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## **The Ever-Changing Status of English in Government-Run Schools of West Bengal: Ideology, Policy and Praxis (1983-2004)**

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### **Abstract**

A rich tradition of English education was founded in West Bengal for historical reasons. But the Left Front Government upset it during their thirty-four years rule. The two decades of Left rule, from 1983 to 2004, witnessed four changes in the scenario of teaching English at school at irregular intervals without proper justification. English education has remained a contested terrain of hegemonies and counter hegemonies since its inception during the colonial period, after Independence in entire India and in Left-ruled West Bengal too. Despite of its pro-proletariat ideology, the Left Front Government did a volte-face when it reintroduced English in the Primary stage after initially abolishing it from there. They even failed to produce any revolutionary ideal in the English textbooks. Globalization, ideological confusions and imperatives of realpolitik are chiefly responsible for the indecisiveness of the Left vis-à-vis English education policies.

**Key Words:** Colonization, English Education, Left Front, Hegemony, Ideology, Realpolitik, Economic Liberalization

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to explore the politics that determined the uneven course of development of English education in vernacular-medium schools that fall under the jurisdiction of the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education during the two decades of the Left-Front Government, from 1983-2004. The hypothesis binding the sets of arguments is that English education since its inception has remained a contested terrain of diverse discursive associations. Hegemonies, counter-hegemonies, contest, consent, complicity, power, control, dominance, subjugation, representation, identity, etc. have been some of the latent issues interspersing the overtly pedagogical policies and praxis vis-à-vis English.

My choice of the locale and the time-frame is not arbitrarily made. Modern West Bengal was part of the most significant Bengal Presidency during the colonial period. Calcutta (now Kolkata) was the capital of British India for nearly 150 years till 1911. Due to the uneven spread of colonization in India a rich tradition of English education was developed in presidency towns like Calcutta, Bombay (now Mumbai) and Madras (now Chennai) (Nurullah and Naik, Mahmood, Ghosh). This legacy of English education continued unquestioned in West Bengal for about three decades even after Independence when most of the northern states situated in the Hindi-heartland were engaged with the “Angreji-Hatao” Movement in the wake of postcolonial nationalism during the late 1950s and the 1960s. It was in 1983 when the ruling Left-Front Government took the revolutionary step of abolishing English from the Primary stage (Classes I-V) in government-run schools. The 34 years long rule of the Left-Front Government was witness to many ideological discrepancies in respect of policies and praxis about many core issues. English education was certainly one of them. In two decades from 1983 to 2004 the Government changed their English education policy four times at irregular intervals without any proper justification. According to changed policy English used to be taught from Class-VI for a decade, from 1983 to 1993. But the following decade saw three changes. English education was started at Class-V in 1994. Again English was introduced in 1999 in Class-II. Finally in 2004 the Government brought English in Class-I in all government-run Primary schools. These frequent changes in the education policies drew much controversy throughout the Left-Front rule and even after. Even it has remained a popular as well as mass-media assumption till date that the

indecisiveness of the government about English education was partially responsible for its dramatic demise in the 2011 Assembly Election. My aim in this paper, therefore, is to bring that unorganized debate within the purview of the academia and study the politics behind the checkered history of English in school curricula in Left-Front ruled West Bengal.

The methodology applied to the study in this paper is threefold: (1) Historical study; (2) Discursive Study; and (3) Textual Study. Annals of historical development account for the genesis as well as institutionalization of the legacy of English education in colonial Bengal in particular. Discursive study analyses the play of power and politics, hegemony and counter-hegemony, dominance and resistance, contest and consent that has often moulded the course of English education since its inception till date. The textual study explores how dominant ideological principles contest with existing hegemonies throughout the process of textbook preparation. Here textbooks serve the purpose of praxis for the implementation of the policies in the pedagogical setup. All these historical, discursive and textual studies, however, often intersect each other.

### **The Colonial Logic and Legacy of English Education in Bengal**

Gauri Viswanathan in *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* has argued that the introduction of English 'represented an embattled response to historical and political pressures: to tensions between the East India Company and the English Parliament, between Parliament and missionaries, between the East India Company and the Indian elite classes' (10). All these stake holders mentioned above had distinct logic that shaped the course of English education in colonial India.

