

Dalits and English

Last updated: 15 February, 2011

Kancha Ilaiah

DECCAN HERALD

Empowerment

The democratic nation proved that the fears of lower castes were wrong. They enrolled into regional language education in a big way.

One bright morning in 1960, when I was about eight, a newly appointed single teacher came to my house. My mother had already cleaned our courtyard called 'vaakili' and was sprinkling the dung water all around the courtyard. I was about to assist my elder brother in untying the cattle and go along with them for grazing. The teacher asked my mother to send me and my elder brother, who was about 10, to school. What she told him shocks every one of us in retrospect: "Ayyaa — if we send our children to school to read and write devil Saraswathi will kill them. That devil wants only brahmins and baniyas to be in that business."

For centuries the so called goddess of education was against the dalit learning, reading and writing in any language. She was the goddess of education of only the high castes — mainly of the brahmins and baniayas. But the lower castes, who were denied of education treated her as a devil that would kill their children if they go to school.

The notion that she kills us was so deep that my grandmother fought with my mother for she was terrified of our imminent death, after I and my brother — not my sisters in any case — were sent to school. She used to pray Pochamma — our village goddess — that she should protect us from Saraswathi. Within a few months after we were sent to school my grandmother died of a future shock that we would not survive at all.

The democratic nation proved that those fears of lower castes were wrong. They got into regional language education in a big way. The goddess of Sanskrit education was adopted by lower castes as their goddess of regional language education too. Several school teachers across the country — many of them were OBC teachers — installed Saraswathi photo even in government schools, ignoring the fact there could be a muslim or a christian or any other minority students in the schools.

It is a known fact that there were several hindu teachers who made humiliating remarks about muslims and christians that they do not have goddess of education like Saraswathi and hence inferior in educational values. Saraswathi Shishumandirs have cropped up all over the country. In the '70s and '80s the aggressive ownership of 'matru bhasha' (mother tongue) theory and adoption of Saraswathi as goddess of Indian education had acquired a nationalist overtone. So militant was that nationalism that any opposition to installing Saraswathi's portrait in the schools and colleges would only invite fist blows.

The right wing student organisations started installing her portrait in the university departments. The regional language departments made Saraswathi an educational-cultural symbol. Unmindful of the secular constitution of the nation even the university teachers — mainly of regional language departments sporting a visible saffron tilak on the forehead, began to treat others who operate outside that cultural norm as inferior.

A walking goddess

With the increase of women teachers in schools, colleges and universities Saraswathi was made almost a walking goddess in the nation. Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, Guru Nanak whose life though

revolved around education to all humans never appeared on the nationalist map of education.

While the majority OBCs, some dalits and tribals began to worship Saraswathi in regional educational centres — of course on the real pooja day the priest talked to her only in Sankrit, in spite of the fact, that under her sharp and well decorated nose that language died to a point no return, except that soliloquous priest nobody understands the slokas, she has become goddess of all Indian languages.

While the historical backwards were enjoying their new status of proximity to mythical Saraswathi, the living Saraswathi in the company of her cousin Laxmi shifted her real operative base to the other world, called colonial English world. The backward class people of India, as of now, have no entry so far.

The recent decision of the Central government to introduce English teaching from class one in all government schools will enable all the lower castes of India are going to enter into a new phase of English education. Though this method of English teaching does not take the dalit-bahujan and minority community children to the level of convent educated upper castes, it makes a new beginning of dreaming for egalitarian education in future.

English education is the key for adopting the modernist approach suitable to the globalised India. The upper castes have handled the contradiction between English and their native culture quite carefully. But when it comes to teaching English to the lower castes they have been proposing a theory that English will destroy the 'culture of the soil'. Having realised the importance of English the Central government has taken a right decision.

However, the next stage should be moving towards total abolition of the gap between the private English medium schools and the government schools in terms of both infrastructure and teaching methods. Even about the language both the public and private schools must be brought under two language formula of teaching 50 per cent syllabus in English and the other half of the syllabus in the regional language across the country.

(The writer is associated with the Maulana Azad National University, Hyderabad)