

HAIL ENGLISH, THE DALIT GODDESS

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The road to Dalit empowerment was paved by Lord Macaulay

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If there is a divinity that can take on the Hindu pantheon, it is Lord Buddha. However, being a great feminist, the Buddha wouldn't take on the exalted goddesses, Saraswati, Lakshmi and Durga, despite the fact that they have historically discriminated against the 'untouchables'. Who, then, is left to fight this formidable trinity whose hatred of Dalits is no secret?

It is a fact that untouchability has been propagated in the name of Hindu gods and goddesses. The segregation of Dalits was sanctioned by Hindu divinity and carried out in their name. Therefore, the victims of untouchability have always prayed for the day when Hindu gods and goddesses would no longer exercise such control over their destinies.

So Dalits began looking for a goddess who could overwhelm the powerful Saraswati-Lakshmi-Durga triumvirate. They understood that the inhuman practice of untouchability was part of the Hindu caste system. Over a period of time, they began to realise that only the Goddess English had the power to destroy the caste order.

The pernicious Hindu caste order rests on the twin principles of occupational purity and blood purity. There is no caste without a rigidly fixed occupation, and vice versa. In Manu's scheme of things, no one can change their occupation and none can marry outside the caste. Historically, castes have been occupational clubs more than any thing else. At the same time, they are marriage clubs as well. The occupations forced on Dalits were pronounced

degrading, and because they performed those degrading tasks, they were branded impure and polluting. Therefore, Dalits could exist only on the margins of society and do the work no one else would.

In the past 100 years, though, there have been significant changes. Millions of Dalits have been able to access dignified modes of employment. It is these relatively emancipated Dalits who have broken free of the shackles of caste-based occupations. The caste order will be destroyed the day a person's occupation ceases to be linked to the caste he/she is born into.

English makes it much easier for all Dalits to leave caste-based occupations. Will English-speaking Dalits, for instance, be asked to skin dead cows? Will English-speaking Dalits be expected to clean gutters and roads? Will English-speaking Dalits be content to work as menials at landlords' farms? The Goddess English can empower Dalits, giving them a chance to break free from centuries of oppression.

Today, English has become the lingua franca of the global village. The non-English speaking citizens of the world will be at a huge disadvantage. That's why 300 million Chinese — six times the total population of England — are learning English. Everyone — the French, Germans, Italians, Greeks — is learning English. Learning English has become the greatest mass movement the world has ever seen.

In India, too, well-off Indian parents invariably seek an English-medium school for their children. Yet many in India don't wish to acknowledge their desire to learn English. They still consider it an alien language. Many Indians despise Lord Macaulay, who forced the English system of education on India. But it was thanks to him that 'untouchables' were able to, for the first time, get an education.

In the pre-English, indigenous system of education, untouchables were kept out of the education loop. Often, the schools were either run in temples or in the residence of pandits — places Dalits had no right to enter. Lord Macaulay changed all that. That's why he is revered by the Dalits, who are thus the

natural legatees of English. The Goddess English, therefore, belongs to the Dalits. If non-Dalit India does not care about English and Lord Macaulay, what right do they have to monopolise this language?

Dalits should, therefore, decide that every Dalit child, within minutes of birth, will hear the English alphahabet as the first sounds of the new world. Parents or immediate relatives can whisper them into the baby's ear. Another relative will hold the picture of Goddess English for a minute before the newborn. Every year, on October 25, the birthday of Lord Macaulay, Dalits will have their Bhagawati jagaran — Goddess English... Goddess English.

The writer is a Dalit activist.