INTRODUCTION

On August 7 1990, the then Prime Minister of India, V.P. Singh announced the implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations. The proposed 27% reservations for Other Backward Classes in addition to the existing 22.5% reservations in public sector jobs and education for Scheduled Castes and Tribes sparked off violent protests by upper caste youths, largely in urban centres and mainly in North India. Protests ranged from street-cleaning to boot-polishing and "the discourses deployed most significantly were those of Unrewarded Merit and Salvation of the Nation" (Tharu and Niranjana 97).

It was around this time that a series of publications heralded what is now referred to as the crisis of English Studies debates.[1] This crisis in English Departments, Tejaswini Niranjana argues, is "a crisis in the making since the 1960s" and has been enabled by nationalist struggles, the women's movement, the civil rights movement, immigration and so on (1998 127). This crisis, Niranjana contends, is crucially linked to critiques of liberal humanism and universalism emerging from both poststructuralism and anticolonial critiques. Niranjana's subsequent analysis of the mesh between the anti-Mandal agitation and the crisis in English Studies shows the manner in which this crisis has emerged "from a specific historical conjuncture" and is locked into "present-day cultural politics in India" (1998 128). For Gauri Viswanathan, as for Niranjana, the crisis debates are marked by "an urgency of rooting our critiques in the present historical

and political situation, rather than treating issues of English pedagogy and criticism as somehow divorced from other related trends in Indian Education" (1993 30).

This thesis operates with the assumption that English has played a very powerful role in the formation of our self-understanding as Indians and also is propelled by the idea that it is highly restrictive to treat English only as a language or literature especially when it could offer us a political and conceptual engagement with ourselves as a nation and as a people. Such an exercise would involve a self-evaluation in the areas of language, politics, religion, economics, etc. It would also demand that we integrate the question of English to the present crisis in the civil society. This, I believe, would make the present crisis in English studies a part of a larger societal crisis, and not merely a west-influenced/inspired one.

Working within the frame of critiques offered by the 'crisis' debates, the object of this thesis is to examine the linkages between English education and the question of merit thrown up by the anti-Mandal agitation. Through a study of the various forms of the institutionalization of English education, I attempt to problematize the notion of merit as it circulates in India today. Higher education in India has been broadly conceptualized as English and has traditionally been dominated by the upper castes. With the anti-Mandal agitation, the question of merit has increasingly been aligned to higher education. Since higher education is dominated by the upper castes and is imagined

as English, the notion of merit is also marked in these terms. Working with the above premise, this thesis seeks to explore the nature of the relationship between merit and English and to examine the linkages of these entities with caste.

My attempt to understand the making of merit in contemporary India has broadly taken two directions. On one hand, I trace the history of English education in India, attempting to locate those moments when the idea of merit was being consolidated. Therefore, I have worked against a linear narrative, emphasizing instead specific moments or events which may yield insights for an analysis of educational merit. On the other hand, I seek to explore ways in which conventional binaries such as colonial/ national, traditional/modern, English/vernacular so often employed to frame debates on education might be dismantled, thus enabling a more nuanced understanding of English education in India. Since they resist operating in terms of these binaries, I draw upon caste critiques of education.

For the British East India Company, whose focus was on trade, there was very little scope for return from an investment made in the education of the natives. At the same time, specific colonial policies, such as permanent settlement of land, led to the decline and withdrawal of patronage for indigenous educational institutions. The British had introduced a series of structural transformations which had enormous effect on the perceptions of dominant groups in the native society. My analysis in the first chapter is to show how, within the wider contexts of colonial

structures, both the British and the Indians were active agents in the introduction of English education in India. My contention is that any account of the institutionalization of English in India as the simple displacement of an indigenous system of education would ignore the complex process of negotiation, contestation, co-optation and resistance at work. The importance of a reconstruction of native agency in the context of colonial education policy is that it would give us a clue to the terms in which an `alien' system of education was internalized and appropriated by certain dominant groups who actively used it in order to consolidate their power and status in the native society.

Recent research has shown how English literature was crucial in making English education acceptable to the dominant groups in the native society. The strategic deployment of notions of universalism and humanism was instrumental in establishing the `secular' credentials of English literature. Through a selective reading of Arnold, I try to show how a liberal humanist ideology was instituted in the name of literature and how Arnold's reference to the Hindu ideal of `detachment' could be read as symptomatic of the various nineteenth century British efforts at constituting literary studies in response to conditions both in the colonies and in England. However, a liberal humanist conceptualization of literature had an enormous effect on the production of an aesthetics and pedagogy centred around `permanent' and `eternal' human values.