The Indian administrators were initially not interested to interfere with the indigenous customs of education and other societal institutions for fear of reaction. But in the wake of widespread corruptions from the part of Company officials the British Parliament force the British East India Company by the Charter Act of 1813 to take over the responsibility of education of colonial subjects of India. But the Company adopted the Orientalist policy of encouraging Oriental learning in classical Sanskrit and Persian. The Missionary endeavor of conversion and education was resisted by the Company administration to appease orthodox sections of the Hindu and the Muslim community till the Charter Act of 1813 reversed the situation in favour of the Missionaries to some extent. Members of the Clapham Sect, like Charles Grant, William Wilberforce, and et al. criticized the official policy of Orientalism and religious non-intervention (Viswanathan 25-6). They vociferously claimed for the introduction of English education as a means of hegemonic control required for the consolidation of the British Empire in the face of potential debilitating forces. The Orientalists led by H. H. Wilson supported the official theory of engraftment or cultural synthesis of Eastern and Western cultures. Vernacularists like William Adam appealed for support to the indigenous institutions of education through the medium of vernaculars. Utilitarians like James Smith too were hesitant about the success of English education in the process of Westernization of Indian subjects. In the other hand Indian elites like Rammohun Roy, Radhakanta Deb, et al. demanded English education despite of their diverse and often conflicting attitude towards modernity. The Anglicist line propounded the policy of dissemination of English education to privileged classes only who in turn would educate their fellow countrymen. It was propagated by T. B. Macaulay and Charles Trevelyan who repeatedly denounced the claim of both the Oriental languages and the vernaculars and asserted the cultural superiority of the British (Zastouphil and Moir 161-73, 281-303). The Filtration Theory designed by Macaulay finally achieved official patronage during the reign of Lord Bentinck, the first Governor-General of India in 1835 (194-6). There has been significant volume of debates, however, about the responsibility of Macaulay in the replacement of Classical Oriental languages with English. While Viswanathan following Edward Said and Michel Foucault's notion of discourse sees the introduction and institutionalization of English as a one way transaction minimalizing the agency of the Indian subjects to none; latest criticisms by Alok K. Mukherjee argues that orthodox Hindu society found in English an ally to establish the degenerated "Arya Dharma" and caste-based hegemony with the help of their racial kin---the British or the Anglo-Saxons (85-105).

Since its inception English education has been pursued for basically two values---transcendental and utilitarian. English in one hand inspired liberal ideals among the educated Indians; on the other hand it lured thousands of job aspirants who wanted to throng the posts of subordinate offices of the government. Lord Hardinge in 1844 overtly declared the policy of discrimination against vernacular educated individuals favouring English educated candidates instead. Post-Industrial Revolution British imperial policies are reflected in the Wood's Dispatch drafted in 1854 during Lord Dalhousie's tenure. Charles Wood recommended bi-furcation of the curriculum. English medium higher education was destined to prepare subordinate office-bearers at cheap cost for the expanded bureaucracy of the colonial government. In the other hand vernacular medium vocational education was meant for producing cheap labours for the extraction of colonial resources to supply raw materials to British industries (Krishnaswami 47-53, Acharya 1124-30). Both sets of students would, however, be indoctrinated into British value system so that they remain loyal consumer of British goods (Bandyopadhyay 143). But limited job prospects for vernacular educated candidates attracted them towards English literary education. Thus Primary, Middle and Secondary level education became subservient to English medium higher studies. The nationalist leaders grew conscious of the role of English as a means of communication and unification in multilingual and multicultural India. Lord Curzon in the first decade of the twentieth century tried in vain to check the spread of English education and liberal ideals in the wake of burgeoning nationalism by means of imposing governmental control over education. During the days of National Education Movement set up as a branch of the Swadeshi and Boycott Movement in the beginning of 1900s the ideologues of vernacular education like Rabindranath Tagore, Satish Chandra Mukherjee, and et al. rather appropriated English instead of getting rid of it. Even the Indian ministers of education during the Diarchy (1919-29) or Provincial Legislature since 1937 did not diminish the status of English in the scenario of Indian education. Thus, by the time India became independent the legacy of English as a compulsory subject throughout the school education was already founded.

### **Post-Independence Government Policies about English Education**

Education was under state control till 1976 when it was put in the concurrent list. Still national commissions and policies often influenced states to formulate policies compatible with them. The MadhyamikPariksha or the Secondary Examination was conducted by the Calcutta University till 1964. So the affair of Secondary education was deemed to be a concern of the University Education Commission 1948-49 chaired by Dr. SarvapalliRadhakrishnan. The imperatives of national integration through the determination of a national language, promoting India to the international platform, and constitutional bindings for universalization of elementary education guided Radhakrishnan Commission (1948-49), Mudaliar Commission (1952-53), Kothari Commission (1964-66) and National Education Policy (1968) to forge the Three Language Formula of teaching the mother tongue, Hindi or any modern Indian language especially for those whose mother tongue is Hindi, and English. But no comprehensive plan for the instructional duration, introductory age, curriculum, minimum achievement level, purpose of English education, etc. came out of these policies. As a result English was taught differently in diverse states.

