Chapter 4

ENGLISH IN A DEMOCRATIC NATION

Section I

English and the democratization of education

In my last chapter I have shown how the vernacular was constituted in terms set for English education and how in the nationalist phase it was not only linked with merit but also with the popular. In such a scheme English was characterized as alien and elitist against a native and popular vernacular. In the second chapter, I have demonstrated how the mainstream focus on the English-vernacular debate successfully deflected attention from critiques on the access to education. These critiques centred on the monopoly of certain castes over education as well as on the easy conflation of education with merit. Using caste as an entry point into the constitution of an English-led-vernacular, I have shown how the claim of the vernacular to have fused education with life is problematic and how caste is a constituent of vernacular language and literature.

Several complex transformations occurred in English education as a result of its changing relationship with the vernacular in the nationalist phase. The diffusionist role envisaged for the vernacular in the colonial education policy was refigured in the nationalist phase in a manner which allowed a modernized and popularized version of the vernacular to emerge as a challenge to English education. From then on the career of

English education can be read as a response and counter to the appeal of the vernacular to a democratic nation. A powerful counter to such an appeal involved a re-emphasis on the relation of English with modernity. However, against colonial arguments which had envisaged a wholesale importation of European knowledge to the colony, the nationalist characterizations of English education involved a more pragmatic and instrumental borrowing. It is at this juncture, I argue, that the teaching of English was split into a debate over language and literature.

The language issue in postcolonial India took the shape of a fierce debate over what should constitute the national language.[1] The nationalist desire for the democratization of education through the vernacular was written into the constitution. It was envisaged that English would be dropped in education and other spheres after 15 years of independence. However, the intense language debates of the 1960s led inexorably to the consolidation of English as the language of higher education. Broadly, it was agreed that the mother-tongue was to be the language of school education on account of its proximity to life and that English was to be the language of college education by virtue of its role as the bearer of modernity. Such a conceptualization of education had two effects. One, it characterized the vernacular not only as the wellspring of democracy but as the repository of tradition, a tradition which English would harness and modernize for national progress. Two, the separately imagined domains of English and the vernacular set up a field where democracy and modernity were marked off from each other.

The focus on the debates over the medium of instruction in the first two decades after independence obscured the fact that the structure of education remained largely intact. The procedure which conferred merit and certified efficiency continued to rest in a system of education organized laterally in terms of a precribed series of courses and graded hierarchically into school and college education. In the second chapter I had argued that the notion of merit was premised on a liberal-humanist idea of the autonomous individual and that it served to erase a history of privileged access to education enjoyed by dominant castes, even as it crucially helped to modernise caste privilege itself. One implication of the retention of such structures in independent India is that education, whether vernacular or English, continues to be the site where merit is manufactured. By extension, higher education is cast as the realm of higher merit. Since the realm of higher education is equally the realm of English, English comes to be the mark not only of modernity but of merit.

The nationalist commitment to the democratization of education no doubt extended the sphere of education and educational opportunity. But it also subtly instituted an unequal relation between education in the vernacular and education in English. The inequality in their relationship consisted in the fact that a vernacular education was considered incomplete without an education in English. Although English seemed to have lost its struggle against the vernacular as a medium of

instruction in independent India, it continues to feature prominently as a major course component in a system of education which works through the vernaculars. It is not only taught as "literature" but an entire new career for English is envisaged through a systematic `language' learning to enable the vernacular medium student access to higher education in English.

It was in this context that a policy decision was made soon after independence to introduce a new form of course in English which subsequently naturalized itself as "Compulsory English."[2] For example, the study group appointed by the Ministry of Education, Government of India reiterated in 1967 that "compulsory English should be taught, not merely in the first and second year of the three year degree course, but for all the three years" (in Loomba 28). The reason which was given for its introduction was that "this makes for better comprehension of written materials in English - a skill which is essential as ever at the post-graduate stage" (in Loomba 28). The injunction was that whatever be the medium of instruction at the school level Compulsory English has to be studied at the undergraduate level. The Compulsory English course is thus tied precisely to the question of equipping the undergraduate student with language skills necessary to access higher education. The underlying assumption of the course is that access to advanced levels of learning is possible through English alone. Although the vernacular medium is adequate for laying the foundational principles of various disciplines it does not fulfill adequately

the requirements of higher levels. Therefore, students need to be equipped with enough competence in English to acquire advanced knowledge. It is perhaps because of this reason that Compulsory English is the most widely taught undergraduate course in India. Indeed, it is almost impossible to acquire a graduate degree without passing a compulsory English course.

