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D is for Dalits and E is for the English Goddess

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"Had Ambedkar not learned English, he would not have gone abroad," said Eash Kumar Gangania, "and had he not gone abroad, he would not have become Babasaheb for us."

Gangania, a teacher from Delhi, was speaking to 1,500 dalits in Bankagaon, a nondescript village near Lakhimpur Khiri in UP. The crowd was rapt as Gangania added that it all happened "because Ambedkar learned English," finally ending with a powerful and surprising message: "If you learn English, you too can scale the heights Babasaheb did."

Gangania's speech came on a special occasion — April 30, the day Bankagaon's dalits pledged to learn the English language as well as worship it as a goddess. It was the day they laid the foundations of a temple dedicated to "English, the Dalit Goddess".

One of those listening to Gangania was Chandra Bhan Prasad, a self-taught Dalit social psychologist who thought up the idea of worshipping English as a goddess. "Nobody is selling hope," he laments, recalling how he has celebrated October 25 as English Day for the last five years. October 25 is the birthday of Lord Macaulay whom Prasad calls the "Father of Indian modernity".

The dalits' new appreciation of English highlights the new class divide in modern India — between a minority of the English-speaking elite and others. For dalits, the medium is the message. Prasad says Indians have figured out that English is the password that can open the doors to a better life. A case in point is Kamal Kumar, a postgraduate dalit who enthusiastically participated in the temple's foundation-laying ceremony. In a mix of Hindi and English, Kumar narrated how he became fluent in English. Basically, his postgraduate studies in Noida's urban environment exposed him to students from English-medium schools.

But, once back in his village, Kumar found himself becoming less fluent because no one else spoke English. Today, he runs a school with 450 students. They are taught in Hindi and Kumar rues the fact that he cannot afford to run an English-medium school. Teachers who know English are hard to get and demand higher wages.

India has been discussing the virtues of English or the "vernacular" as a medium of instruction from the mid-19th century. In 1835, Lord Macaulay tilted the balance in favour of English with his Minute on Indian Education. It was a formidable defence of the cause but so tactless that his rant against Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit and other vernacular languages upsets Indians even today.

In Prasad's mind there is no debate about the role of English. He calls English-speaking Indians Macaulay's children and sees English as a tool to emancipate the dalits. "The State and society cannot emancipate all dalits from backwardness and poverty. The dalits themselves should shape their own future," he says.

It is a praiseworthy enterprise especially in one crucial respect: Till now, every effort and demand to do with dalit welfare has expected 'others' to act. The others could be the state, society or the media. Now, it's up to the dalits to demand English and sooner than later they will get it, while elites may continue to debate the question — mostly in English. For, the message of the English Goddess is simple: "Come to me, I will empower you."

That is why the temple ceremony was an all-dalit affair. The premises of a dalit-run school are being used for the temple. The first donation — Rs 2 lakh — has come from Milind Kamble, chairman of the Pune-based Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

As more dalit parents insist on imparting English to their children, the market will do the rest. At some point, the supply of English teachers is bound to meet demand, helping educators like Kamal Kumar offer English-medium education. However, two questions remain unanswered. One is the colonial taint of English. The lone foreigner at the temple event, Sussex university professor Marcus Wood, offers an answer. The British empire was responsible for the standardization of English, which paved the way for its emergence as a global language, "but now English does not belong to the English anymore". The dalits' quest for English is their attempt to find a voice. It has all the ingredients of an epic struggle. This goddess may not join the Hindu pantheon of 330 million but it could usher in an era of cultural rejuvenation for dalits.

The author is a Fellow of the Rajiv Gandhi Institute for Contemporary Studies, New Delhi. The views expressed are personal

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