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Teaching English Literature in Rural India: Issues and Prospects

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Abstract

The English brought English to India to make it easier for them to govern this vast country. Gradually the language got prominence all over the world and hence, in India, it gained wide prominence. Along with the spread of English, English literature also gained wide popularity and place in our educational system. When an Indian student learns English literature, he does not inherit ideas, beliefs, values, and knowledge of the English culture. The teacher and the learner both have no share in the culture and tradition of English people or people where English is spoken as a mother tongue or a native language. Learners are unknown to the literary traditions also.

English literature teaching poses serious problems to the teachers as they find it difficult to relate to the traditions, culture, values, and mythology of European countries. They cannot relate the emotions, happenings, and situations to the Indian students. Hence the students feel alienated and cannot comprehend the real meaning of the given text. Due to this geographical, cultural, and social difference, the students cannot relate to the literary texts and find it uninteresting.

The teachers need to focus primarily on teaching language to enhance the comprehensive skills of the students to grasp literature. The goal of English literature teaching should be to increase proficiency when the English language is being used across India. It concerns intelligibility, comprehensibility, and interpretability. It should lead to international communication through interactions and a better understanding of the English literature at large.

Keywords: Literature, language, culture, mythology, teaching, vocabulary, communication etc.

Introduction

After attaining political authority, the English felt the necessity to educate the indigenous Indians in their own language mainly for two reasons- firstly, to rule the vast sub-continent smoothly for a long time by their created black sahibs and secondly, to extract maximum returns by giving minimum or limited assistance. For these interests, the English bestowed their language to the Indians as colonial lords. For this in 1813, they formulated 'The Charter Act'. It reads, 'After defraying the expenses of the military, civil and commercial establishments and paying the debt, in the manner hereinafter provided, a sum of not less than one lac of rupees in each year shall be set apart and applied to the revival and improvement of literature and the encouragement of the learned natives and for the

introduction and promotion of knowledge of science among the inhabitants of the British territories in India'.

This was the beginning of modern Indian education. But soon a dispute arose between the Orientalists and the Anglicists over the conceptual stand of these two terms "literature" and "the learned natives" in the Charter Act. The Orientalists claimed that the term literature in the Charter referred to 'Indian literature' while the Anglicists claimed it to be "English literature and culture". The controversy, whatsoever, continued till 1825, and then on 2nd February 1834, Macaulay gave his epoch-making Minute on the issue. He interpreted the term 'Literature' as 'English literature and culture' and 'the learned natives' as the people who know Locke's philosophy and Milton's verse as per the 43rd clause of the Charter'. At that time, Indian learned

thinkers like Raja Rammohan Roy, Keshab Chander Ghosh, etc. supported Macaulay's interpretation and worked for the study of the English language, literature, and culture in India.

There are varieties of English but English literature produced by native speakers or writers has remained an important, original, standard, and accepted variety of English. Literature has been included in the syllabi of higher education for a long time and it is continued even now. In many parts of the world today, there is a great demand for English language learning as it is a language of international communication of business, commerce, science, technology, and higher education. The reason for the need and purpose of the study of English literature may be possible in its increasing reputation as the literature of the world language. With this, native English literature is considered essential and important as part of the learning process of the English language. It might be learned and studied for its literary aspects, to know and enjoy English in original native expressions, and to be acquainted with the works of great literary masters. English literature has always been looked upon with high regard for its variety of subjects, style, reflection of life, and magnitude. Mostly the aesthetic beauty and the utility of language proficiency is the main reason behind the inclusion of literature in language study.

Now, after more than six decades of Indian Independence, it has been firmly established that the study of English literature and language has become indispensable for the Indians not only to keep pace with the globalized world but also to interchange ideas among all ethnic and linguistic groups living in this sub-continent. Today English language and literature have reached universal status and as such no one can keep his doors shut and deny its access for fear of losing his own. But, in teaching English literature in non-native contexts, the teachers and learners face certain difficulties and problems due to cultural, racial, and linguistic differences. British or English cultural references are not known or familiar to the learners and hence many times they do not understand the matter as is viewed by the author.

India is a multi-lingual, multi-cultural, and multi-racial country having 70 percent of its population living in villages. The living conditions, rituals, customs, and superstitions of Indian villagers have not changed so much since the days of Nissim Ezekiel or Sarojini Naidu. In semi-urban areas, most of the students are first-generation learners. Here, in India, there are more than 365 linguistic groups. Besides the Aryan and Dravidian groups, there are many other ethnic groups having their own indigenous culture and living habits. Even today we miserably failed to create our national language which could help communicate and understand each and every Indian citizen living in this land of ancient culture. I have been mentioning these because 'Literature is the mirror of society'.

So, naturally, in English literature English life, English nature, English feelings, and English views and opinions are reflected. All these are really foreign to Indian rural life. Although it is said that human emotions and passions are the same in every country,

in every age, and in every race, their expressions vary from place to place, from country to country, from race to race, and from age to age. The problem of studying and teaching English literature starts from this point. It is said that great literature, is timeless and placeless but do all the prescribed pieces in the university syllabi belong to that category? The answer is certainly a big 'No'. So, the problem accumulates because of this vast cultural gap. The teacher in an undergraduate class, thus faces some basic problems, which need to be given attention.