It is important to note that a 'compulsory' course in English carries a national mandate in the sense that it is one of the 'choices' exercised by the Indian nation-state as part of its effort to commit English, however lowly, to the greatest number of Indian people. Viewed in this manner, this course seems to be one of the forms which English has taken in its response to a democratic offer made by the Indian state. In fact, it is a course which carries the burdens of both the processes of democratization and modernization - a complex process which neither an education in the vernacular nor in English could hope to accomplish. The questions then are: Does the Compulsory English course actually offer students the competence and skill that it is supposed to? Does it fulfill its promise of democratizing higher education? Does it really offer the vernacular medium student access to the world of English? The urgency of these questions can be made out from the way the vernacular medium student feels let down by his/her Compulsory English course which hardly delivers the linguistic competence it promises.

However, my concern here is not to emphasize the failure of the course, rather to ask what exactly a course in Compulsory English accomplishes, what it consolidates and what `function' it serves in our education system. It is clear that the terms in which this course was set up had to do, on the one hand, with a nationalist desire to utilize the vernacular as a popular medium of education and on the other, with an intention to make English available to the common man so that it becomes free from its configuration as an elitist language. The putting together of a Compulsory English course involved a difficult process. In their effort to fashion the course its proponents were mostly driven by the nationalist critiques of English language and literature. It is in this context that I propose to make a reading of a few Compulsory English text-books, concentrating mostly on their `editorials', `prefaces' and `introductions'. It is through a reading of these neglected parts of the language text-books I hope to show how anthology-making is not a simple and an innocent act of putting together a few lessons but involves an activity which is not merely literary-aesthetic but politico-ideological.

Section II

Rethinking Compulsory English

The three-year Compulsory course at the under-graduate level has always an `anthology' at the first year level. The course which usually starts with an anthology of short stories invariably culminates in the teaching of a literary text, either a novel or a play. For example, the undergraduate Compulsory

English course for Commerce students of Gujarat University, Ahmedabad has an anthology *Jubilee English Reader* for the first year; Ruskin Bond's *The Room on the Roof* for the second year and Henrik Ibsen's *The Pillars of Society* for the third year of study. It is in the context of such a course that the teaching of English as a language remains inseparable from its teaching as literature. The role of literature in a predominantly language oriented course such as "Compulsory English" however remains fraught with tension. The nationalist critiques of English language and literature articulated in terms of a separation between education and life seem to have devalued the place English literature used to enjoy in the colonial system of education. But these critiques were framed within a logic centered around the efficacy and value of literature in the dissemination of universal humanist values. Such a logic worked to expand the boundaries of literature to include not only English authors but Indian writers in English as well. It is noteworthy that Indian writers had become part of the anthologies produced for Indian students long before they were officially prescribed as part of the English literature syllabus at the university level. For an example, one could take the anthology entitled *Ten Tales: For Indian Students* which was first published in 1931, and has gone through seven reprints, often twice in a year, in a span of thirteen years. Out of the ten short stories included in this anthology four are by Indians: "The Babus of Nayanjore" and "The Castaway" by Rabindranath Tagore; "The Letter" by Gaurishanker Joshi and "The Muscular Son-in-law" by

Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay. The inclusion of these Indian writers looks natural and normal in the context of the Arnoldian conceptualization of literature as an expansive space without national boundaries, a space where a Tagore can jostle unproblematically alongside Frederick Marryat, Anatole France and Leo Tolstoy. The logic which underwrites this collection of short stories and bestows unity on writers of diverse national origins and of divergent themes and styles can be gleaned through the way the book is introduced to its readers:

> The characters and incidents of the story may be drawn from any grade of society, from the upper classes from the middle classes, or from the lower classes, for the essentials of human life and character are the same in every class.
>
> The incidents or even the characters may take a special colour from the age in which they are supposed to be placed or the country or even the particular community to which they are supposed to belong. Such special colour adds a special interest to the story. But here again the essential human elements are the same and that is why we find real interest in these stories. (*Ten Tales* iv)

It is evident that a logic based on the "essentials of human life and character" works inevitably towards the production of a universalist notion of literature. The operational logic of such

an anthology is that 'age', 'country' and 'community' are no bar in the reading and appreciation of literature and that the proper provenance of literature is not any specific society or class but the essentials of human life which is assumed to be same everywhere. Such a notion of literature remains the basis for the selection of material for anthologies. The editor of *Selected Prose Models* (1985) declares in the "preface" that

> These models of well-written prose represent a cross-section of the best that has been thought and said in English in our century. The writers chosen for this anthology are master spirits who have freely drawn upon the genius of the English language, or to whom the theme matters as much as the idiom, or whose thoughts have an enduring appeal. (Augustine n.p.)

Another editor, D.P. Patnaik while introducing the anthology *Sense and Sensibility* (1964) announces that the selection is designed to

> give a bird's eye view of the development of English prose from the eighteenth century to the twentieth, with an emphasis upon the prose of today. They are also taken from the writings of different lands to bring home to the young students the richness and cosmopolitan character of English prose. The book offers not only a variety of styles, but also a diversity of interests and subject matter - embracing almost the entire gamut of human experience (iii).

That the production of an anthology is not an isolated activity and that it is crucially related to the institutional structures can be observed from the way Patnaik envisages a career for his anthology:

> The purpose of education is to produce a total man - one who is aware of and sensitive to the varied aspects of life. It is hoped that this anthology will help in that process by opening before its readers new vistas of beauty and wonder (iv).

The function which Patnaik assigns to the anthology is clear: to produce "a total man." Further, he believes that such a function could be accomplished by acquainting the readers with the writings of different lands and ages. He also believes that the cosmopolitan character of English prose would not only give its reader access to the entire gamut of human experience but would also make him sensitive to the varied aspects of life. The editors of *Popular Short Stories* (1988) accept the cosmopolitan character of English language but differ in their selection of material. The explanation which they provide for their selection procedure is as follows:

> This collection of short stories mainly focuses on characters and situations familiar in modern life. Many readers cannot appreciate stories that gave delight to an older generation. The types of schools and law courts that Dickens, for instance, describes in his

> novels are relics of the past; his Victorian characters are difficult to recognize in a modern situation. Young people today therefore find that those novels do not communicate with them personally. We hope that this selection of narratives of situations and description of persons from modern society will appeal and relate to young readers (*Popular Short Stories* n.p.).

This collection, in accordance with the declared intentions of its editors, includes stories only by twentieth century authors. The underlying assumption is that stories by modern authors would strike a personal chord in the heart of its readers as they would instantly recognize the characters and situations as their own. The editors do recognize a split between modern education and modern life, but they believe that this split could be overcome through a reading based on modern authors, and not the writers of the past.

The need to unite education and life is also a major preoccupation of the anthology, *Links: Indian Prose in English* (1989). Its editor, G.S. Balarama Gupta makes a selection from Indian non-fictional prose writings in English spanning nearly two centuries. He argues that Indian prose writings in English antedate those in verse and are numerous enough to constitute a significant body of Indian literature in English. It is through a collection of such writings that Gupta wants to present "a complex of values - educational, ethical, spiritual and cultural

- which Indian historical experience and heritage uphold" (v). He further declares that

> Our purpose in publishing an anthology comprising Indian non-fictional prose writing in English is to offer such specimens of English prose as would help Indian readers to respond to them more inclusively than they would to those of Western writings having cultural overtones alien to their experience or sensibility (ix).