West Bengal experienced different kinds of regimes like Congress rule, United Front rule, and Presidential rule till 1977 when the long lasting Left-Front Government brought stability for 34 years at a stretch. English used to be taught from the Primary stage in West Bengal till 1982. In 1983 the Left Front Government in compliance with the recommendations of the Prof. HimangshuBimalMajumdar Commission (1974-79) abolished English in the Primary stage (Classes I-V). The logic was mainly that English would interfere with learning the mother tongue at the Primary stage. The communist ideological imperative of the Left Front found in English a nexus of elitist values and comprador bourgeoisie ideologies. Thus, as a measure to diminish the importance of English in the new setup English was introduced at the beginning of High School stage, i.e. Class-VI. This policy was followed for a decade despite occasional criticisms from a section of educationists and intellectuals. The Ashok Mitra Commission 1991-92, however, advised the Government to advance the teaching of English in schools by one class. Thus

English began to be taught in Class-V in government-run schools from 1994. Rampant public reactions, media criticisms and campaigns by the opposition parties in the wake of Parliamentary Election 1999 compelled the Government to set up a One Man Committee under the chairmanship of Prof. PabitraSarkar in 1998. This Committee tried to justify earlier policies vis-à-vis English education by giving instances from Neurolinguistics. But he also took account of Government's desperation to address popular demand in the wake of burgeoning middle class aspirations resulting from economic reforms by the Left Front Government. The Committee, therefore, recommended beginning of English from the second half of Class-II. The Government readily implemented it in 1999. Another Committee under the chairmanship of Prof. RanjugopalMukhopadhyay was founded in 2001. The Committee submitted its final report in 2003. It maintained that the Government should not have surrendered to the popular whims of introducing English at an earlier stage. It suggested a rollback of English from Primary schools and introducing it in Class-V. The Buddhadeb Bhattacharya led Government, however, nullified that proposal and brought English in Class-1 in all government-run Primary schools in 2004. Thus the circle became full within two decades.

### **Framing English Textbook: The Inherent Contradiction**

Textbooks are important medium through which the curricular praxis is implemented. The textbook committee usually functions within certain perimeters. It is to comply with a pedagogical approach which in turn involves certain methods and corresponding techniques. Again the textbook is to maintain the continuity within a series of textbooks that aims at implementation of the prescriptions made in the syllabus. The syllabus again follows the larger framework of a given curriculum. The curriculum usually maintains the purpose or ideology to be implemented through the instructional materials. Patriotism, national integrity, gender sensitivity, citizenship, communal harmony, regional specificity, etc. are some of the curricular objectives often reflected in the textbooks (Advani). Apart from that the textbook has to comply with two necessary principles---copyright law and cheap publication cost. Both of these factors have influenced the selection process of contents.

Since colonial times Bengal has experienced several experimentations in the field of English pedagogy. Grammar-Translation, despite of adverse criticisms, has defied all other scientific and logical approaches and methods like Oral Approach, Reading Method, Structural Approach, Drill Method, etc. to remain a time-tested method till date. Functional Communicative Approach has been one of the latest innovations in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT). It is a student-centric approach. It discourages both the frontal lecture method as well as the formal teaching of grammar. The Left Front adopted this approach in 1983 and the existing textbooks were replaced with new ones composed by the principles of the Functional Communicative Approach.

The textbook is broadly divided into two distinct parts---prose and poetry. The prose section are usually composed or abridged from classics by the textbook committee in simplified style. The poetry section has been consistent of mainly British canonical poets with few representations from the Indian English Writing. Despite of policy changes and corresponding textbook modifications no less than four times, the contents were merely repeated or readjusted in the textbooks in all subsequent editions year after year. Thus, colonial hangover, stringent copyright laws and the binding of cheap publication cost have been instrumental in the process of textbook preparation. There is no provision for either rapid readers or formal grammar books.

