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Reinforcing Nationalism through Cultural Learning (A Study of Select Texts in the +2 Syllabi of India)

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Abstract:

Reinforcing Nationalism among students in the right perspective is one of the key concerns before the teachers in India. Nationalism has been an emotional and ideological experience which illuminates the essential human condition of the Indians. Initiating cultural learning and facilitating proper cultural ethos among the students is an uphill task. Among other things it requires a dexterous use of text and the right level of motivation. Nationalism as a term has ever been elusive and in a constant flux of change. To add to the woes is globalisation which has made nationalism a very fluid term. To be truly national one needs to be sensitive to the international ethos of diverse nationalisms and cultures.

The Nehruvian concept of nationalism which is simultaneously international best suits the requirements of Indian students. Issues like caste based discrimination, cultural parity for the linguistic minority; stifling voice of the marginal among many others need to be discussed with the students at the higher levels of school education. This would sensitise them and craft them into sensible private individuals and citizens with a sense of national loyalty at the same time.

Aijaz Ahmad in his erudite discourse on nationalism *In Theory* (1992) is concerned about the global channels of communication and circulation which coerce the texts into the stereotyped third world literature. As a remedy Ahmad recommends guarding against the principle of “selective incorporation” of texts into the canon. In this paper select texts of the +2 syllabi infusing cultural learning and true nationalism shall be discussed with a keen eye at cultural learning.

Keywords: Nationalism, Cultural Learning,+2 Syllabi, ELT,L1,L2,FL, Aijaz Ahmad.

Teaching of English in India has been seen with contrasting perspectives. While some have seen it as a threat to Indian culture and linguistic diversity others have seen it as a meeting ground for Indians from diverse linguistic and cultural background. It could be convincingly opined that the role of link language could have been played by an Indian language but the fact remains that English has not only linked the Indians among themselves but also with the world outside. The dominance of English as a language has been accepted by the Indians due to several factors; political, psychological, economic and technological. The rulers with English as their mother tongue colonized

and unified India as a single administrative unit from the high north to the deep south, this the strongest of Indian empires failed to do. In Independent India, English can be used to strengthen and reinforce nationalism by bringing to the fore various suppressed voices and initiate a cultural change through cultural learning. For Aijaz Ahmad observes in *Nationalism: In Theory and Practice*:

...there are multiple pressures to dilute the nation into its constituent units, or atleast weaken its hold on these units. Such pressures can take both progressive as well as highly retrogressive form. In the progressive accent there is a body of the common and indivisible rights for all but then also much larger body of secondary rights for the oppressed castes , classes, communities and social groups of various kinds.(1)

It is in this progressive accent that the English language can be used right from the stage of school education not only to bring change through cultural learning but also through making interactions possible. English could be used as a platform for accessing canon from such ignored social sections who are as much citizens of India as their oppressors are.

Since independence, English education has reinforced nationalism through cultural learning and cultural exchange. It has provided a platform for the Indians to interact and communicate among themselves which no single Indian language is still capable of. However, the introduction of English studies was thought more to be necessitated by the need for native administrators. Edward Said has hinted at the role of English literature and English studies in the reinforcement and extension of the colonial enterprise. Said suggested that the “encoding” of colonialism took place in the texts which were produced about and for the orient. These texts helped to naturalise the complete system of imperialism as imperative. Macaulay, in his 1835 Minute of Education, dismissed Indian and native knowledge as worthless and hence recommended the introduction of western education. Native texts such as Kalidasa’s *Shakuntala* were widely read and appreciated in the Europe but were considered unfit for the natives because these texts were thought to instigate immorality in the weak minds of the natives.