One could see that the various attempts to use `literature' as part of a Compulsory English course reveal an area of contest where the "alienness" of English literature is stressed and a certain authenticity is claimed for Indian writing in English. Although the values of English literature are challenged on the ground of lack of authenticity the universalist and humanist descriptions of literature are retained. Indian writers and their works are claimed to have represented a way of life that could be easily recognized as "Indian." The literature-oriented textbooks seem to be constantly defining the Indian material as more authentic and therefore more suitable for the education of Indian students. Apart from this authenticity argument which seems to put Indian writing in English in opposition to English literature, what is most striking about these textbooks is their wholesale recognition that a "literary" education is the best possible education, the difference between the value of an education based on Indian literary material and the one based on `alien' and `foreign' material being only a difference in degree.

The claim is that the Indian material would serve the purpose of bridging the gap between education and life "more" effectively than the material based on "western writings having cultural overtones alien to [Indian] experience or sensibility." But, as I have argued in the context of the relationship between caste and vernacular literature, the writing based on Indian experience and Indian languages could be as alienating as western writings. By extending this argument one could claim that a literary text, whether Indian or western, vernacular or English, is equally alienating to a dalit. The development of a caste perspective on literature would help us to grasp some of the unquestioned assumptions that have gone into the making of many literature-oriented textbooks. But since these textbooks are part of a course oriented mainly towards teaching English as a language the literature aspect of the course continues to be taught in the most unproblematic manner. Despite the apparent variety of these textbooks and their selections they are structured by an uniformity of rigorous sameness of exercises appended to the "lessons."

The predominance of literature in a language-oriented Compulsory English course, however, is countered by a certain aggressive "functionalism" which is reflected in many textbooks. *The Romance of Living*, a textbook published in 1962, puts this conflict into perspective in its "preface":

> On the one hand, there are the new, and perhaps legitimate, demands for functional prose as reading

> material; on the other, there is equally valid belief that the reading material can be used for training, enlarging and disciplining the consciousness of the young reader. It is difficult to reconcile these opposing attitudes, and the preparation of an anthology, therefore involves a lot of self-examination (Singh n.p.).

Such a posing of the problem in terms of an opposition between language and literature only prefigures a theme which had to become a major point of discussion in the official policy on English education. A committee appointed in 1967 to report on the study of English in India observed that a demarcation of language and literature teaching would serve the nation best with the prediction that

> more and more students are sure to opt for language study, for that is the need of the hour. We expect that within the next twenty years or so, most of the departments of English in the Universities will have changed over mainly to a language oriented post-graduate course in English (in Loomba 28).

While it is possible to argue that the prediction has not come true and that the departments of English have not changed over to language-oriented post-graduate courses, it is certainly important to emphasize that a decision in favour of "functionalism" is definitely not unrelated to a certain decline

of interest in English literature courses in postcolonial India. In fact, the stress on the utilitarian aspect of English education is quite consistent with the developmental logic of the nation-state. It is also clear that more and more students are in fact opting for language study. The popularity of private English tution classes and courses also bear testimony to a clear preference for the teaching of English as a language.[3] However, within the academy, the expression of this utilitarian attitude to English can be located in the production of language-oriented textbooks and their popularity in independent India. For example, the editors of *Twentieth Century English Prose* (1986), while taking stock of the textbooks produced in the past, state the following in their "preface":

> For some time past, there has been a shift of emphasis from the study of literature to the acquisition of communication skills in English at the undergraduate level. In consequence, language oriented prose texts have come out in plenty (Dept. of English, Kashmir University iii).

The argument that English is a skill to be acquired is certainly a part of the managerial and bureaucratic approach to national growth. Such an approach is crucially linked to the Nehruvian model of development which relies on science and technology for the transformation of India from a backward, underdeveloped nation into a developed one. In a scheme which marks a shift from the cultural to the economic, from the

humanities to sciences, English comes to be refigured in terms of its contemporary utility value. This is of course not to suggest that English education was ever free from a certain utilitarianism. Rather it is to reiterate that in the context of a nationalist commitment to science and technology the need for English literature as a repository of cultural and moral values came under stress. Many contestants emerged in independent India to take its place, Indian writing in English being one, apart from Commonwealth and American literature, which effectively occupied the pride of place earlier accorded to English "literature." Further, in this phase, as Sunder Rajan has argued, English as language "developed into an international commodity with a privileged connection with the English nation" (14).

