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A Textbook with a Difference Educating the Elite

Meena Swaminathan

Can there ever be a genuine social revolution until the consciousness of the elite is roused, and they become aware of the world of poverty and injustice in which we live; and of their own role in perpetuating that world? Its only then that the elite can get involved in bringing about change, or so believe those who believe in the possibility of change from within. In our country (and in other developing countries with the colonial past—the neo-colonial ones) the elite is an internal one, ruling group sharply distinguished from the masses. And nothing marks the difference between the elite and the masses more in India than their different relationships to the English language.

Road to Power

Attendance at an English medium school, and knowledge of the English language is not merely a caste mark, the characteristic of a class set apart. It opens the road to power and privilege, a job security, to the safety of belonging to the ruling majority. But the role of English is even more subtle, far-reaching and pervasive than that. English not only introduces an alien language, culture, and social tradition to Indian children at school, it creates another sensibility and another thought-process; so intimately are language and thought connected. The English-linked set of values and concepts, the mental framework that results, is part of the immense gap

between the elite and the masses; a gap perpetuated by both the educational and the socio-economical system as a whole. How can this gap be bridged and the elite be made aware of the reality of the life of the masses in their own country? The problem of educating the elite is closely connected with the problem of teaching English.

Divorce from Reality

But this is not all. The ironic twist is that the study of English in Indian schools today contributes to the creation of a sensibility which is not merely alien, and not even contemporary. Most school syllabi lean heavily on the classic literature of the nineteenth century or earlier. Twentieth century and contemporary masters of English prose and poetry rarely, if ever, figure in school textbooks. So the young are nurtured in the world of Dickens, Hardy and Stevenson, cut off from modern English Literature and thought. From this world they are all too often led straight into the world of Harold Robins or Denise Robins, completing their divorce from contemporary reality of their own countries, as well as giving their language an archaic flavour. So even on strictly literary grounds, there is a good case for introducing some new thinking into English language textbooks.

Who is Responsible

Let us look at the other side of the picture. Who is responsible

for this state of affairs? Now another irony awaits us. The Christian missions, whose original noble purpose was to uplift the poor and the needy, cater to the elite. The mission schools are the most prestigious in the country, with fierce competition for entry. They are pace setters, and the children of the elite exclusively attend these schools, or similar institutions which aspire to emulate them. So those, who would walk with the lowliest in the land, find themselves in the awkward situation of being in charge of the education of the sons and daughters of the affluent. English education, the perpetuator and symptom of unequal society of today, is offered to the children of the elite by the servants of the poor. A truly mindboggling situation, indicative of the confusion of the times!

Faced with this awkward problem, the Jesuit fathers have applied their minds and with their usual ingenuity have cut the knot with a marvellously practical solution. What is it? Simple! They will carry the war into the enemy camp, and fight with the enemy's weapons. They will subvert. With superb audacity, they will use the very instruments of oppression, the English language, to open the doors of perception. They will raise the consciousness of the young through the medium of the English language textbook—catch 'em young and teach 'em right! The present textbook* is the first offering in this direction.

In Third World

Culled largely from the pages of the *Economic and Political Weekly*,

* *Education to Reality* through English Language, composed and compiled by Gladys D'Souza, rscj, and Gabriel Gonçalves, sj. Published by R.K. Educational Association, Bettiah, W. Champaran, Bihar, Vol. A, pp. 174, Vol. B 164. Rs. 4.25 per volume.

The New Internationalist, and a few other journals, the book is a selection of documentary extracts about various aspects of life in the Third World. The subjects covered range from the life of primitive tribes today, the diaries of early explorers and colonisers, apartheid, and race and caste discrimination, the condition of peasants, landless labourers and workers all over the world, to elementary lessons in monopolistic economics, environmental pollution, health care and literacy. There is also a short selection of poems from the Third World on such themes. The good Father and Sister have gone about their work with devastating thoroughness. Every extract is followed by an exhaustive, almost tedious set of conventional language exercises, questions for discussion, suggestions for activities, and further reading, a variety of thought-provoking follow-ups. So skilfully is the camouflage done that one cannot help wondering from whom the authors are hiding. One suspects the targets are the less liberal members of their own tribe.

Heavy for Young

Having congratulated the authors on their admirable objective and courage in taking the first step towards it, one can afford to quarrel a little about the details of the execution. The selections are a little too much of the same thing, drawn from the same sort of sources. The book seems to have been put together by a team of stern social scientists with little feeling for the reactions of the young and less concern for good literature. It may prove a bit heavy and dull for readers of class VIII and IX. Perhaps, the way out would have been to include more extracts from creative writing in the form of fiction, poetry, drama, or prose.

There now exists a considerable body of such literature in English originating from Africa, Asia, and

Latin America. The story of the lives of the poor, the exploited and the deprived, seen and portrayed through the eyes of sensitive writers would provide a vision of life in its totality, with all the artists' resources of fantasy, humor, pathos and irony to convey the rich texture of life. This is not to decry the value of good reportage by competent journalists, but only to suggest that the flesh of literature be added to the bare bones of journalism.

Difficult Exercises

Similarly, many of the exercises seem too difficult for the age-group. One can argue of course, that it is better to err on the side of being challenging than to be cautious and offer too little. But there are dangers in difficulty too. It may sometimes be better to merely expose the young mind to a variety of materials and leave it there to be turned over, than to drive home the point too often and risk the danger of de-sensitization. Also, much depends on the teacher—his

skill, ingenuity, concern, and commitment to the same values. Considering the class background and education of most teachers working in the English medium schools, who are likely to handle this textbook, this may be asking for a little too much. Here again the answer may lie in using a rich variety of textual materials which will make an impact, with or without the suggested exercises and discussions and thus make the project less dependent on teachers' use and interpretation.

One hopes that these and a few other small defects (such as the failure to document *all* the resources) will be taken care of in the promised second edition. One also hopes for many more such efforts in this direction. This is a Gandhian venture, and an endeavour to convince the enemy within by the power of truth-force. More power to all engaged in this task!

Courtesy *Voluntary Action*, Vol. XX No. 6, June 1978

Child to Child Programme

The Institute of Education and Child Health in London and the Ministry of Overseas Development of the United Kingdom are developing a programme for 1979 which is called the Child to Child Programme. This programme is to focus on the children most in need in all parts of the world. Generally these are the children under five years of age living in rural areas and poor urban sectors of developing countries.

There are 350 million children in the world without essential services in health, nutrition and education. This programme will try to use the services of school-age child to help the healthy development of the pre-school child. The objectives will build on knowledge and practices which already exist in societies concerned

Efforts will be made to mediate the activities of this programme through the health workers in each country as well as the teachers and village leaders. An important aspect will be direct encounters between teachers and health workers to see what kinds of programmes can be developed. Every one can be involved.

If you have any ideas or material, in any language, which can contribute to the Child to Child Programme, or if you would like more information, please write to: Child to Child Programme, International Year of the Child, Institute of Child Health, 30 Guildford Street, London WC1N 1EH, England.

—*Education Newsletter*, WCC, Vol. VII, No. 1 1978