

# Role of English Language Education in Social and Economic Upliftment of Children of Labour Community: An Indian Case

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## Abstract

*In ancient India, the caste system played a very important role in the field of education where the right to education was restricted to the children of the elite class alone. Even in the post British era, the English language has been occupying the focal point in every sphere of the Indian life. In the context of Education for All, focus should be directed towards the education of the underprivileged or the disadvantaged child in the mainstream curriculum – such that he can use English as a tool for social mobility and change the life conditions that he is born into – that of a tea garden labourer. This paper is research based and uses personal experience and involvement on the part of the researcher with the subject under study- the disadvantaged learner in the guise of the tea garden labourer child (henceforth TGLC) for whom education in general, and English education, in particular, is a first generation experience. In this study, it becomes clear how the disadvantaged child emerges as an individual who is often characterized as the withdrawn, aggressive and lonely child who shies away from all school activities.*

## Introduction

The world has shrunk and become a smaller place with the rapid technological advancements today. In the context of these developments, very few communities have remained monolingual. Being bilingual or knowing another language may mean “getting a job; a chance to get educated; the ability to take a fuller part in the life of one’s own country or the opportunities to emigrate to another; an expansion of one’s literary and cultural horizons; the expression of one’s political opinions or beliefs. A second language affects people’s careers and possible futures, their lives and their very identities” (Cook, 2001:1). Thus being able to speak more than one language achieves much beyond mere artistic achievement or simple pleasure: the acquisition or learning of a second language, using the two words interchangeably, becomes vital to the life of millions of people in the world around. Therefore, the role of the teacher or the educator becomes more important now.

Any “whining schoolboy”, to use Shakespeare’s words, is expected to learn the second language and ever since the first schoolboy “crept like a snail unwillingly to school” the harassed teacher has had to deal with not only the brilliant aspiring titan but also with the “educationally subnormal” (Burt, 1961) or in simpler terms the “backward child.” The individual learner – disadvantaged or not, is unique and so are his problems and the obstacles he faces in language learning. This is more acute in the children coming from the labour community characterised by poverty and illiteracy in which they are the first generation learners.

## Need for learning English as a second language in India

Whether one is for or against it, one cannot deny that English as a language has been playing a major role in India, since the time of the

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British colonizers. Even the Constitution of India has accorded English the status of the Associate Official Language- whereby every official document has to use the English language wherever it uses the national language- Hindi. India is a vast country with its population speaking a variety of languages. Further, each language has a number of dialects and sub-dialects, many of which do not even have their own scripts. The Constitution of India has recognised 15 local languages as official languages. Even though Hindi is declared as the national language, its use is restricted to a very few states of Northern India, with the entire southern, eastern and the north-eastern states being more comfortable using English as their official language. In fact, today there are more English teachers, more English students and more Indian English writers, a stronger English press and a powerful media than the time when the British left the country. With the growth of literacy, urbanity, and technological advancement, the scope and intensity of communication in English for inter-group contact is getting radically transformed. In many urban situations a minimum acquaintance of English is taken for granted and it is regarded as an essential part of the middle class baggage. In fact, in states like Meghalaya, Nagaland and Mizoram, English is accepted as the sole official language and in the rest of India, there exists, in the words of Khubchandani (1997), the "English caste" who show a distinct obsession with Western values and act as gatekeepers to upward mobility. He calls this as the "brown saheb mentality."

But, it cannot be denied that the root reason of introducing English in India – of creating a class of 'clerks' to make handling official works in India easier - has today, under the changing times, adapted itself to suit the times. Today, a fluent speaker of English can see that the language is marked by many material advantages associated with learning it. Besides, all major educational establishments – including all technical and non-technical institutes use English as the only medium of instruction. Students with less exposure to the English language face a major hurdle in comprehending the educational input.

Again, with new job opportunities like the call centre industry, the hotel industry, the airlines and travel agencies etc., offering alluring job alternatives, English as a language has started to enjoy a booming sense of prestige. Though not generally used as a mother tongue, English is an additional subject and under the Three Language Formula, English is one of the three languages a school goer needs to know - the other two being Hindi and the mother tongue. English is also used as a medium of instruction in courts, and as the chief means of communication of the government in its dealings with foreign governments. What we cannot overlook is the fact that for Indians, it is a reality that the English-knowing sections, which are ever increasing, command control over the Indian scenario in all working scenes.

With the globalization of the Indian economy and the open trade agreements, the world is recognizing the power and efficiency of the advancing Indian economy to occupy a leading position. Indian professionals are creating a great impact on every sector of the global scenario of science and technology, media and communication, and art and culture. English language being the key factor in achieving all these, there is a strong need for the learning of English as a very important second language not only for the urban Indian community but also for the remotely situated tribal populace.

### **Concept of the disadvantaged learner**

In the early stage of British colonialism, there was a major need to have a class of English-speaking or comprehending group for the British to discharge their daily functions in India. That was how the English language percolated into the lives of the higher classes in India. But, today, with the existing English teaching programmes for ethnic and sub-ethnic minorities, it has become clear that the learning of English has ceased to be the privilege of the rich and higher classes. All the schools in India have courses in English for students possessing a wide range of abilities, with different styles of learning and different foci of interests. A growing number of who are from the socio-economically backward classes.

The marked differences in the learning output of the students and their divergent school performances have led to the question of variable successes and the concept of the disadvantaged child.