The function of Compulsory English, as I have argued, was clearly to transform a vernacular education at school to an English-oriented education at college in the interest of a nation committed to science and technology. In this respect, Compulsory English was a product of a nationalist offer to democratize the leadership and management of the state. Equally, it was the product of a logic that left unchallenged the broad assumption that English alone held the key to the cutting edge of research in science and technology. Since competence in English language was seen to be crucial to the highest levels of research and therefore, by extension, to nation-building, the splintering of English into language and literature courses profoundly refigured the Compulsory English course. Charged with the task of producing

"competence" in the English language, the Compulsory English anthology struggled with a variety of conceptualizations designed to offer an instrumental grasp of the language to those who did not have it.[4] To raise the question of competence is, however, to raise the question of standards. Therefore, even as the Compulsory English course is constructed in terms of a democratic offer, it is simultaneously considered as a guardian of standards, a gateway to the higher reaches of education and to elite spaces within the nation-building process.

The dual function of Compulsory English appears to open out to two related sets of questions. One one hand, questions could be asked about the efficacy of the course - whether it offers a competence in English, or fulfills its democratic obligation to allow a vernacular medium student access to college education. On the other hand, another set of questions could be asked about its evaluative function which polices access to college education, constructs new forms of merit, certifies new types of efficiency.

These new forms of merit, complicit with a competence in English, are powerfully linked to the nation-building process. As I have argued in the second chapter, the notion of merit was a contentious one, employed by the nationalist elite to counter the 'Depressed class' demands for proportional representation in government services. The equation of competence in English with merit is therefore also linked to the question of caste. Compulsory English, which institutes a rigorous uniformity in its pedagogical practices, operates on the assumption that students

everywhere are alike. This notion of homogenization of the student body erases all differences of class, caste, community and gender. The pedagogical practices premised upon uniform standards of courses are loaded in favour of the elite groups, disempowering precisely those students to whom a democratic offer is made. Therefore it is possible to argue that the effects of the movement from English literature teaching in the colonial phase to English language teaching in the postcolonial phase did not in any considerable way dismantle the construction of education as a site for the production of an elite. In fact, one can argue that the function of a scientific English language education, like that of a humanist literary education, is to fashion and consolidate the elite. Although literary studies and language studies have been imagined as significantly distinct, the fact that the Compulsory English anthology often sets up an easy conflation of the two suggests the fact that their function and effects are not dissimilar: to consolidate elitism in India. The Compulsory English course, which on the face of it seems to resist the configuration of English as an elite language, in fact undermines its own offer by being caught in an education system committed to the establishment of a relationship of equality between English and the vernacular languages. Viewed in this manner, the introduction of a Compulsory English course in independent India seems to be the logical outcome of a role that was envisaged for English in a predominantly vernacular-driven education system. The need to reorganize English at the undergraduate level on a "compulsory" basis reflects, on the one

hand, the burden of English under a vernacular system of education and on the other, a reassertion of the value of English. Thus, the Compulsory English course is the one which not only shows the limits of a vernacular system of education but it is also the one through which a vernacular-led education tries to overcome its limits. For example, the editors of *An English Anthology for College Classes* (1968) write in their "Foreword" about how they "became aware of the enormous gap between how much English a student who sought admission to a college really knew and how much he ought to have known." On the basis of such a realization they argued that "It would not help matters if we merely sat back and blamed the secondary schools. We, therefore, decided to do whatever we could to improve the conditions of English teaching at this level" (*An English Anthology* iii).