In the nature and bird poems of Wordsworth, Keats, Hardy, Frost, etc., we get the description of English/American or as a whole European birds like Wren, Nightingale, Thrush, Robin red breast, etc. Similarly, we find the description of daffodils, lilies, willow trees, pine woods, etc. Now the teachers of rural India possess only bookish knowledge of these things. Moreover, the crowded classes with minimal facilities for audio-visual aids offer very little scope to show live pictures of such natural objects. As a result, the teacher finds it very difficult to incorporate the ideas and sentiments expressed in the literary piece to his students. For this reason, the students receive incomplete or hazy ideas that they have to carry all through their lives. The problem continues eternally giving birth to distorted and irrelevant ideas to the posterity.

The English or American social pattern is quite different from that of ours. Indian students in general are born and brought up in conservative and sometimes orthodox society where they follow some strict social and moral codes of conduct. However, the values and morals of European society are quite different from those of the Indians. Their social pattern is rather loose and unorthodox. As a result, a teacher in an undergraduate class finds it very difficult to describe the love life described in a drama or novel. The students encounter a conflict between his/her practice and the situation narrated in the story. He/she feels shy and sometimes offended because of his/her limited vision. The teacher feels afraid of whether his description or analysis violated the limit or not. His anxiousness and handicapped ness make the lesson mechanical and the students embarrassed. In fine the class of literature turns to a class of 'translation'. And thus, the real pleasure of studying literature vanishes.

The undergraduate students of our country possess very little knowledge of European history and geography. For this reason, it becomes very difficult on the part of the teacher to make them understand the situation narrated in the text. When an Indian teacher teaches R.K. Narayan's Malgudi novels, each and every student can visualize the locality and its people in his mind's eye. However, the same student fails to visualize Hardy's WESSEX or Robert Frost's YELLOW WOOD described by the same teacher. The teacher, however skilled, he may be, cannot incorporate the total picture to his students. He fails to bridge the gap between Indian Aky and the European Sky. The ultimate result is the student's incomplete and partial knowledge.

In most of the prescribed pieces of Indian universities, we get references to the Bible and Christianity, like Gray's *Elegy*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Shakespearean dramas, essays of famous essayists, etc. Now it is a fact that a large section of Indian teachers do not know the pros and cons of Christianity as they belong to some other religion. Ready references are also not easy to access. As a result, the teacher generally avoids the detailed analysis of things like Easter Sunday, Holy Thursday, Resurrection, etc., and completes his task somehow. Thus, the student receives only a partial idea about all these things and his study of literature remains incomplete. He misses the inherent significance of such Biblical terms and references.

The same is true so far as Greek mythology as well as, European/English historical incidents are concerned. An Indian teacher can analyze any Indian mythological or historical incident clearly and effectively. However, the same teacher has to take immense labor and strain while analyzing an incident from Greek or Roman mythology. His task becomes very difficult because of the cultural differences. Latin and French quotations are also impediments on part of both the students and the teachers.

Another very acute problem is the insufficiency of proper study materials. Both the students and the teachers have to depend mainly on the notes instead of real authoritative reference books. So, the students receive somewhat backdated, stale, or obsolete views. The next impediment or problem is undoubtedly vernacular background. A large number of students admit themselves to undergraduate courses with a very poor background. In rural schools, they do not get proper guidance due to the non-availability of trained teachers. They pass high school examinations by solving the test papers. They memorize some stock questions on grammar without knowing the rules. So, their knowledge of the English language remains very weak. Their vocabulary is really painful. A recent study revealed that even a good student possesses 500 to 2000-word stock. Now in such a situation how can he/she understand the poems, novels, or dramas of great English authors? Even students having English backgrounds suffer from this weakness.

Then the question arises how within the total field of education, can the study of literature make its maximum contribution? How far is the study of literature significant and relevant in the process of education? The answer can be made positive, provided certain precautions are taken and improvements are made in the methods of teaching, learning, and selection of works for study. Teaching literature can develop language skills and perceptual ability among the learners if it is taught properly or with a willingness to change methods as per new demands. These problems are quite obvious and widespread. After years of analysis and studies at different levels, some remedies or solutions are being thought and taken into consideration, so that the situation can be changed and a new perspective to teaching English literature can be added.

A number of English professors suggested that instead of teaching English literature as a separate branch of

study, the students should be taught English and some other Indian literature simultaneously. They are of the opinion of bringing English and major Indian literature under the same umbrella. They like to give it the title 'Cultural Studies' instead of present English literature or Hindi literature etc. Now, the idea is a broad one. If the idea is implemented properly then Indian students will get a scope of comparative study of English and Indian literature simultaneously. This comparative study will develop a critical understanding of the minds of the students. They will be able to see the conceptual similarities and practical differences between English literature and Indian literature. This comparative study will definitely be able to solve many of the problems mentioned earlier.

