THE IMPACT OF ENGLISH ON INDIAN NATIONALISM

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The most important phenomenon in new India is the growth of National consciousness which has been attributed by various authorities on the subject to causes other than the development of English language like the nation wide agitation against the foreign rule and the spirit of the age with the obvious implication that even without the introduction of English as the medium of instruction and of communication India would have developed National consciousness. The purpose of this article is to trace the effects of English language and Western education on every aspect of Indian life, to focus attention in particular on the role it played in fostering national consciousness and to clear some longstanding misconceptions about the effects of English education.

A feeling of national sentiment was gathering momentum during the Viceroyalty of Lord Ripon. It soon expressed itself in the organisation of the Indian National Congress which has played a decisive role in shaping India’s destiny. Here it should be understood clearly that the foreign rule itself had given rise to and engendered the feeling of Nationality and national unity in the Indian mind. This feeling of Nationality and National unity embraced the entire country and inspired its population speaking different languages and practising different religions. By that it is not intended to convey that the people of India had been utterly ignorant of the sentiment of Nationality before the advent of British rule in India. But Western writers like Perceval Griffiths are of the opinion that before Western education was introduced there was no sense of Nationality. As an answer to Perceval Griffiths it may be said that a sort of political unity as expressed in a common Government was to be found under the Mauryas. There was also cultural unity which gave them a common intellectual life and bound them together by common social, moral and religious ideas which were disturbed by the on-rush of foreign elements. Here also Perceval Griffiths differs and he is of the opinion that before the introduction of English and Western education some of these elements of Nationality were non-existent or if they were there they were of little consequence. Political unity according to him was non-existent because there was not one Government which exercised its sway over the whole of India. Cultural unity was also non-existent and there were only cultures which were antagonistic to each other.

In fairness to Griffiths it must be conceded that though there was this sentiment of Nationality it was not strong or intense enough to get general recognition before the advent of the British. The Mutiny of 1857 whatever name may be given to it was not an organised War of
Independence but it was in the nature of a conglomeration of many unorganized local uprisings though they were all to some extent motivated by a desire to overthrow the British rule. We have to agree with Griffiths that material, moral and intellectual conditions which alone could have produced a general National sentiment were non-existent. Those conditions were supplied by the British rule. The new forces that came along with it such as, a well-organized system of Government and improvement in the means of communication and transport brought people of distant provinces together and promoted among them a common understanding. But the greatest force to the irresistible working of which India was subjected by British rule was the introduction of English education.

The British rule in India had brought in its train certain material developments of which education is one. Seeds of Western education were sown during the British rule. The heated controversy between those who desired to promote the old Oriental learning and those who urged the opening of rich treasures of European thought and culture to the Indian mind like Macaulay and Raja Ram Mohan Roy, was settled in favour of English education. Here the decision might have been partly influenced by considerations of administrative convenience. But the decision itself was a great epoch-making event. It had a decisive influence on the evolution of India’s destiny. Modern India is undoubtedly the product of Western education. Its literature, science, politics, economics and other branches of learning were introduced to India. It is unfair to ignore and look with disrespect on Western education and the enormous good that it has done to this country. Modern India would not have been whatever she is today without the powerful and beneficial influence of Western education. R. G. Pradhan rightly observes that the impact of Western education was tremendous and the effects were far-reaching. They have touched almost every sphere and phase of Indian thought and life. This may not have been of sufficient magnitude according to some, but according to Griffiths the reality of this impact must be conceded since it is obvious that Western education removed superstition and modified the direction of their practical working in every day life. But in the region of social and political thought the impact and effect was almost revolutionary, says Pradhan.

Western education has given India a common language in which her educated classes freely exchange views and ideas. A common language is of great help towards the formation and growth of National unity. The process of development of spirit of Nationality would have been not only difficult but also infinitely prolonged without the English language and the common intellectual cultural intercourse it facilitated though the Hindus had a common cultural tradition, there were Mohammadans who were outside the Hindu fold because of their distinct racial, linguistic and cultural traditions. It was only after the introduction
of Western education that the Hindus and other communities in India began to drink deep of the fountain of Western literature, history and philosophy. All the educated classes irrespective of community imbibed the common culture which gave rise to common views and feelings which are a fundamental prerequisite for the growth of Nationality. It is the contention of some historians that even without Western education, India would have attained the position of a great modern power especially in view of the fact that the latter half of the 19th century witnessed a resurgent of a spirit of Nationality all over the world so much so that the age itself is an age of Nationalism. It is extremely difficult and absolutely futile to speculate on what would have happened if the course of Indian history had been different from what it has been. Sardar K. M. Panikkar in his book ‘Survey of Indian History’ speculates as follows:

‘The particularisms based on vernaculars would have grown so greatly as to break up even the idea of Indian Unity. Much of the new learning on which India’s great recovery has been based would not have been available to us. The scientific development of the West would have reached us second hand and participation in the scientific work of the world would have been a distant ideal’. In short, by going in for English education India joined the world community.

