Paper – 4

AN EGALITARIAN APPROACH TO EDUCATION

WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO THE MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION

There is no better way of setting the tone for this topic than paraphrasing the main thrust of the book, '*Education for Liberation'* by Adam Curle. He states that the present educational thinking has, by and large, led to cut throat competition and acquisitive materialism. **The stronger the urge for acquisitive materialism, the weaker obviously is the awareness of, sensitivity to and compassion for the needs of others. What happens as a result is that the powerful and the wealthy (among both nations and men) diminish the potential of the weak**. Admittedly, the claim that there is a measurable relationship between education and economic growth in the developed countries has an element of truth in it. Their engine of growth, however, needs to be stoked up constantly at the expense of the developing nations. What is happening to the Third World countries, as a result? Their resources, both natural and human, are being depleted by the developed countries so that to a large extent they nullify sustainable development elsewhere. They reap where they have not sowed. Society becomes unequal and unjust. Violence is rife. Racial, caste and class disharmonies intensify. And the poor schools of these nations are not so much gateways to opportunity as training grounds of failure.

But, this system need not be allowed to become completely dominant. Embedded in our nature and in our society is the counter-system that is altruistic and empathetic, co-operative and egalitarian. All right-thinking people ought to opt for this counter system**. The essence of this counter-system is the principle of separating the first stage of education, solely intended to develop to the extent possible the individual's intrinsic potential for its own sake, from the later stages of education to prepare or train one for the extrinsic aim of securing employment in the future.**

In practical terms, the main aim of the first few years of school should be that of facilitating the development of the whole individual as well as of his sensibilities that would display a concern for the welfare of society as a whole of which he is part and parcel. During this period, while he is acquiring basic knowledge of literacy, of numeracy and of his environment, he is also being initiated into his civic and social responsibilities. This would, it is hoped, help discourage unethical competition and encourage the concept of co-operation between individuals. It is on such a humane edifice that preparation for finding one's niche in life can effectively be built rather than on the exclusivist principle of, 'Life is a rat race in which only the fittest survive'.

Witness the unseemly haste with which modern-day parents drive their children to distraction in this rat race. **Strangely, something as basic and all embracing as language has come to serve as one of the mechanisms of exclusivity and self-interest**. Among most sections of our society, competence in English language is being

increasingly perceived as a means of reaching the top of the professional ladder with its promise of exciting rewards and prospects. It is this perception that has in recent years caused the so-called English Medium Schools to come out in a rash all over India. But such schools, which are relatively expensive, far from making education egalitarian, make it exclusive and render it beyond the reach of the majority.

These 'evangelists' who spread the gospel of English promote English mainly in order to exploit this perception. This might then argue the need for countering this trend by localizing the medium of instruction to make good education accessible to all speakers of the local language across the board. Along with this, no doubt, the system may also develop a multi-pronged language policy that takes into account the possible future uses of English, staggering it into formal education so that they are introduced only at different stages. **Under no circumstances, however, should there be second or third language interference in the first four years of schooling, at the very least.**

Not many know that the 'Pallikoodam' of Kottayam has already put this principle into practice. The instruction in the lower primary classes of the school is now exclusively in the mother tongue i.e. Malayalam, and not English. When we learn that this school in its earlier incarnation was an exclusively English-medium school, this new indigenized re-birth assumes greater significance in so far as Mary Roy the founder of the school had the strength of will to follow the dictates of her new-found pedagogical belief in using the mother tongue as the medium of instruction in the first years of schooling. With a homogeneous speech community to draw the children from, this policy poses no conflict of interest with the parents, whom she has been able to carry with her. Pallikoodam, however, is very much beyond the reach of the not-so-well-to-do parents. It is, after all, a private school. The point, however, is the acceptance of right-thinking parents, regardless of whether they are rich or not, that first language instruction is ideal for their children in the concept-forming years. Providing quality education in the mother tongue to all, however, should be the concern of a welfare state.

A child should receive instruction both IN and THROUGH his mother tongue. This is a basic right that should not be withheld from the child. Early concepts are so formed through a child's practical experiences, in a spatial-tactile framework, that they may easily be retrieved through his first language in a learning continuum that spans the home and the school. This is equally true of imbibing one's own culture. **No language is culturally neutral**. From the moment a child is born, it is initiated into the culture and traditions enshrined in its mother tongue, which took his remote ancestors centuries to develop. **To superimpose on the child's mind another language and, through it, its culture, which must be seen to be complementary and inseparable, in the early years of ongoing concept formation and acculturation is likely to cause a traumatic break in the continuity between home and school**. Mahatma Gandhi had once complained that, because of the time taken to learn English so early, the standard of attainment in everything else was 'pitifully inadequate'.

If a child does not use English at home, to what extent is it realistic to speak of English as a medium of instruction in the initial years of schooling? Who stands to benefit the most

from this approach? Is it not logical to infer that only the child who speaks English as a home language stands to benefit from this policy? And, from what social background does he come? The inference is that English is the Language of Privilege. Perpetuation of English, therefore, goes counter to the interests of the vast majority of children or, to put it differently, to the principle of equality of opportunities.

One of the main reasons why many parents, irrespective of their social backgrounds, send their children to an English medium school is to make them learn English from the start. For them, it would go a long way towards offering their children access to well-paid jobs and positions of prestige in the community. At least, that is their perception. Therefore, to deny the school children early access to English would be interpreted by these parents as an attempt to hold them and their children back from upward social mobility. But, this view is flawed.