The introduction of English education, I contend, was by no means a smooth and uncontested process. By systematically tracking the elements of native agency through educational reports, I attempt to show how official policy on education was compromised on various occasions on account of the fear of native dissent. The British sought to organize a modern and secular system of education for the natives despite resistance from missionaries since they were propelled by the nature of the colonial rule itself to manufacture native consent. The system of education could be made operational not on account of its 'modern' and 'secular' character but on the condition that it would pass through the gaze of caste. Therefore, I operate with the assumption that what came to be instituted as a modern and secular form of education had the sanction of caste. For example, the case for female education could be resolved only through due respect to the native principle of exclusion and, more important, within the limits of patriarchy. It is, therefore, arguable that Indian modernity, much like Indian secularism, has caste as one of its constituents. A part of my engagement in the first chapter is to show how education served as a key through which caste could detraditionalize itself and assume the marks of modernity, the possession of English being one such marker.

From around 1835 there was a sustained effort to shape and fashion institutions of learning in the lines of services required for the maintenance of the colonial state. This led to the formulation of a whole new set of competencies which were

organized only at a 'higher' level of education in English. However, many students discontinued their education at primary and secondary levels. Efforts were, therefore, made to organize education through the vernacular along the lines of an education in English at lower levels. Such an arrangement of English and vernacular education, even as it led to a division of skills as "lower" and "higher," created conditions for eligibility for posts in the interior of the country.

The English-vernacular led education was found to be 'efficient' and 'feasible' in the context of the native society, as it catered effectively to the needs of both the urban and rural areas. However, when the three metropolitan universities were set up in 1857 it became clear that the education system had no uniformity either in the standards it followed or in the courses of studies it introduced. I argue that through a technical manipulation, whereby the idea of 'class' was made to correspond with the year of study, the colonial state effectively produced a neutral category which erased all differences of syllabus, examination system and teaching practice. This ensured a uniform system of education throughout the provinces. This neutrality also purported to give a fair and just system of admission, instruction and evaluation of students, irrespective of who they were and what was their location in terms of caste, community and gender.

My interest in raising the question of standards and studies is to show how a system of measurement, instituted to maintain

uniformity, legitimized a certain notion of justice while it effectively erased questions of caste, community and gender which were/are crucial in terms of access to education. In fact, the origin of a discourse on merit and efficiency can be traced back to such a moment when questions of caste and community were rendered irrelevant on the basis of a 'neutrality' observed in the process of admission, instruction and evaluation of students.

My concern has been to explore the possible reasons why education, whether English or indigenous, has featured so prominently in the historical accounts of Indian nationalism. Some of the major themes associated with English education in India are the themes of democracy, modernity, secularism, nationalism etc. It is generally argued that English educated Indians took command over westen principles of political discourse, initiated the process of decolonization and led the nationalist movement. It is through a reading of a select group of historians and their historiographical concerns, I have tried to lay open the various ways in which the question of education has featured in their writings.

Colonialist historiographers stress the point that in spite of a 'common' education in English, the educated Indians remained divided on the lines of caste, community and religion. It is as if the destiny of English education remains unfulfilled in a colonial society on account of the educated Indians' inability to disengage themselves from traditional ties. Such a delineation of English education and the English educated Indians has serious

implications for accounts of Indian nationalism because in these accounts the development of nationalist consciousness in India fails to match upto the high ideals of nationalism in the west. Nationalist historiographers, on the other hand, locate instruments of change outside the system of colonial education. Their stress on indigenous learning certainly problematizes the nature and content of nationalist consciousness by describing it as the product of separate but complementary forms of Indian and western knowledge. Even while nationalist historiographers attempt to write into the nation-making project the values and ideals of indigenous forms of learning, they also trace the limits of nationalist consciousness to the colonial circumstances in which it developed.

However, what is common to both colonialist and nationalist historiography is their elitist bias. The location of an elitist bias by the *Subaltern* group of historians has not only exposed the ideological character of historiography but has also rendered problematic the status assigned to both education and the educated elite in the nation-making project. *Subaltern* historians argue that a recovery of subaltern consciousness, written out of both the colonialist and nationalist historiography, would not only enlarge the understanding of nationalist movement but would also serve to displace education as the privileged site of the production of nationalist consciousness.