The contents of the textbooks, however, are often reflective of the existing discriminations in representation and prejudices concerning class, caste, religion and sex/gender.<sup>1,2</sup> Idealizing rural life are also an important aspect of this textbook. Discrimination in representation is applied to the issue of Dalits too. There are few representations from the Scheduled Tribe and the Scheduled Caste communities in the entire series including all subsequent editions which amounts to about twenty two volumes. Stereotyping the roles of farmers, homemakers, slum dwellers are also found in the textbooks. A normative upper caste Hindu male is promoted above others as ideal in almost all the textbooks. Conventional roles of women are legitimized across

religions, classes and cultures<sup>3, 4</sup>. Service women are few and they depicted rather as aberrations. Often a happy image of the farmer residing amidst the ideal surroundings of a village is projected while the rural exploitative structure as well as class and caste hierarchies in the agricultural sector are kept in the dark. A version of national history which is again the prerogative of mainly upper caste Hindu male nationalists and freedom fighters is maintained in the entire textbook series.

### Conclusion

Despite of pro-proletariat ideology the Left Front government failed to bring about significant improvements in the field of education. They had often turned their revolutionary zeal to minor reforms to the existing structure. From the above study some of the following causes and effects of their experimentations with English education and probable reasons of their failure can be inferred:

The Left Front government failed to apprehend the complexity of English in the post-colonial setting. Their perspective of associating English with elitist ideologies and comprador bourgeoisie value system was simplistic.

The Left leadership in their way to serve the ordinary people ultimately succumbed to the British colonial discriminative policy of reserving English for classes and assigning vernaculars for masses. Thus English continued to be a marker of class consciousness, power and exploitation.

Development of linguistic and cultural identity politics especially in states like Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, etc. and in neighbouring nations like Bangladesh influenced the Left Front leadership of West Bengal too. But they probably failed to realize that the 'Bengali Bhadrak' identity itself has been a colonial construct. English educated, cultured, mainly service oriented, middle class intelligentsia has assimilated and manipulated that identity. They have remained loyal supporters of English education since colonial times. They were in no position to surrender the acquired privileges resulting from their command over English to the claim of either the vernaculars or the proletariat.

Shift of the electoral base primarily from working classes to ever-growing middle classes also was responsible for creating division in the Leftist ideologies in West Bengal about many other socio-economic programmes apart from the issue of English. New entrants in the party rank and file too did not cling to the original ideological principles.

Governmental reforms at the agricultural sector and the service sector increased the middle class population manifold. A general tendency of class ascendancy was reflected in the mass aspiration for English education.

The Dalits found in English a means of emancipation from the discriminations and exploitations prevailing in the existing socio-economic structure.

The government also could not convince the general public about the theory of teaching of English interfering with teaching of the mother tongue. Pabitra Sarkar Committee was the only one to enlist conflicting views from renowned socio-linguists and neurolinguists to justify its position. Educationists and intellectuals like Sunanda Sanyal, Sukanta Choudhuri, Supriya Choudhuri, and et al., therefore, vociferously claimed for a child's aptitude to acquire more than one language simultaneously at an early age (Mitra 144, Sarkar 48-59).

States like Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, etc. provided instances of successful introduction of English from earlier stages of schooling. West Bengal was clearly lagging behind them.

The failure of candidates from West Bengal in all India examinations and interviews mostly in the field of civil services, engineering and medicine intensified public dissidence against the government's policy. The circulation of those views in the media and the increasing protest from the opposition like S.U.C.I and the T.M.C made the government nervous at the wake of election every time forcing them into policy modifications. Thus the policy was changed in 1994-95 (in the wake of 1996 Parliamentary and Assembly Election); in 1999 (1999 Parliamentary Election); and in 2004-05 (2004 Parliamentary Election and 2006 Assembly Election) keeping in mind the imperative of realpolitik.

Government's English policies helped to the proliferation of private-run English medium schools and coaching classes or tuitions. They would often fleece the middle class aspirants and lower classes alike.

Besides, the credibility of government run schools was at stake. Most of the bright students either left them or got admitted to English medium public schools. Even ordinary students followed suit. These schools had been instrumental in disseminating government's ideologies especially in rural and suburban areas. These developments made the party apprehensive of their losing hold over the masses.

One usually needed lower qualification to become a teacher in a primary school. Thus the party used to recruit a large number of under-qualified candidates mostly taken from lower middle and lower classes in the primary education sector. This policy served two purposes. Firstly, the newly recruits easily became adherent to the teachers' wing of the party. Secondly the government could claim of redressing the problem of unemployment. But if English was introduced in the primary schools, the government was to recruit higher qualified candidates chiefly from the middle and upper-middle classes. They might not become party cadres so easily as their predecessors. It held back the Government to implement teaching of English earlier.

