

## **Community, Aspirations and English: A Sociolinguistic Study of a West Bengal Village**

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### **Abstract**

This paper tries to understand the perception of a community and its desire for socio-economic mobility of its new generations by learning the English language in a NGO run school named Brilliant School (name is changed) in a village of Murshidabad district of West Bengal. It is a semi-ethnographic study with participant observation, non-structured interviews and observation with the help of an interpreter Sahib (name changed; also all personal names given in the article are changed names), because the author was not fully conversant in Bengali. It is a qualitative study which tries to describe the context of reality in relation to learning English as perceived by the target group.

**Key Words:** Community, aspiration, context, narrative, enquiry, imitative use, computeracy, cultural capital, critical pedagogy.

### **Focus of This Paper**

In this paper the perceptions of the residents of a village towards 'English in School' would be looked into, based mainly on recorded interviews with parents who send their kids to Brilliant School, an English medium school. These interviews, and narrations based on them were conducted with the help of an interlocutor because I was not conversant in Bengali language.

After recording these interviews and narratives, an analysis of the same is undertaken.

### **Scene-I**

A half-paralysed man with white flowing beard sits basking in the sun. Two grandsons, who are enrolled in Brilliant School, approximately of the same age, are playing around in a carefree manner nearby. A granddaughter a little older than the two is observing the scene curiously from the verandah of the pucca house (among the few in the village). 29

year old Sohina and 31 year old Nihana are the only members present on the scene. They are the daughters-in-law of the aged man. The sons are away posted in the Indian Army. Sohina exclaims, "My husband is a lance Naik, and my brother-in-law is a havildar." Their father (the bearded man on the scene) was a carpenter who went to school till class 7th and was a great football player in his hey days. He says proudly "There was no footballer of my stature in the local area."

### **Transcript of the Interview that Took Place**

Q. Why do you send your kids to an English medium school?

Sohina: This is the age of computer, without English it is not possible to learn computer. My husband is in the army. He is posted in Pune. He took me along once. He can use computer and I have seen him working in English.

Q. But they teach English from class I in the primary school. It is free of cost. Why do not you send your kids there?

Sohina: They do not teach (Padhai hobe na?) Nihana intervenes after a long time; The Police gives you respect in the station, if you know English. Everyone speaks Bangla, but if you speak English, you are offered a chair immediately.

Sohina: He can speak Bangla only in Bengal, without English, he won't be able to travel in the world.

Nihana: Outside Bengal, government documents are either printed in English or Hindi.

Sohina: This is the age of computer, we must move forward by learning English.

Q. You seem to be interested in computers a lot, but computer can be learnt through Bangla, also.

Sahib: But it is very difficult. Even in Hindi it is very tough to work on computers.

Q. (to grandfather): Do you know English?

Grandfather: I know Arabic and Bengala. My friend with whom I used to compete in football, went on to learn English after class 7<sup>th</sup>. I left studies after class 7<sup>th</sup>, he went on to become a high ranking officer in the Indian Army. In our days English was taught only in the city school. My friend went to attend it. Look where he is!

Q. Do your sons know Arabic?

G.F. No, they know Bangla and a bit English, so they have got jobs in the Army.

Q. Do any one of the members of your family know Arabic?

G.F. No.

Q. You did not teach them.

G.F. It is not a necessity any more.

Q. Why?

G.F. When we went to school, all the books were in Bengala and Arabic was an additional subject. Now everything is in English ... this is the need of the times.

Q. But if you get the same opportunities by learning Bengala, would you still opt for English?

G.F. No. Not at all (Emphatically)

Q. (to Sohina) Why should one learn Bengala?

Sohina: It is our mother tongue, gives a sense of belonging. (Apnapan)

Q. But still you send your kids to an English medium school.

Sohina: So what, I want my kid to explore the world; it is possible only through English. Even if he does not speak Bengala, he can talk to the world in English. It is the 'pressure' of English.

## Scene II

Sahib's story has been narrated in the preceding paragraphs. His kids study in Brilliant on scholarship. Among three brothers who now live separately, he has now built a pucca house because he is among the privileged few salaried people living in the village. His wife Neera is cleaning utensils below the bamboo groves on the pond with ducks quacking away.

They have a son and a daughter, 7 year old Anaya and 6 year old Amir. Neera has been to school till class 7<sup>th</sup>.

Neera did not talk much like Nihana and Sohina, but was emphatic that the life of her kids would change for the better if they went to Brilliant and study English.

Neera's case seems to be that of 'reverence' for English without knowing the why of it. Her husband Sahib having been exposed to multitude of visitors at Brilliant, feels that English opens all the doors and one cannot do without it, in contemporary world.

## Role of NGO

Brilliant is an innovative experiment in the sense that it is trying to empower people through English medium quality education and host of other community initiatives. Brilliant is a nodal centre, providing rich pedagogical possibilities for the classroom as well as for linking education with broader socio-economic goals. But it cannot replace the existing government supported system followed in government schools. NGO initiatives can only show ways of doing things in a better way. These initiatives are not meant to be alternatives to replace governmental systems, simply because intentions cannot cater to the whole

population, in spite of providing scholarships and charging a modest fee of 350/- per month.

The two cases of families presented above, who send their children to Brilliant, suggest, they are economically better off and socially more informed to decide in favour of English medium school for their kids. The families from Bagdi community, who are the poorest of the lot in the village, cannot afford to send their kids to Brilliant.