Following the *Subaltern* emphasis on the marginal and the invisible, I have focussed on caste critiques of education

located alongside mainstream debates. By citing the case of B.R. Ambedkar, I have tried to show how the colonial education system produced effects that became increasingly contentious during the time of independence. It is specifically on account of its entanglement with questions of nation, subject and citizenship, that the issue of education came to acquire a new dimension.

The struggle over education was as much against the colonial state as it was within the native society. My contention is that the narratives of the anti-colonial struggle over education were mostly spun around the English-vernacular debate, whereas the struggle within the native society was structured by resistance towards the monopoly of a certain caste/class/community. A reading of Ambedkar shows how certain crucial issues relating to education are neglected on account of an over-emphasis in the mainstream on the issue of the vernacular and English.

The question of caste which Ambedkar raises in the context of education opens up the question of merit and efficiency which has relevance even today. It is clear that the uncritical acceptance in mainstream nationalist thought of the educational merit of a particular caste/class/community of people had and continues to have enormous effect on the conduct of political representation. It is, therefore, necessary to explore how a system of education based on an explicit agenda of democratization delegitimizes the very groups it tries to empower.

My reading of Ambedkar seeks to show that there is a certain sense in which the native elite continues to take for granted the benefits that have accrued to it on account of systematic and continuing access to systems of education. The Mandal Commission Report and the elite reaction to caste reservations have not only highlighted the caste constituency of our education system but have rendered problematic the notions of merit and efficiency upon which the elite constructs its claim to greater representation in civil-social institutions.

The elite class which grew into the 'national' leadership in the early decades of the twentieth century was, significantly, constituted by a 'modern' form of education which enabled it to push for enhanced political power. This bid for political power was locked in with the question of the vernacular.

My concern is also with the critiques of education developed by nationalism. On one hand, these critiques show how the liberal humanist ideals embodied in the English text-books were inconsistent with the action of the English people in the colonies. On the other hand, they valorize the national-popular construction of the vernacular on the basis that it was democratic and bridged the gap between education and life. However, I claim that the nationalist projection of the vernacular as 'popular' is to be viewed as part of its politics and not as a democratization of the linguistic field.

In my reading of an 1867 demand for a vernacular university, the nativization of the lyric form in the Gujarati and the formulation of a national education project, I try to work against a nationalist logic which conceptualizes the vernacular as opposed to English. In each of these cases, I attempt to demonstrate that the vernacular collaborated with English, rather than opposed it. Moreover, I argue, the version of vernacular which each of these instances helped to consolidate was complicit with a sense of the national marked firmly as upper caste.

My analysis of the phenomenon of Compulsory English in independent India stems from my location as a teacher of Compulsory English in a moffusil college. Stressing the need to recognize the pedagogical as political, I argue that a politico-conceptual engagement with the practices surrounding the teaching and learning of Compulsory English would not only extend the meaning of the crisis, which now seems to be confined to a few metropolitan departments of literature, but would also work towards the production of caste, community and gender-sensitive textbooks and teaching practices, which though inadequate in themselves, would certainly be a step in the direction of a more democratic education.

This thesis is centrally addressed to the complicity of English with mainstream understanding of the notions "standards," "competence" and "merit." It is hoped that a close attention to the historical processes involved in constituting and consolidating these terms would dismantle them in the interest of an education for critical consciousness.

Notes

1. In recent years a line of research in English studies has emerged which has opened up the discipline for fresh inquiry and intervention. It has come to converge with similar lines of research in disciplines as various as political science, history, sociology, psychology, economics etc. What marks the contemporary moment of research is that the inquiry is in the form of `self-scrutiny'. This has tremendous implications for established forms of knowledge. The recognition that a `discipline' establishes a certain form of knowledge through a series of material practices such as teaching, reading and evaluating; that such a disciplinary `form' of knowledge is political-historical and that there is nothing sacrosanct in such a `knowledge' has upset the self-certitude of a discipline and has also undermined its authority as a disseminator of knowledge, true and certain, among people. The central texts of the "crisis" debate are Svati Joshi, ed., *Rethinking English: Essays in Literature, Language, History*, (New Delhi: Trianka, 1991); Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan, ed., *The Lie of the Land: English Literary Studies in India*, (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1993); Susie Tharu, ed., *Subject to Change: Teaching Literature in the Nineties*, (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1998) and of course, Gauri Viswanathan *Masks of Conquest: English Literary Study and British Rule in India* (London: Faber & Faber, 1989).