The prospect of huge financial provision for recruitment of new teachers and training of existing ones was also a factor behind the procrastination of the government.

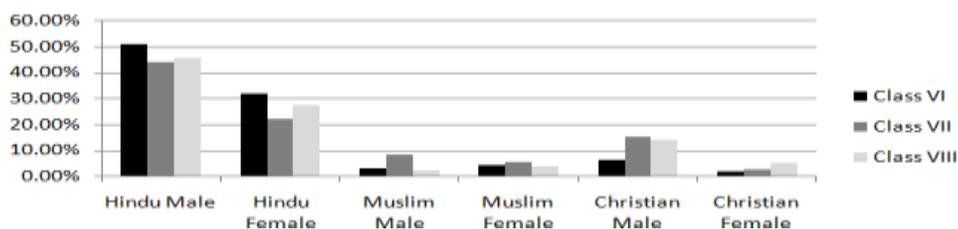
The lip service paid to the Functional-Communicative approach in one hand and the lack of proper orientation in the other were responsible for the failure of the programme of teaching English in a more systematic way.

In the post-economic liberalization era since 1990s English has been shedding its elitist label and becoming the language of the leader and the proletariat alike in the burgeoning sector of Information Technology. English language education is increasingly replacing English literary education in British canonical literature. In the new scenario the U.S.A, and not the U.K, leads the English empire. In the globalized world India aspires to become the leading supplier of English educated proletariats to foreign farms at low cost. The Left Front government, therefore, had few options apart from following the latest trends set by the market economy.

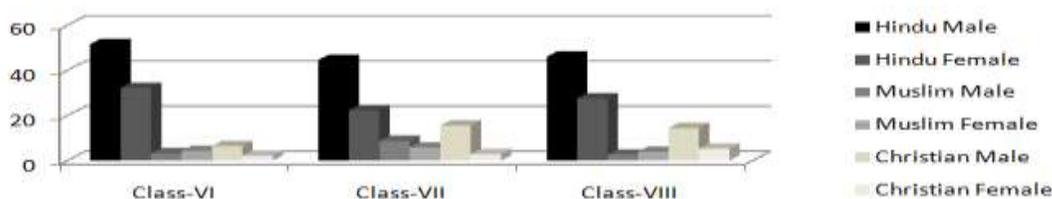
Despite of claims of decolonization of the discipline of English, the textbooks retained the colonial legacies especially in the literary part. Again the communist government also failed to utilize the English textbook as a powerful agency to eliminate discriminations of a capitalist and patriarchal society. Thus conventional or stereotypical roles for genders, castes, religious groups and classes, therefore, persisted.

From the above discussions it is revealed that despite of revolutionary claims of universalizing elementary education and literacy in the state at the cost of English education, the Left Front Government did not succeed in their aim. It interfered in vain with the rich legacy of English education and surrendered to the market forces and imperatives of electoral politics at the end. But at least two generations have been still suffering due to the ideological whims and indecisiveness of the Government.

**Tables and Figures**



1. **Chart No. 1:**Consistency of representation of characters according to their religion and sex in the English textbooks of Class-VI (*Learning English: Step One*, 1983); of Class-VII (*Learning English: Step Two*, 1984); and of Class-VIII (*Learning English: Step Three*, 1986).



2. **Chart No. 2:** Comparison among the relative position of all the characters according to their religion and sex in the English textbooks of Class-VI (*Learning English: Step One*, 1983); of Class-VII (*Learning English: Step Two*, 1984); and of Class-VIII (*Learning English: Step Three*, 1986).

**Table 1:** List of gender-wise activities of the Roy family [*Learning English: Step Three 6* (1986)].

	Making bed	Washing clothes	Cleaning/ cooking/ sweeping	Doing homework	Go shopping	Draw rations
1. Sri Roy	His own bed	His own clothes	×	Helps Aruna	√	√
2. Smt. Roy	Her own bed	Her own clothes	All three	×	×	×
3. Mihir (son)	×	×	×	Without help	×	×
4. Aruna (daughter)	Her own bed & Mihir's	Mihir's clothes/her own clothes	Sweeping & cleaning	With help	×	×

**Table 2:** List of gender-wise distribution of activities/hobbies [*Learning English: Step Three 10* (1986)].

	Gardening	Candle-making	Spinning	Clay-modelling	Cane and bamboo work
Somen	√			√	√
Mala		√	√	√	
Rekha		√	√		√
Hirak	√		√	√	

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