### **Scene at Village Primary School**

Let us see what the Village Primary School has to offer to such students.

Village Primary School is in a sorry state of affairs. The in-charge of the school is nibbling away on some register, which has to be prepared before the crucial meeting. One of the lady teachers is assigned with the duty of watching children near the pond, lest someone might drown. Two additional rooms built under the 'Sarva Siksha Abhiyan' (Education for All) are stuffed with straw. Some students are on the terrace of the school, shouting and yelling. One of the teachers is standing with young men on the other side of the pond, 'Adda Baazi' (chatting) in popular parlance.

Here is the conversation that followed, with the in-charge of the school.

Q. When was English introduced as a compulsory subject in primary schools in West Bengal?

I.C. (In-charge): In 2006, from class I to IV, after that it is upper primary in Bengal. My English is weak. We do not have any special teacher. None of us can teach English properly.

Q. Than how do you manage? (They hardly teach but still...)

I.C. I as an in-charge went to the Area circle for training in spoken English.

Q. Who were the trainers?

I.C. They were teachers like us. But whose English was better. I can teach everything except English.

Q. What books do you use for teaching English?

I.C. Books prescribed by West Bengal School Education Board, prepared in collaboration with British Council.

Q. Do you support the government's decision to teach English from class I?

I.C. Yes, it is a must we did not know English. That is why we could not make anything of our selves.

These interviews highlight the importance of the context in language teaching specially English as a second language (Barkhuizen 2008). These interviews show also that “teachers teach best and learners learn best in situations that are compatible with their backgrounds, beliefs and expectations” (Kumaravadivelu 2006).

The primary school teacher in the village rues that he did not know English, so he could not make anything of his life. The 'self-esteem' of the teacher seems to suffer. His comment that he can teach all subjects except English and his English is poor is a sort of 'self-confession'.

### **Sohina's Computer Age: Deconstructing the Power of English**

The debates over hegemony of English cannot be understood without how it constitutes the everyday existence of individuals in the society. The residents of the village, like Sohina or Sahib, do not send their kids to Brilliant, as a well thought out educational decision, but more as a strategy to cope with the 'hegemony' of English which they see around themselves. Sohina must have seen it when she went to visit/stay with her husband in Pune. The atmosphere of Cantonment and the Officers who inhabit there and their 'commands' made Sohina feel the 'Power' of English. She does not want that her children should remain powerless. They should also share the 'pie of power'. She goes to the extent of dismissing Bengala and feels that even if her child does not know the language, he can

communicate with the world through English,

The old man, Sohina's father-in-law left studies after class 7th, did not attend the city English school, so he could not rise above the family profession of carpentry. Mobility seems to imply escaping the clutches of immediate socioeconomic existence, rather than questioning it. So, knowledge of English can promote mobility, but a critical ability, so often associated with true education, involves an engagement with pedagogy at a deeper level rather than limiting it to acquisition for functional use.

### **L1 or Mother Tongue**

L1 is so much intertwined with individual's identity. Critical awareness is impossible without it. So any meaningful Language learning-teaching has to take this under consideration. The extent and how about is a pedagogical issue to be engaged with by language teachers.

### **Impact of Global Market and Globalization**

Sohina's mention about the age of computer and hence the need to learn English can be explained by using Krishnaswamy's (1998) argument that it is western technology which plays a key role in introducing English as a language of international market. Materials in English in print as well as electronic media and newspapers, news magazines, advertising agencies and other participants in the market process attract producers and consumers (Krishnaswamy, 98). So English and its spread cannot be seen in isolation from the great global market expansion.

Krishnaswamy (1998) sums up the situation, "while all these explosions (booms in technology, etc.) are taking place in the English knowing world, the 76.29 per cent of rural population combined with the illiterate section of the 23.31 percent of urban population, is becoming more and more illiterate. These people, who were brought up in the oral tradition of the social milieu, become illiterate, even in their mother tongue with the introduction of the printed word. They again became illiterate vis-a-vis English and English education, now they are becoming 'incomputerate, an even worse disadvantage than illiteracy and English illiteracy, 'computeracy' is again pushing them to margins."

Computeracy is pushing them to margins, this statement read in conjunction with Sohina's assertion that there is a pressure of English, shows how hegemony of any kind, be it a language, works at very subtle levels.

### **Imitative Function**

How does one explain the desire of Sohina and Nihana to educate their children in English medium school. English medium schools are seen as elite institutions, so the desire to be 'there' or to be a part of it, may be one of plausible reasons. Krishnaswamy explains the phenomenon through what he calls 'imitative' function.'

In the social domain, English has induced what may be called the 'imitative function - a tendency to imitate the successful English educated elite. As a result, quite a few people have started using English even in areas where it is neither necessary nor appropriate. The 'imitative use' has an element of parody in the case of some but in most cases it shows the desire to become successful in life.

This 'imitative use' is only possible when there is a model to imitate. Like in Sahib's case, it might be the rush of educationists and others who visit the English Medium School. It is also possible that the status of those associated with the English Medium School may have some indirect influence and impact.

If we examine this statement in relation to those who are full fee paying parents sending their kids to the English Medium School, they not only have 'economic' capital (most of the households have salaried members), but cultural capital too, who see their relational position, and try to accumulate more capital with English medium education for their kids, to move up in the social trajectory.

### **Conclusion**

We can conclude the paper by stressing the fact that the situation is very complex and that social and economic advantages as well as deprivation also play an important part in the choice of English as the medium of instruction.



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