English literary studies were instrumental in propagating western ideals among the natives: aesthetics, political ideas and the humanistic tradition were spread into the natives who were thought merely the cover for exploitation both economic and mental; to be precise intellectual. It is at this juncture that the role of native supporters of English education, Raja Ram Mohun Roy, Syed Ahmad Khan for instance is thus crucial to understand. The English studies which were aimed to curb any native tendency and rebellion could only have been the armour to understand the motives of the British and to face it. Regarding nationalism of that phase Aijaz Ahmad in “Nationalism in Theory and Practice” in *Nationalism and Globalisation* observes that:

Anti-colonial nationalisms have been uniformly progressive in so far they have sought to destroy the colonial structure. In many other respects, their progressive character is not quite so clear-cut, especially in their internal structure, with respect to the labouring classes, women, religious or linguistic minorities, the dispossessed and socially oppressed castes. In most cases colonial autocracy was followed by dictatorial rule, based not on democratic rights of citizenship but on new forms of subjection; or, the formal rights of citizenship, where they existed were never translated into substantive rights of social and economic equality.(5)

It is in these 'other aspects' that the progressive aspect of nationalism shall be sought through cultural learning for which the English studies shall be a vehicle. English language teaching in India did not remain just language study it became a conveyer of ideas. English being the language of our rulers was bound to influence our attitude owing to the infiltration western culture and ideas has made through ELT in India. This dilemma was confronted by the rise of Indian English literature, works of translations and common wealth literature in independent India. English culture imbibed by the children learned and received from the Anglicized mode of education gradually went through a change, with the change in the curriculum chosen for English language teaching in free India. The *Foreword* by the Director, National Council of Educational Research and Training appended to the textbook *Vistas a Supplementary Reader in English for Class XII* clearly stipulates that "...children's life at school must be linked to their life outside the school." This life outside school for Indian children is not an anglicised life but a pure life of the Indian milieu with a myriad of cultures and ethnicities boiling down into the idea that is India. Since the end of the colonial period, there has always existed the constitutional capability to scale down the policy of education imposed by British administrators. Under article 343 (2) of the constitution English remained the language for all official purposes until 26 January 1965. Kunzru committee 1957, set up to investigate future language planning for the country, proposed the linking of the study of English literature to the study of Indian literature. This change was going to promote it less as colonial cultural inheritance and more as an instrument of cultural exchange within the country; India being a land of a variety of cultures and languages. It was claimed that the study of English can help and promote an understanding of how the modern identity of India has emerged from a specific historical development, thereby exploring the complete growth of nationalism in India, and also that of India as a nation.

These days English is used either in a planned or in an unwitting manner as a tool for reinforcing nationalism. The language has become a handy channel for interaction and communication across the myriad linguistic and cultural entities of India often packed in impervious jackets. English has been gracefully used in the academia right from the schools to the levels of higher education to break open these jackets and facilitate a free flow of ideas and intermixing of culture resulting into a better understanding and appreciation of the various native cultures. This has gone a long way in promoting nationalism and reinforcing it through cultural learning. The very notion of Indian literature as an umbrella term invites culturally open and fertile minds. Through translations into the English language the study of various cultures and literature in India has infused a sense of inquisitiveness among the teachers and learners resulting into the joy of discovery and cultural enrichment. All such realisations not only humanise the learners through cultural learning but also reinforce nationalism. Through English cultural learning infuses a deep sense of mutual identity and pride in the very idea of being an Indian. It would not be very simplistic to say that through cultural learning Indianness is enhanced. We are not a homogenous people nor are we ethnically or linguistically a monolithic entity; under such complex situations cultural learning becomes a breather and lends aroma of nationalism through texts indigenous in them and content but English in language. Not only have the Indians started writing in English with the ease and aplomb of a native but have also realised the importance of translations in English.

English has found place in the primary, secondary and senior secondary levels of education. The senior secondary level of education is a crucial stage in the life and learning process of a learner. At

this stage the students stand on the threshold of maturity of thought, understanding, ideas and choice. English by now becomes an imperative part of a learner's life and hence the channel most suitable to inculcate the rationalistic approach in the learner thereby enhancing the feeling of nationalism. After being aptly fed with the knowledge of language both L1 and L2 and also with the history of India pre and post independence; the learner is now prepared to grasp the ideas apart from the fact based knowledge. And the most suitable vehicle to carry the ideas is the teaching and learning that takes place in a language classroom of course through literature. The +2 syllabi of English in Indian schools have gone through various stages of change. At present it is a mixture of heterogeneous pieces serving different purposes from teaching the nuances of English language and literature to the cultural exchange through the texts, from propagating ideas of nationalism, Marxism etc to promoting indigenous culture and tradition in the students.