If we cast our minds back to the first half of the last century, all the schools in Travancore, whether state schools or otherwise, except for a school or two that catered to the Anglo-Indian children in the British enclaves, taught the first four years of the Primary School solely through the medium of Malayalam. Malayalam was also taught as a subject at this stage, but English was quite rightly held back. At the end of that period, basic concepts had generally been effectively internalized and basic numeracy and literacy acquired by the children without negative interference from another language with a totally different orthography and grammar.

It was only in the fifth year of school, the Preparatory Class as it was significantly named, that English was introduced as a subject. In the sixth, seventh and eighth years, comprising the first, second and third forms of the Middle School, English continued to be taught, but still only as a subject, with a graded increase in its degree of difficulty from one year to the next.

The High School came next. In the fourth, fifth and sixth forms of High School, English continued to be taught as a subject. Apart from grammar, elements of literature were also incorporated into the subject. For the first time, it was also used as medium of instruction to prepare the children for the English School Leaving Certificate (ESLC). Those of us who are now in their seventies or more can unhesitatingly testify to the efficacy of that system both cognitively and linguistically, for they found the transition to the all-English college education a relatively smooth one.

A much more recent example from my personal experience may not be out of place in this context. Lawrence School, Lovedale, used to admit, in the nineteen sixties and seventies, a limited number of merit scholars drawn from local language medium schools of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. They joined Lawrence only in the Fourth Grade. In refreshing contrast to the children from privileged homes who came to Lawrence ‘armed’ with English, these scholars, ‘with little English and less privilege’, soon caught up with the rest and beat them at their own ‘English’ game. They became the pacesetters in all spheres of school activities, both curricular and co-curricular. **I venture to say, in retrospect, that the soundness of their basic concept formation through their first**

language must have helped them in no small measure to make a smooth shift of gears from what was inaptly called 'second' language to 'first' language, English.

Some educators make sweeping statements to justify the introduction of English as Medium of Instruction from as early as Grade One. Some of these are:

* English is the language of Higher Education

* English is an international language

* English is the language of international trade

* English is the language of technology

* English is the lingua franca of India

One's quarrel with the above statements is not that they contain no grain of truth; it is that these Anglophile apologists give highly selective examples to make such vast generalizations. The question is, how many of our school-leavers move on to institutions of higher learning? Not many more than 10 %, I dare say. How many of this 10 % have fallen by the wayside solely because they have been denied the benefit of early English? Not many, I am sure. And, how many among those who have had early exposure to English, for what it is worth, have gone on to become diplomats or captains of industry? Or, for that matter, how many of them have become international professionals? Certainly not large enough in numbers to warrant the vast sums of money that will have to be used to blanket our schools with English to benefit the select few who may stand to 'gain' from it at some indeterminate time in the future.

We may infer from the above that, for a school beginner, if there is no immediacy of use for English outside the four walls of the classroom, why encumber him with this additional load so early? Where there is no immediacy, it is the adult learner of a new language who is more motivated. The point of reference for primary education is the immediate community and not so much the next stage of schooling. The first stage of education should, therefore, be complete and terminal as far as basic concept formation is concerned.

What is obtaining now in the school scene is this uncomprehending rush for places in the comparatively few, but much more expensive, so-called English Medium Schools where the teaching of the local language is often only an apology for that. I say 'so-called' because most of the teachers of English in such schools are not qualitatively any superior to their counterparts in the more modest local language medium schools. If anything, the communicative competence of a sizable number of these teachers of/in English is so dismal that they only help perpetuate their deviant variety of English through the children they teach. These children end up learning more than one language but less than two, in neither of which they can think clearly or express themselves correctly! They are thus

grossly deprived of cognitive skills (critical skills of drawing inferences and making judgements) that further education is built on.

Instead of giving children early opportunities to develop their intellectual potential through a language they are most comfortable with, parents go to the other extreme of spending their hard-earned money to give their children the much touted, but not uniformly standard, and often spurious, 'education in English'. This is because many parents mistake a kind of glibness in a non-standard variety of social English for communicative competence in English in their children. This kind of patter may be all right in a party, but, in a professional situation where quick decisions are crucial, the right register of language may escape the 'partygoer' and become a will-o'-the-wisp for the aspiring professional. The touchstone of a person's competence in any language is not so much his glibness in spouting formulaic phrases as his unrehearsed ability to express abstract concepts clearly and critically, on his feet as it were.

It is the theory of 'Supply and Demand' that is being so artfully employed by the purveyors of English to create a market for it. Through their designs, English becomes a rare commodity that fetches a high price. 'Do you want your children to be academic highfliers? Then, allow us to offer you an English-medium education' they are heard to say. That is their constant gambit. As a result, parents are inveigled into paying for a dubious advantage that their children do not stand to gain much from.

To a large extent, the problem lies with parents who regard their children as economic commodities in which to invest to serve their own selfish ends. It is like buying dud shares in a fly-by-night company and vainly hoping they would turn out to be blue chip someday. Would it not profit them more if they let their children make their own choices when the time is ripe and in the meanwhile develop their potential to the full through early concept formation in their first language rather than use them as pawns in a game whose outcome is uncertain?

Finally, it is important to regard children as persons capable of making their own choices. Aptitudes and attainments vary from person to person. Even without having to resolve the nature-nurture controversy, one could safely say that no two persons are alike in their intellectual potential or tactile-motor skills or aesthetic tastes or, for that matter, their emotional makeup. Therefore, to argue that all should have the same opportunities to be 'cloned' professionally would be to misunderstand the concept of equality of opportunities. That all children should have the right to unhindered education is a sound egalitarian principle, but that should be understood to mean only that children should have equal freedom to go their different ways. Until education becomes a fundamental right that is given as a constitutional provision across the board, the anomaly of the well-endowed schools for the privileged few and the ill-equipped schools for the disadvantaged majority competing unequally will continue to negate the principle of equality of opportunities.

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