fixed our gaze exclusively on English. But my reading of Ilaiah shows that there is an inadequacy in thinking of the English-vernacular relationship in terms of an alien/native binary because the language which was fashioned as a medium of instruction and which was to unite education and life has been found to be as alienating as the English language. The choice of an English or vernacular

education was and is no choice at all, except to a privileged caste/class/community who can access education in terms of both language and subject matter.

Finally, I have undertaken an analysis of the subject Compulsory English taught at undergraduate courses across India. Drawing on the arguments of the previous chapters, I offer a reading of the Compulsory English course. This subject and the practices which surround it have emerged as crucially important in the education system of independent India. On one hand, I have shown how the course appears to fulfil a democratic obligation to allow a vernacular medium student access to higher education; on the other, I demonstrate the way its evaluative function polices access to college education. In doing so Compulsory English remains complicit in the process of certification of merit. In the conclusion, I attempt to integrate my arguments about the institutionalization of English education with a larger project of interrogating the constitution of educational merit in India today.