A few chapters from select texts from +2 syllabi shall be taken into account. In the CBSE's +2 syllabi we find a variety of literary pieces picked up with great care. While on the one hand there is a chapter on the whims and fancies of a Prince from an erstwhile Indian princely state by Kalki, an extract from Bama's *Karukku* arousing pathos; on the other there is a story by Anees Jung taking us to places with the child labourers of the country and by Amitav Ghosh keeping his promise with an expatriate from Kashmir.

The Tiger King by Kalki is primarily a story with a 'Before You Read' tag about the general attitude of human beings towards animals. But the layers of the story unveil biting satire on the conceit of those in power. Apart from illustrating the callousness of human beings towards wildlife and leaving a food for thought about the need for a new system of ecology which is embedded in the care of all people, writer satirises the so called Indian Princes of the princely states. The Kings and the crown prince who ruled over the people of India based on the doctrine of '*daviya adhikar*': the divine right to rule justifying themselves as true rulers of the land were Indian only in skin and blood.

No other miracle marked his childhood days...the boy drank the milk of an English cow, was brought up by an English nanny, tutored in English by an English man, saw nothing but English films- exactly as other crown Prince of all other Indian states did.(10)

This imitation of the British life style was not obvious or acceptable in those times but was guided by a blind admiration for the rulers resulting in disgust towards one's own traditions. In an another instance the writer shows how these crown prince used the treasure of the state as their personal property wasting lakhs of rupees to save the kingdom:

...because he prevented a British officer from fulfilling his desire the Maharaja stood in danger of losing his kingdom itself...

...the Maharaja was happy that though he had lost three lakhs of rupees he had managed to retain his kingdom.(12)

The events surrounding the retention of the kingdom gives a peek in the old days to the learner when subsidiary alliance chopped the wings of the so called provincial rulers. The learner who has learned about the subsidiary alliance, doctrine of lapse etc, now gets an inside picture of the effect they

created apart from the battles and usurping of kingdoms, why and how the public was imposed with heavy taxes. Here the role of the teacher becomes crucial. With the help of the teacher the student gets a feel of the hard earned freedom. Instead of false glorification he understands the suffering of the common people both at the hands of native and foreign rulers, he realises the hardships our people went through to let us breathe in free India. Thus, arousing a sense of nationalism, which isn't based on any rhetoric but on realisations. The student is also encouraged to draw a parallel between the political order of yesterday and today. The sense of nationalism which blooms in this manner would not lead him to shout slogans or create frenzy but cultivate a deep sense of connection with history of the land he lives in and with the problems and sufferings of common people.

One of the units in *Vistas* (NCERT) presents autobiographical episodes from the lives of two women from the marginalised communities who look back on their childhood and reflect on their relationship with the mainstream culture. One of them is a contemporary Tamil Dalit writer Bama. The excerpt has been taken from her autobiography *Karukku* about how she struggled and triumphed in a time when severe prejudice prevailed towards dalits in India. The excerpt titled '*We too are Human Beings*' is a work of translation in a language so lucid, straightforward and sympathetic that the student is drawn to put himself in the shoes of the writer and get an experience of inequality and injustice meted out upon the people from marginalised community.

