

Changing Attitude to English and Stratification in Presidency College

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A recent survey has shown that as large as 90% of the Presidency students come from the metropolitan area whereas only 10% come from the districts. Again, while 67% of the students come from affluent families, only 33% hail from the middle class. Table 1 shows the distribution of students coming from Government and Public School backgrounds.

As high as 73% of these students had their schooling in the English medium and the remaining 27% came from schools teaching in the mother tongue. This is delineated in Table 2.

Majority of the Presidency students are thus seen to come from prosperous homes and metropolitan background and are well-groomed for higher studies mainly because of English-medium schooling. Education means, in practical terms, a human resource development and is highly subsidized by the State. The Indian Constitution at the same time intends to do away with inequalities, both economic and social, through the Directive Principles of State Policy. However, the analysis attempted above is proof enough that the benefits of subsidized higher education has gone only to the better-off section of the society, against the spirit of the welfare state. Urban schooling and prosperous background may enhance a student's abilities but can never be so decisive a factor as to eliminate a large student group, coming from rural backgrounds, from the general student mass of the Presidency College. This paradox, obvious from the findings of the survey, is the result of a faulty language policy in so far as

Table 1
Percentages of students coming to Presidency College from different types of schools or colleges (1989-91)

Department	Govt. or Govt. sponsored	Private or Public
English	0	100
Bengali	87	3*
Hindi	78	22*
Physics	19	81
Chemistry	39	61
Mathematics	45	55
Botany	38	62
Zoology	47	53
Physiology	36	64
Geology	43	57
Geography	48	52
Economics	13	87
Statistics	32	68
History	1	99
Pol. Science	19	81
Philosophy	74	26*
Sociology	24	76
College average	38%	62%

- *(1) Philosophy, Bengali and Hindi have very low marks percentage requirements for admission.
- (2) Students from public/private schools fare far better in disciplines which need proficiency in English (e.g., English, History and Economics) than students coming from Govt. schools.

the introduction of English has been shifted from the primary to the middle school level.

Over a decade ago, Dr. Bhabatosh Datta,

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Table 2

Percentages of students in terms of media of study and average % scores at plus-two level (1989-91).

Departments	English medium		Bengali medium	% of marks in + 2 exam.
	H.S.	I.S.C./C.B.S.E.	H.S.	
English	51.52	48.48	0	74.1
Bengali	0	0	100	60.8
Hindi	11.76	58.82	29.41 (Hindi medium)	59.1
Physics	45.95	40.54	13.51	76.9
Chemistry	25.00	39.06	35.94	74.1
Mathematics	55.56	19.44	25.00	69.0
Botany	44.68	36.17	19.15	68.0
Zoology	55.56	11.12	33.33	61.8
Physiology	41.94	22.58	35.48	66.8
Geology	36.84	21.05	42.11	67.9
Geography	26.19	16.66	57.14	68.3
Economics	55.56	33.33	11.11	76.4
Statistics	77.50	15.00	7.5	69.8
History	65.38	28.85	5.77	67.6
Pol. Science	61.22	30.61	8.16	65.2
Philosophy	19.23	3.85	76.92	60.8
Sociology	54.55	45.45	0	64.1
Average	45.63	27.02	27.35	
College average	73%		27%	67.69

albeit in a different context, probed into the phenomenon and came to the following conclusion :

"If it is complained that a large number of students of Presidency College come from affluent families, the reason lies in unequal opportunities at the school level. It should be possible to establish good schools everywhere, but it will be practically impossible to have colleges like Presidency all over the region."

However, he did not spell out the criterion of a "good school" in absolute terms; but the sure implication is that the schools in the districts do not fit his bill. These schools, apart

from being generally deficient in infrastructure, impart instruction through the vernacular. The poor performance of students, turned out by these schools, in the Higher Secondary Examination and subsequently at the admission tests for disciplines like English, History, Economics, Political Science and Sociology in particular, is a sure indicator inter alia of their inadequate grip on elementary English in contrast to the more successful metropolitan students. This situation was, however, very different only six years ago when English was still taught at the primary level (Table 3).

It is thus evident that there has been a decline of 6% in the number of students with

Table 3

Percentages of students in terms of their media of study and examination background at the plus-two level (1984-85).

Department	English medium		Bengali medium
	H.S.	I.S.C./C.B.S.E.	H.S.
Bengali	16	0	84
English	71	23	6
History	60	20	20
Philosophy	38	0	62
Political Science	69	8	23
Botany	57	33	10
Chemistry	50	22	28
Economics	47	36	17
Geography	12	0	88
Mathematics	38	0	62
Physics	47	38	15
Physiology	24	47	29
Statistics	46	45	9
College average	57	10	33

Bengali medium schooling and an equal increase in the number of students coming from English medium schools in the Presidency College over the last six years, i.e., a 1% change per year. The single most important factor for the phenomenon can safely be identified as the difference in the English language skill. This difference has been accentuated in less than a decade. The Asok Mitra Commission, on the contrary, has recommended among other things an elimination of English in a phased manner from the school curriculum on the following grounds :

- The aim of primary education is to impart literacy and this need not necessarily be done in English.
- The rural poor, more precisely the first generation learners, have no use for English and so, attempting to teach

them this language is a waste of time and an added burden on the State's scarce resources.

- To be self-respecting, Bengalees like Bangladeshis should gradually phase out the English language and usher in Bengali at all stages of education.

Presidency College is supposed to be a centre of learning where the idea of excellence is pursued to its logical end. Preparation for admission into such a centre entails a good grooming in English for the simple reason that education must make the student competitive in a world that is shrinking in time and space with every passing day. Imparting basic skills through the mother tongue might be a laudable objective; but it will not take the student very far notwithstanding his regional loyalty to Bengal and the Bengali language. What is more, democracy which in the ultimate analysis is a 'rule by the mediocre', will cease to attract the best minds, having created 'vote banks' through 'linguistic chauvinism' and denying the majority of the population an access to higher education. Besides widening the social divide between the 'rural poor' and the 'urban elite', this policy is bound to lead to a situation where regimentation of the underprivileged at the hands of the manipulative policymakers would be perpetuated, for higher education alone can give one an access to 'power'.

India has accepted market economy and is gradually globalizing its markets. Its culture, languages and life styles are bound to be seriously affected in the process. Whether the changes would reduce poverty and bring about our integration with the rest of the world would depend largely on the level of efficiency of the managers of our society. The idea of this efficiency has definitely lots to do with our familiarity with the English language.

Stratification in the student population in the Presidency College has already shown signs of isolation of the larger section of Bengalee society from the national mainstream in as much as only the students coming from metropolitan areas, affluent homes and private English medium schools have almost monopolised higher education and through it,

an access to the power.

If we fail to ponder over these consequences even now and persuade the policymakers to take corrective measures, this isolation might prove total and spell peril for those who have been asked to wait till the 'meek inherits the world'. ■