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**Teaching English in Minority Institutions**

**V. K. Sunwani, Ph.D.**

## Teaching English in Minority Institutions

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### Diversity and Plurality Are Found Everywhere

Democracy is nothing if it does not admit of diversity and plurality. No one can demand uniformity in democracy as uniformity leads to authoritarianism. No society is uniform, for that matter. Within the Hindu society, there is religious diversity, apart from cultural and linguistic diversity. There is a great deal of religious and cultural diversity among Muslims also.

We always talk of 'Hindus' and 'Muslims' or 'Sikhs' and 'Christians', cite their numbers and draw our conclusions. We ignore the diversity and plurality of religious beliefs and cultures within these communities. Besides, we draw our conclusions about a community from our experiences in urban areas. Communalism tends to be an urban phenomenon. The major communal disturbances occurred in urban areas though now they have spread to rural areas also. In the urban areas, separate political identities carry more weight than in the rural areas. If we keep the bewildering diversity of our country in view, the national mainstream will appear to be a theoretical construct rather than a reality out there.

### Indian Muslims

Indian Muslims are very much part of the regional cultural streams. For example, the Muslims of Kerala are part of the Malayalam cultural stream and in that sense are closer to the Kerala Hindus and Christians than to the Urdu-speaking Muslims of the North. The

Muslims of Tamil Nadu are much closer to Tamil Hindus and Christians. The Muslims have made seminal contribution to the regional languages and cultures.

The same is true of the Muslims of Gujarat. These Muslims are so well integrated with the regional cultures that they feel alienated in other areas of India. This integration goes to such an extent that in many cases anyone who does not belong to these regional cultures is not considered Muslim. I myself had this experience when I visited a place near the Kerala-Tamil Nadu border. When I spoke to an elderly Muslim woman through an interpreter, she was surprised that someone who did not know Malayalam could be a Muslim. Her universe of Islam was limited to her region and her language.

### The Notion of *Minority*

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Minority as a concept has not been adequately defined in the Indian Constitution. Although mentioning the cultural attributes of religion and language, the Constitution does not provide details on the geographical and numerical specification of the concept. By retaining the concept of minority these sections are reminded about their being 'different' and that sows the seed of divisiveness.

Even the specifics of language and religion are not mentioned. The definition of minorities needs to be recalled from the Indian Constitution and understood in the context of Constituent Assembly debates.

### **Minority Education**

Minority groups and multicultural aspects of learning are rapidly turning into a major focus throughout the international educational world. But distinct minority cultures and languages are rarely given enough attention within formal school settings throughout the world.

Often at the mercy of majority populations, ethnic minority groups received little or no support within formal school settings. National languages are used as the primary language of instruction, leaving minority students in confusion and at a disadvantage. However, more and more international organizations and governments around the world are pushing for the educational rights of these underprivileged groups.

It is our daily experience that education, formal, nonformal, or informal, plays major roles when it comes to both maintaining and transforming cultures and societies .

### **Education for All and Focus on Language**

With education for all turning into a universal goal, one might start wondering whose education for all is on the agenda. Most children go to school, but for the minority students, government schools are not very likely to promote their culture, history or language.

One thing that most qualitative researchers have in common is their focus on language as an essential avenue to understanding and analyzing the world. It is generally agreed that learning to talk is fundamental to learning a culture and that language provides the categories and terms for understanding self and others.

### **Minorities and English Teaching Institutions**

For our purpose, we will consider minority taken in the religious sense of the word as agreed to by the government. Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Neo Buddhists, and Parsis are considered to be the minority communities. Jains are also one such community. All communities have their own education system, within the framework of the NPE, and

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also of NCF 2005. They have their own religious prayers for which some observe special timings.

Among the minorities, Christians and Parsis do not have much problems with English because of their orientation in the language, be it through the society, the church, or their environment. But that is only part of the matter. There are many Christian families who falter in English because it is never used at all. Buddhists have set up English medium schools which follow the CBSE syllabus.

The Sikhs also have established English Medium schools on the national pattern. Also, they have the Khalsa schools, Guru Gobind Schools, and Guru Nanak schools where the language taught, among others is Punjabi which follows the Gurumukhi (from the word of the Guru, thus sacred speak) script. These schools follow the syllabus of the PSEB, or the CBSE. Languages taught are Punjabi, English and Hindi, but they prefer Punjabi and English to Hindi. There is an official diktat that Punjabi is to be used in all official correspondence within the state and in English when writing to the Centre and the other States. There are 140 colleges of education, intake 100 each, of which 2, in Patiala and Faridkot are the only government ones.

### **Madarasas and Other Institutions**

Every study and data has been pointing to the need for greater provisions for education among the Muslim community. The Gopal Singh Committee and the Sachar Committee have also emphasized the need to avoid marginalization and exclusion.

There is a huge difference in the pedagogy of the madrasas. The medium of instruction is Urdu, and students from madrasa focus on developing their language skills in Urdu. Most madrasas do not teach subjects such as science and mathematics at the intermediate level which forces students to opt for languages or theology at the university level.

However, many in madrassas express interest in pursuing medicine, computer sciences and engineering today. There is an assumption in several quarters that the level of understanding of madrasa students is not on par with students of mainstream schools. We should note that because they study logic and rhetoric at the madrasa, their comprehension level is just as good, if not better.

### **Role of Bilingual Education**

Although the socio-economic situation of the minority people has improved in recent years, they are still a very vulnerable and disadvantaged group within the major society. The attempts to introduce nonformal and adult education in the communities have largely failed. To impart formal education in their first language, we also have to discuss the importance of bilingual education for ethnic minority groups. Minority children often

have to leave their families and villages in order to go to schools, where they will not be taught their own language or culture.

### **Direction of Changes in Madrassa Curriculum**

The need of the hour is to introduce significant changes and amendments to the madrasa syllabus in order to keep pace with the times and fulfill the requirements of the modern age. This includes making English, political science, history, and math compulsory subjects.

### **Difficulties in Learning and Teaching English**

Having been to some schools run by the minority institutions, and talked to teachers and students of these schools, following are some of the problems faced in teaching and learning English.

1. Pronunciation
2. Expression in English, use of the mother tongue
3. Spelling, spelling pronunciation
4. Construction of sentences in English
5. In rural schools English is not understood, so we have to resort to MT
6. Teaching aids are not used; there is no modern technology employed.
7. Students lack fluency in writing, and their thoughts are not organized.
8. Alphabetical memory, but word attack skills are missing

### **Conclusion**

Social justice cannot be delivered to the marginalized persons without education and awareness. Minorities lag behind members of the dominant groups in the acquisition of literacy. The minority children spend very little time writing and reading both in the classroom and at home. Reforms in language education, especially English, will help minorities to overcome economic, social and political barriers.

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