By AMITA KANEKAR

The English Language and Denationalisation

Does education in the English language threaten Indian culture and nationalism, or even the Indian nation itself, as some allege?

The most recent such allegation was by Uday Bhembre, at a public meeting of the RSS-backed Bharatiya Bhasha Suraksha Manch (BBSM). ‘English medium is a step of deculturisation, leading to the ultimate agenda of denationalisation,’ declared Bhembre, referring to the demand of FORCE, an organisation of parents of school-children, for government grants to English medium schools.

This however seems like hypocrisy. Why are Bhembre and the BBSM saying this only about FORCE, while ignoring all the private schools merrily functioning in English? Why haven’t they criticised the casteist language policy of the Goa government, which enforces Konkani medium only in government-aided schools, i.e. primarily for Bahujan students, both Catholic and Hindu? Everybody knows that learning in English leads to better jobs and opportunities.

The government’s position is thus blatantly pro-elite. If you are rich, you can go to private schools, study in English, and become richer. If you can’t afford private schools, you just stay poor by learning in bamon Konkani, i.e. the brahmanical and Devnagari-scripted Konkani of the Saraswats, so useless that it cannot sustain even one single newspaper. Why hasn’t the BBSM exposed this two-faced policy and demanded a complete ban of English-medium education across Goa? Or is their real grouse not about English at all, but about the need to prop up their bamon Konkani, for which the future of Bahujan students is to be sacrificed, especially Catholic students, since Hindus can at least escape via Marathi?

But modern education in the English language has come in for criticism even by persons not associated with the right-wing. Bhalchandra Nemade, Marathi writer and visiting professor at Goa University calls English a ‘killer language’ and a ‘slaughterhouse’ of students, and declares that education should only happen in the mother-tongue. But who decides one’s mother-tongue? Is ‘Puneri Marathi’ – the brahmanical official language of Maharashtra — the mother-tongue of Bahujan children even in Pune, leave aside the rest of Maharashtra?

One can ignore Nemade's demagogy, but the nativism behind it rings a familiar bell. Noted Goan environmentalist, activist and lawyer, Norma Alvares, speaking last year at the launch of a book on António Francisco Fernandes, the late veteran of many people's struggles in Goa, rued the fact that tribal people were giving up their traditions for modern ways, which, she said, really meant just consumerism and greed. One reason for this, according to her, was modern education, which made tribal people forget their 'maibhas' (mother-tongue) and turned them into city people who no longer understood how rice grew, how to pluck coconuts, and all the rest of their traditional knowledge.

This programme was attended by this writer, and also by a great many people from Goa's aboriginal communities. Many of the older generation present, I discovered, had never been to school. It was curious to hear a highly educated person condemning modern education before such an audience, who revered António Fernandes for, among other things, fighting for the education of their children. Why warn people who hardly consume about the horror of consumerism? And why should it be the burden of tribal communities to pluck coconuts? Just because it was tradition? Isn't there something odd here?

The answer comes from another public figure, who also sees English education as a threat to tradition, but likes it that way. Chandrabhan Prasad, Ambedkarite thinker and one of the speakers at the Dr B. R. Ambedkar Memorial Lecture Series in Goa last year, is a passionate believer in English as a tool of social emancipation in India. He also thinks it's best to let Indian languages wither away. 'Let all Indians speak in English by 2060. India will be a better nation.'

But wouldn't this mean the loss of traditional knowledge systems and cultures, he was asked. Dalits, he answered, do have a lot of traditional knowledge – like the profound and exceptional knowledge of how to make detergent from donkey dung, or how to skin a dead animal with their bare hands. But '[w]e want to gift our talents to other castes. You require exceptional level of human patience if you have to collect human shit in your hands and not vomit. Dalits have been doing this for ages. Please take this knowledge immediately and give us an education at CSDS (Centre for the Study of Developing Societies) instead!'

The English language, he says, is important not just because it leads to better jobs, income and future, but also because it does NOT belong to the Indian tradition. Being an outsider,

English is not a conduit of caste. Most other Indian languages, thanks to their long and hoary traditions, are casteist.

What Prasad says is true of bamon Konkani too; it contains several castiest formulations, proverbs, jokes and abuse, many of which are old and traditional. This Konkani even flaunts two 'you's nowadays, like Puneri Marathi – one to show respect and the other to show disrespect. Who needs to hear this kind of discrimination? Deculturisation or even 'denationalisation' may be exactly what this nation needs.

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