From the above analysis it is clear that language teaching in the shape of Compulsory English course is structured in relation to the politico-ideological. Nevertheless, there have been consistent attempts to disregard evidence of the politics of Compulsory English. It will perhaps be useful to suggest that these attempts are enmeshed in the politics of our time. For example, one argument made frequently in the context of a structural adjustment programme and the economics of liberalization and globalization is about the potential value of English in a market-driven global economy. As C.K. Seshadri has argued, "India has signed the WTO agreement and has become a part of the global knowledge based economy. Most of this knowledge is

available in English. It is time our professors came out of their ivory towers of theory and literary criticism, and tackled the real problems of teaching English, unless they want to be swept off their feet by swift winds of change" (209). Such a market-oriented approach to English, which seems to be consistent with our time, carries echoes of the predictions made in 1967 in the report submitted by the study group appointed by the Ministry of Education, Government of India. In fact, Seshadri's argument is in line with the suggestion made in the report regarding the desirability of introducing language-oriented post-graduate courses. Seshadri, for example, argues that "if there can be departments of French, German or Russian which teach these `languages' at the university level, one fails to understand why the English language cannot be taught" (206). A language-oriented course at the university level, it is believed, would solve the problem of teaching at the school and college level. Such a belief issues out of his realization that "most teachers of English in schools are products of our university system. Obviously, our departments of English do not equip them with the kind of skills needed to teach English!" (Seshadri 206). At least one function of this kind of skill-based argument is to requisition existing infrastructure to the services of the market. Although the needs of the market are not necessarily consistent with those of the nation-state, this argument successfully uses English to unproblematically conflate one need with the other. Moreover, such arguments work with the assumption that good teachers with improved skills and innovative

ideas could ensure effective teaching of English. This argument reiterates the logic of language studies which figures efficiency in terms of better teachers, better textbooks, better syllabus and better courses.

The question one would like to ask here is: why does the ground reality in the classroom as well as in the surrounding educational environment remain the same, despite strenuous efforts at the level of policy formulation, curriculum design, syllabus making, textbook production and a variety of other inputs? Having taught for several years in rural Gujarat and having worked with batch after batch of students who pass their Compulsory English course without acquiring the competence that it is meant to offer, I am convinced that the severe mismatch between what is intended and what is found at the end of a course cannot be reduced to the inadequacy of the textbook, teacher or methodology. Yet, language teaching in India continues to be structured around a confidence that efficiency in teacher training, production of textbooks and methodologies could successfully produce competence in English. For example, the Acharya Rammurthy Commission Report of 1990 observes that eleven English language institutes exist but that standards vary and that overall standards of English are going down. However, it seeks to address this problem by recommeding the use of technology for language development (in Chatterji 306).

Such procedures, recommendations, and suggested improvements serve to homogenize the student body and to erase differences of

caste, community and gender. By calling for a pedagogical emphasis on the ideal of the national progress, these recommendations elide the notion of education as a terrain of struggle. Disregarding the relationship of knowledge and power, they assume the teaching of English as an innocent activity concerned with imparting reading, writing and communicative skills. However, such a pedagogical thrust is, as I have shown through my reading of the anthology editorials, is itself underwritten by an ideology which consolidates the space of the elite by arbitrating standards of competence in English.

In present-day India, it appears that interventions which bring the erased history of class, caste, community and gender back into the classroom might enhance the efficiency of teaching practices. Indeed, the recognition that notions of skill and standard are ideological could open out alternative ways of conceptualizing learning.

Notes

1. See G. Sundara Reddi, ed., *The Language Problem in India*, (New Delhi: National, 1973) and S.N. Mazumdar, *Marxism and the Language Problem in India*, (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1970) for a comprehensive account of views on the issue of national language during the first two decades after independence.

2. The course "Compulsory English" is also called "General English" in some Indian Universities.

3. As an index of popular demand for such private courses, refer to the bilingual *Rapidex English Speaking Course*, Anonymous (New Delhi: Pustak Mahal, 1998) 16th edition. This course is available in twelve Indian languages and claims to have five crore readers.

4. For example, there are efforts at designing separate courses for students of Commerce and Science with the assumption that the interests of these students are distinct and that the inclusion of commercial and scientific topics would stimulate the language learning process. G.C. Thornley, the editor of *Easier Scientific English Practice* (New Delhi: Longmans, 1964) writes that the book is "a first collection of writing of scientific interest" which would "provide those who are interested in Science with material for fairly easy practice in English language" (vii). Similarly, R.K. Khanna et al in their anthology *English for Students of Commerce* (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1991) state that "most of the essays are on topics of interest to students of Commerce" in order to "meet their [language] needs" (n.p.).