

'Indian languages carry the legacy of caste'

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In an article on reservation for oppressed classes in the information technology sector, noted sociologist Gail Omvedt had quoted a Dalit boy as saying: 'In Pune they just assume that anyone working with computers is a Brahmin.'

The hidden agony of being born in the former untouchable class is now coming into the open in the so-called resurgent India. Dalits, who number around 17 million and live on the margins of society, are passing through testing times.

In a changing India, they don't want to be left behind as they have for thousands of years in the past. Their aspiration to get ahead is driving them to a variety of new ideas and actions. They are also, looking back to their messiah -- freedom fighter and Constitution expert Dr B R Babasaheb Ambedkar.

New Delhi-based **Chandra Bhan Prasad**, 48, is a Dalit activist who writes a weekly column on Dalit issues in *The Pioneer* newspaper.

Born in Azamgarh, Uttar Pradesh, in a peasant's family, Prasad has done an M Phil from Jawaharlal Nehru University on technological acquisition in post-Mao China. Due to unavailability of resources he could not complete his Ph D in the Chinese history of science.

Prasad picked up the gun in the early 1980s when he joined the Communist Party of India-Maoist Leninist with dreams of changing Indian society. "The Maoists are ambiguous, they can't win," he says. "They are not reflective on the issue of caste in India so I left the CPI-ML."

Now, married but struggling without a regular income, Prasad keeps throwing up provocative ideas concerning Dalits in the national debate.

His latest idea is the anti-thesis of the saying -- 'language is the cradle of civilisation.' Prasad thinks the ethnic languages of India are carrying forward -- generation after generation -- the prejudices and biases of casteist Indian minds.

Prasad, in a passionately argued debate with Managing Editor **Sheela Bhatt**, claims that for the empowerment of Dalits, the knowledge of English is must, especially in a society where those who can speak English are riding up the social ladder faster than others.

English, he says, is the new goddess!

Prasad celebrated October 25, 2006, [Thomas Macaulay's](#) birthday as a day when the Dalit community in New Delhi unveiled Goddess English!

Why do you want Dalits to abandon their mother tongues and take up English which is not their mother tongue?

In Indian society nothing belongs to the Dalits. Anything that is Indian, mirrors the Indian culture, value system. It will certainly contain the strong flavour of caste and prejudice against untouchables.

In Hindi, to greet somebody we say *pranam*. The person bows down and there is a kind of body coordination like the folding of hands and bowing down of the head when he or she says *pranam*.

According to Indian tradition, Dalits don't have the right to receive *pranam*. Because the receiver of the *pranam* had the right to bless, so Dalits never received *pranams*. In response, the person responds with '*khush raho* (be happy).

Have Dalits ever blessed the upper castes?

I want to emphasize the fact that how Indian languages -- be it Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, Tamil or Malayalam -- all of them carry the legacy of caste. But if you replace Hindi or Tamil by English you will greet by saying 'good morning.' The other person will respond saying 'good morning'. Both will look into the eyes and equality is established.

There are too many caste-based abuses in India. People say *chori-chamari na karna*. (*Don't steal like the chamars*, who are the lowest caste amongst the Dalits). In the countryside these abuses are quite common, even now. "I'll make you a *bhangi*(sweeper caste)!" -- is quite often used as a threat.

In Hindi films and television serials they have slightly modified these age-old abuses. They now say *chori-chakari na karna*. It hurts us. Analyse it with a little sensitivity. These abuses are meant for us only; it reflects the mindset of Indians.

Indians don't eat pork because untouchables were eating it. Germans eat it, why can't we eat it? They are fine people also. Indian culture carries many such caste-based biases.

What are the broader issues in favour of English?

There are several cultural aspects. The knowledge of English by Dalits will hit at the backbone of the caste system.

India's caste system relies on the twin principle of occupational purity and blood purity. You could not go out of your occupation. A cobbler's son would have to be a cobbler and a carpenter's son remained a carpenter for generations. Inter-caste marriages were strictly prohibited.

For centuries Dalits could not marry outside their caste to maintain caste purity. But if a Dalit knows English then there is no way he will be climbing a toddy tree and end up doing a manual job.

The English-speaking Dalit will not be made a sweeper or a cleaner of toilets. Good knowledge of English will emancipate him and give him leverage to liberate himself from traditional occupations.

Once you are out of your traditional socio-circle you have a higher chance to marry in the non-Dalit family. That will break the bondage of 'blood purity' as well. There are some instances of Dalits who speak English, they dress well, have a good job and are married to Brahmins.

In a recent television interview, Yogendra Yadav, the wellknown thinker on social issues, has effectively rebutted your argument. The caste system will not go away only because Dalits start speaking English. It will be more useful if the mindset of the upper caste changes.

You are right. My movement for English will not immediately demolish the caste system. But it will be a great leap forward. Look at the way ordinary people are treated in India who know only Indian languages and the way English-speaking people are treated.

When you speak English it so happens that you dress up differently. I get invited to parties and when I speak in English people talk differently and are even ready to listen to me.

What I speak, if spoken in Hindi, doesn't make an impact at all. I am dismissed but if I say the same things in English, I am heard and applauded. Also, you may have noticed that English-speaking people tend to wear suits and matching shoes. Better dressing elevates your position and makes you heard.

But it is also true that to move ahead in life you need confidence and talent more than anything else. Second, unless the upper castes change their mindset how are you going to get fair treatment, which is your real and final aim? In other words, the upper castes will give you equal status irrespective of the fact that you speak Hindi or Telugu or English if and when they realise their wrongs.

The change in mindset will only help you, not your knowledge of English. And, if you have confidence in your talent or in yourself more can be achieved than otherwise. You have an example of Planning Commission Member Dr Bal Mungekar.

He is a well-known economist who writes in English, speaks English. He didn't write his first book in Marathi, his mother tongue. If he was not English-speaking he would not have been made a member of the Planning Commission.

But that would be true for even a Brahmin economist.

For the same reason I am arguing that chances of Dalits moving ahead will be much less without knowing English.

It may not be an entirely correct argument because Lalu Prasad Yadav, a leader of the Other Backward Classes, is powerful and successful because of his ethnicity. Rather, he knows English but never speaks it because he knows that to win an election in India he should speak Hindi. How do you explain that? He ridicules English-speaking people and is still surging ahead.

You can't compare him to ordinary Dalits because he holds political office. Politics is a limited field. In democracy, you can win an election without the knowledge of English. How many can become MPs?

We are talking about his confidence.

But he is ridiculed too.

J Jayalalithaa's strength is not her knowledge of English.

You can't compare politics with what I am saying.

Okay, take Sania Mirza. Her talent and tact has nothing to do with her knowledge of English.

Films, sports and politics are different fields. I am talking of ordinary lives. These are fields offering opportunities to merely a few people. Whereas the knowledge of English can give opportunity to millions and millions of people. Not out of any complexes but with confidence we have celebrated Lord Macaulay's birthday on October 25, 2006. On that day, we have established English as the Dalits' goddess.

People condemn him for making India bilingual but I consider Macaulay the father of Indian modernity. The bottom line is that since I have some knowledge of English I feel more confident than those other Dalits who can't speak English.

Do you disagree that culture and identity is interlinked to languages?

Yes, I agree.