When I was studying in the third class, I hadn't yet heard people speak openly of untouchability. But I had already seen, felt, experienced and been humiliated by what it is.(96)

The student identifies himself with the people from the marginalised community and their sufferings. He looks at the larger picture of a nation where he co-exists with a variety of people. In doing so he connects himself not with a particular person but with a section of the nation which is left marginalised. The feeling of oneness with the people of his country inculcates in him a sense of nationalism; the nationalism which means equality, respect and dignity to all. The learner understands what effect discrimination and injustice can create and how the seeds of rebellion are sowed early in life. He gets ready to resist the oppression of any kind. Jawaharlal Nehru analysed the causes of the rise and fall of civilisation she pointed out,

We have before us lessons of history. We have seen how repeatedly in spite of our many virtues and our great abilities we have fallen in the race of nations, and because of this lack of unity amongst us the entire community of India has been separated into castes and creeds which do not pull together. Therefore, I lay stress everywhere on the unity of India and on our need to fight communalism, provincialism, separatism and casteism. (*The Hindu*)

Such sensitive issues of untouchability, caste discriminations and the like when discussed in the class spreads not only awareness among students but also forces them to realise that how such discriminations can become an impediment in the way of an ideal nation.

An excerpt from '*Lost Spring, Stories of Stolen Childhood*' by Anees Jung is also included in the syllabi of CBSE. Here the writer analyses the grinding poverty and traditions which condemn these children to a life of exploitation. Also dealt with are the issues of migration of people from villages to cities, of the callousness of society and the political class to the sufferings of the poor. The text speaks of factual events and situations of misery being forced upon the children from the deprived

section; of the plight of street children forced into labour early in life and denied the opportunity of schooling. The learner cannot evade the pathos created by conversations like:

“There is no school in my neighbourhood. When they build one, I will go.”

“If I start a school, will you come?” I ask, half-joking.

“Yes,” he says, smiling broadly.

A few days later I see him running up to me. “Is your school ready?”(14)

The promises made in the bleak world of such children abound in every corner but are rarely kept. When school children are taught such narratives they very much empathise with such street urchins. This empathy goes a long way in bringing cultural sensitivity which is also mentioned under the sub title *Comprehension*, detailing the purpose behind including such texts in the +2 syllabi, at the end of the chapter: ‘Factual understanding and responding with sensitivity.’

Apart from the native writers and writings in English the syllabus includes foreign writers also; Alphonse Daudet is one of them. *The Last Lesson* by Alphonse Daudet the French novelist is set in the days of Franco Prussian War in which France was defeated by Prussia led by Bismark. In the story *The Last Lesson* the French districts Alsace and Lorraine have been conquered by Prussia. The story is about a conquered people who suddenly realise how precious their language is to them.

...French language, saying that it was the most beautiful –the clearest, the most logical; that we must guard it among us and never forget it...(5)

Story deals with the pain that is inflicted on the people of a territory by its conquerors by taking away the right to speak or study their own language and a foreign language being imposed on them.

My last French lesson! Why, I hardly knew how to write! I should never learn anymore! I must stop there, then! Oh, how sorry I was for not learning my lessons...(4)

Although the story deals with a foreign situation it gives an insight to the learner about the importance of one’s language; about the pride in one’s own mother tongue. It also helps the students understand language rights of citizens and the problems of linguistic minorities. We are living in an explosive time where regional and linguistic politics often create unwanted differences in the society. The student can be made to understand the difference between the pride in one’s language and linguistic chauvinism. He can be made to realise that how linguistic chauvinism could meddle with the rights and life of other people and also that how linguistic minorities face discrimination. In case of India where we have linguistic and cultural diversity this kind of sensitivity is very important and more so to keep the ‘unity in diversity’ cliché true.

When a people are enslaved, as long as they hold fast to their language it is as if they had the key to their prison. (7)

As newer generations are exposed to novel ideas and modern philosophies of the Enlightenment and of Romanticism, understanding often created in these younger generations through an educational system styled after the Western pattern may cause them to look down on their heritage and history,

and to yearn for the exotic purity of a new order to sweep away the double standards, the dishonesty, the rot which they felt inevitably stifling them and their society. It is here that English studies can play a crucial role in reinforcing nationalism through cultural learning. Chapters in English textbooks are drawn from a wide pool of canon ranging from local to international and not only from those originally written in the English language but translated into English. This prevents children from developing a mindset which is partisan and creates in them cultural sensitivity and a positive kind of nationalism which is all encompassing and is poles apart from nationalistic or any sort of chauvinism.

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