Another group of thinkers, on the other hand, opines that instead of teaching English literature i.e., the works of Shakespeare, Keats, Shelley, Byron, Milton, etc. the Indian students should be taught the translated version of the works of these writers in their personal vernaculars. This will diminish the extra burden of learning the language first and then finding out the literary merits of any text. Now, this idea is also a good one. If it can be implemented properly and all over the country, it would yield enormous results. However, from the practical point of view, it seems next to impossible. It is true that English scholars were able to translate the works of Classical masters like Homer, Virgil, etc. because of the enormous richness of their language. But would it be wrong to say that no Indian language possesses the richness of translating Shakespeare, Milton, Johnson, etc. Again, it is also said that only another Shakespeare can translate Shakespeare. Therefore, though the idea is very good, it is of no value because of the practical impossibilities.

Another option is to teach only 'Indian writings in English' to the Indian students. The Indian writers have attained maturity enough to satisfy the literary thirst of Indian students. In fact, it has been well established that Indian writers are producing works of real merit. Right from the beginning we have innumerable poets, novelists, and dramatists of extraordinary talent and acute sensibility. Since Toru Dutt, we have several masters in this field. Sir Salman Rushdie started the postmodernism with the publication of his *Midnight's Children*. After Ravinder Nath Tagore, V.S. Naipaul also bagged the Nobel Prize for literature (2002) by dint of his lucid but thought-provoking writings. Jhumpa Lahiri, Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, and Amitav Ghosh, are writers of real merit. But the most interesting and important thing about these Indian writers is their Indianness. Almost all of them have taken the Indian sub-continent as their theme and subject. As a result, the students will feel at home while studying English literature. The sights, sounds, and sentiments will appear familiar to them. They will not find the man and manners of English literature foreign like the present situation. As a result, the students will be able to enjoy their classroom study. The class would not appear boring or problematic to them. They would feel the taste of real Literature study. But again, this idea seems impractical as the students will not get the opportunity to taste the world literature.

Again, if in addition to the Indian writing in English, the translated version of regional writers are tagged to the University syllabus, then the subject will definitely be much more attractive and interesting. If this idea is implemented then the study and teaching of English literature in any part of India would be interesting as well as entertaining. It will no longer be a burden to both the teachers and the students. In such a case the teachers would be able to discharge their duties free from all sorts of anxieties and obstacles. However, like other propositions, here also lies a few practical problems- the main is, of course, "A sharp detachment from the proper English literature". A student having a Bachelor's degree or Master's degree in English without the knowledge of Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Bernard Shaw, or T.S. Eliot will appear to be an awkward fellow. Therefore, here also the thinkers will have to ponder over the matter before giving the final nod.

Now, whatever may be the propositions, innovations, changes in curriculum, or change of texts, it appears clear that nothing will be totally satisfactory until and unless the Indian students develop a strong command over the language first because the main fault lies not in the subject matter, but in its accessibility. There is a close and firm relation between language and literature. Teachers must understand this relation and be ready to change the traditional methods. Modern techniques, use of materials like audio-video, participation in seminars, live interactions, preparing students for diverse sources, of information on their own, and developing the skills of synthesis of knowledge among them, such methods are to be followed to remove the cultural and linguistic barriers and make the learning more fruitful. A good command of the language requires strong conceptions of grammar and rich vocabulary. A student who has the capacity to understand the pages of Hardy, Austen, or Woolf will never find them boring or uninteresting. Therefore, students aspiring to study English literature should learn grammar at the preparatory level. They must acquire a rich vocabulary as well, before stepping into the door of English literature in the undergraduate classes. Again, this is obviously to be done at the school level. At the college level, this is simply impossible because of the shortage of time and lengthy syllabus. If these two problems are solved then other problems will automatically be diluted. The teacher's job would be easier if he found his students had a good command of the language and sound grammatical knowledge. He would then invest his time and skill in the analysis and explanation of the author's statements properly.

There is still another problem on the part of both the students and a section of teachers and this is the defective pronunciation. Some students learn to pronounce words in a wrong manner at their preparatory level. They fail to correct this defect all through their life. As such they fail to understand what the teacher says. On the other hand, some teachers are also guilty of this defective pronunciation. This happens because of the climatic and environmental differences of the teacher. As a result, most of the students fail to understand what the teacher is trying to convey.

Another impediment in the teaching of English literature is the 'job-prospect' psychology of the students. A big section of students want to study English literature for its job prospects. From the very beginning, they remain obsessed with the desire to secure a certain percentage of marks. They believe it safer to memorize some notes given by some teachers than to write the answers themselves. For this reason, their approach becomes mechanical and stereotyped. They miss the humor of Shakespeare or the satire of Dryden, Donne, etc. Their obsession with a certain percentage of marks ruins their pleasure of studying literature. As a result, the teacher's best effort proves to be barren and meaningless.

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