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**Towards Education Reforms -
Decolonizing English Studies in India**

Sujata Rana, Ph.D.

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Problems and Hazards

Every innovative and non-conventional approach to education in general and language learning in particular is bound to face certain problems as mentioned below. It is really a challenging job to address these problems:

1. The language curriculum designed does not accommodate the use of technology as a part of syllabus. The pressure of completing the syllabus within the stipulated time is also a hazard.
2. There is lack of trained and competent teachers.
3. The exams focus mainly on testing students' 'content' knowledge. So their cramming rather than grasping and expression powers are tested and evaluated.
4. The large classrooms, technical failures and frequent power cuts also pose a problem.
5. Disinterest and lack of motivation on the part of students makes it difficult to organize and orient them to use technological tools.
6. The monopoly of the bureaucrats and administrators to control the education funds and financial assistance for innovative techniques and research programs cause inordinate delay in the implementation of new methods.
7. The last but not the least is that the text books for English language learning reflect colonial hangover.

Colonization of Indian Minds and Sensibilities

In this paper I take up for discussion the need for addressing the issue mentioned at number 7 above. According to P. K. Rajan (2000), "we should, first of all, learn to repudiate the inflated notion of an inherent superiority attached to English studies traditionally."

The text books prescribed by the universities for the subject of English usually present the social climate which is alien to our students. For example while teaching a poem "Daffodils" by William Wordsworth the teacher has to take so much of pain to describe the yellow-coloured English flowers as we do not have these flowers in our country.

Similarly, poems with historical connotations to sundry movements and events that were popular in UK/Europe do not help Indian students to enjoy such poems, as references to

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such events hardly make any sense to them. For example, John Dryden's attack on Thomas Shadwell sounds difficult to Indian students as they don't know anything about the poet's intention behind writing that poem.

Macaulay's Minutes of 1835 somewhat firmed up the then existing practice of teaching English with a heavy undertone of European history, personalities, and events that shaped the course of western history and civilization. Actually, the proposal of both Macaulay and Bentick was intended to transplant the then existing British/European models of education with the hope that such a transplant would produce great results in the educational, social, moral, political and economic fibre of Indian mind and society. While the European nations subsequently made great progress introducing changes in their curriculum, Indians have not made adequate changes in their own curriculum.

Changes did take place in terms of choice and selection of materials to teach English and literature in English classes, but what we need now is a total overhaul of our English curriculum.

Decolonizing the Indian Mindset and the English Studies in India

In post-independence India, decolonization is our major agenda since the old colonial structures of subservience persist in every walk of life. For promoting English language learning in India, the need of the hour is to come out of the colonial mindset and realize the urgency of including texts in English by Indian writers without prejudice and discrimination.

Redesigning the Syllabi

For decolonizing English studies we can go to the extent of doing away with certain colonial English texts from the syllabi of Indian universities. Some of these literary texts are completely irrelevant in Indian contexts. In place of colonial texts, the literature of Indian writers in English translation may be prescribed as our regional writers writing in languages other than Hindi or English are no less Indian writers than Arundhati Roy, R.K.Narayan or Anita Desai.

Besides, one can also explore the rewards of teaching our own mythical and historical books. For instance, Tenali Raman and Birbal can be taught at elementary level and Ramayana and Mahabharata and stories from other religions in India at advanced levels. Mahatma Gandhi's *Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Nehru's *Discovery of India*, Tagore's *Gitanjali*, and R. K. Narayan's fiction and such other materials can keep the students engaged for longer period in language learning classes.

The NCERT and CBSE have already started this process of decolonizing English studies. But the universities seem to be slow to undertake the challenging task of revising textbooks according to the needs and interests of Indian learners. Sincere efforts need to

be put in to offer some indigenous and pragmatic models of syllabi restructuring. One cannot deny the fact that “English studies in India today should aim at facilitating the national agenda of democratization and decolonization...what is needed is to shed the psychology of subservience” (Rajan 2000) and use English as a tool of transformation to meet the changed requirements of the Information Age.

Other Side of the Coin

No doubt, the need to decolonize Indian literary psyche is an urgent one. But there is another side of the coin too. Excessive emphasis either on Indian or Western response to English studies would create a lot of imbalance. As the world has become a global village and India is itself a cauldron of various cultures, the exclusive stress on ethnocentric national approach can make us sensitive to and interested in Indian ideas and approaches only. The new ideas from the West may fail to find a place in our hearts and make us a part of iron curtain civilization. Studying Indian texts in English to the absolute exclusion of foreign ones would only dissociate us from the foreign trends in literature and criticism.

Conclusion: Adopting a Balanced Approach

I would conclude with the observation that a balanced approach should be adopted. Indian response to literature in English should be broad and free from pre-conceived notions and biases. No doubt, English should be taught without any Western or Eastern prejudices. Moreover, the study of English language, not English literature, should be a priority as the youngsters seeking jobs in private companies or professions must be proficient in English. There is obviously no denying the fact that literary texts contribute a lot to the teaching of language. But once again the need of the hour is the judicious and need-based selection of the literary texts.

For communicative proficiency one cannot rely solely on obsolete, conventional classroom teaching. The role of language labs and other technological teaching aids is an important one to help the students learn the minutest intricacies of the language and attain communicative competence. The teachers’ assistance comes in the form of initiating and promoting interactive patterns of communication in the classroom.

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