The Western education has awakened and fostered the spirit of Nationality not only by the indirect means of common language and culture but also by various means. It is impossible to receive Western education without imbibing the spirit of Nationality because modern Western culture is synonymous with Nationalism, spirit of patriotism and love of freedom. Nowhere do we find the spirit of Nationality as in the history of the West glorified in its literature and history. It spread the ideas that every nation has a right to be independent and no effort or sacrifice is too great in the interest of the Motherland. These were some of the fundamental teachings of Western culture and they are important for National growth. These ideas were recognized and appreciated by young Indians who were given Western education. After all what is Education? Whatever be its label, it will be utterly useless if it did not succeed in impressing upon the mind its particular ideas and principles. The mind is what education makes it and the Indian would have been a curious human being if he had failed to learn the noble teachings of Western education. Advanced nationalists have frankly recognized the debt which India owes to Western education.

In the early twenties, Mr Vishnu Sastry Chiplonkar, the founder of the ‘Deccan Education Society of Poona’ and one of the staunchest nationalists of his times has compared Western education to the Milk of the Tigress. According to him no one who was Western educated could fail to imbibe the principal virtues of love of freedom, independence and struggled to achieve. ‘Kesari’ the great nationalist news paper in the latter part of the 19th century frankly admitted that the rise of
national consciousness was due to British rule. The same opinion is expressed by our Prime Minister, Pandit Nehru in his ‘Autobiography’ and ‘Discovery of India’. Thus the greatest effect of English education has been to promote the spirit of nationalism.

Another effect of English education was in the region of political thought. It has not only awakened and developed the spirit of nationality but has radically changed some of fundamental political concepts of the Indian people. Here the impact was almost revolutionary. Political notions and sentiments of the Indian people were completely changed. The Indian who was governed by absolute monarchs began to appreciate constitutional governments, sovereignty of the people and the rights of the individual. Professor Majumdar is of the opinion that the development of our political thought which was at a very low ebb was revived, revitalised and developed by Western education.

Western education had another radical and far-reaching effect on Indian mind and that was the development of national and racial self-introspection. The Indian began to inquire into the causes of his fall, of his loss of independence and of his backward condition. The movements for social and religious reforms were the outcome of this spirit of self-introspection. The founders of these movements discovered the secret of success of Western civilization in freedom of thought and action. They felt that unless their country cultivates and develops the spirit of freedom it could not emerge once again as a great nation. In course of time new forces generated by British rule and Western education aroused the feeling of national consciousness which manifested itself in an organised national movement.

Professor Humayun Kabir, a well-known educationalist, touching on the Englishman’s contribution to India has said as follows: ‘The Western system of education and the English language were perhaps the greatest gifts that the British people brought to India. They opened a new horizon of thought to the Indian people. Western education brought the Indian mind in touch with the scientific temper of modern world. In short the discovery of the West lead to the discovery of the East’.

Thus the English language has been the most powerful single influence which has worked for the unification of the country. It is through the use of English as a common language that men in all parts of our country have been able to come together and build up a common front whether it be in politics, history or religion. In view of the rich contribution English language has made and is making to India it would be not only short sighted but also suicidal to replace it by an Indian language. If at this juncture we do not exercise particular care to retain English language the country stands exposed to the danger of being divided into various linguistic groups. Furthermore she will lose the advantage of being in constant touch with the rest of the World, English being an international language. Non-English writers published
their writings in English because of its wide appeal. Hence it is imperative that we should not be induced to embark upon a course which will do great harm to our future generations and to the nation as a whole.

**BOOKS CONSULTED**

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5. Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan  ...  Imperial Unity Vol II
6. Pandit Nehru  ...  Discovery of India.
7. Humayun Kabir  ...  Article in the Deccan Herald.