The term 'disadvantaged' is used to direct one's attention to someone who is deficient in some way and feels a major handicap in meeting the human potential (Fantini, 1968). It is a relative term that has been so far used to include those who are economically in the low-income group, physically handicapped or belong culturally to that stratum of society, which is a diversion from the mainstream. Thus, in a nutshell, the term disadvantaged includes the lower classes, ethnic minorities, immigrants and refugees.

When the disadvantaged learner comes to the classroom, starting from his kindergarten days, he misses out about eighty-five percent of what goes on in a formal classroom as such children have not been trained to listen (Silberman, 1964). It is because, that the disadvantaged learners are those who come from low-income households where the basic concern revolves around food and clothing and thus very little or no time remains for other interactions with their parents. The parent of the disadvantaged child has little or no time, to talk with his child. More often than not, he is the first-generation learner who comes to the classroom with a completely different set of values in comparison to his middle class classmates. All these make it "difficult to become involved because they cannot see the relationship between what they study and their personal world" (Graham, 1969: 21). He comes from a world, which has no access to the newspapers, no books, no pictures and no magazines, which form a major source of knowledge for the middle-class children. Yet, ironically, it is the printed page, which is the mainstay of the school days he has just begun to make a part of his life. "Learners who have had little or no contact with these media in their early years are at a disadvantage as soon as they enter learning situations which depend on oral and written language" (Withall, 1967: 49). Middle class values like thrift, parsimony, practice of social amenities and a concern about a better future often perplex the

disadvantaged learner and leaves him in a confused state. The term *disadvantaged* thus stands out mainly because of its distinctive differences from the mainstream. It, thus, becomes mandatory to take up the cause of the education of the disadvantaged as a special cause of concern and look at the role that English language learning can play to change his whole life set-up for the better.

### **Selection of the study group**

The children of the tea-garden-labour (henceforth TGL) community are considered as the disadvantaged learners in the context of this study. The tea gardens in Assam are a legacy of the British colonizers and perhaps as old as the language itself. Just like English in India has attained the official status of being the Associate Official Language, similarly the tea plantations that the English have left behind play a major part in the Indian economy. With the employment of over one million, the tea plantation industry is among the largest private employers in India. It is spread across the states of Assam, Kerela, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal. The plantation workforce, that is the TGL community, has been amongst the most exploited workforce in the organised sector. Their wages are amongst the lowest when compared to workers in other industries, and their working and living conditions are most dismal. Most of the plantations are located in remote and isolated areas, the workers are mainly dependent on plantations as there are hardly any other ready employment avenues. They are illiterate and are migrants from Orissa to Assam, with no knowledge or information about their rights. The fact that the plantation areas do not come under the purview of rural development and other anti-poverty programmes of the government has also prevented their conditions from improving. The tea-garden-labourer child (henceforth TGLC) who evolves out of a generation of tribal culture is mostly the first-generation learner. The social and economic conditions that make up his home environment marks him off as culturally disadvantaged.

### **Objectives of the study**

The study aims at an empirical investigation making use of field research to decipher the factors affecting

language learning in the TGLC and its implications for performance in the examinations in general and English language learning in particular. The TGLC is viewed as a disadvantaged child. The attempt of the study is to analyse the importance of the English language as a tool for social mobility of the TGLC. The present study has been undertaken with the following objectives in mind:

- 1) To identify the factors impeding language learning and the role of attitudes and motivation in the learning of the English language by the TGLC.
- 2) To identify the problems inherent in the setup in which the TGLC gets educated in general and learns to use the English language in particular.
- 3) To attempt an empirical study and arrive at the root causes that lead to the lack of motivation towards the learning of the English language.
- 4) Finally, to study the role of the English language education in social and economical upliftment of the children of tea garden labour community.

### Research tools and methods

The problems quoted above can be formulated into a set of questions to which answers are sought in order to design the instruments to carry out the field work.

- 1) What are the major problems faced by the TGLC in getting educated in a school setting?
- 2) What are the problems faced by the TGLC in the learning of the English language in particular?
- 3) Has the existing setup of the teaching of the English language been able to create job opportunities for a better and economically sound future of the TGLC?
- 4) Has the English language served as an added advantage in bringing about a social upliftment of the TGL community?

The fieldwork included two steps – a Preliminary Study and the Main Study, as it was necessary to get to know the teaching- learning conditions of the

TGLC as well as the home background that they came from before the issues to be highlighted in designing the research tools could be decided on. This was necessary to maintain the authenticity of the data collected as the present study aims to identify the factors that affect language learning.

The fieldwork spread over a period of one year with frequent visits to the school, active interactions with the TGLC, the teachers who taught them, as well as, with the TGL. After the informal meetings, the students and the teachers were ready to answer the Questionnaires and video record the interviews. The research tools used were:

- Student questionnaire
- Teacher questionnaire
- Proficiency test in English
- Videotaped interviews of teachers, parents, students and management staffs.

### Discussion of the findings

An analysis of the student questionnaire leads us to some major observations on the TGLC. The TGLC is well aware of the place of importance that English holds in one's professional life today. He has a positive attitude towards the English language but he is very clear in his mind of the fact that English is necessary only if one wants to move out of the TGL community. Within his own community, learning of English is of no immediate use. English for them can be seen to be synonymous with intelligence and they associate the English language and an ability to speak fluently in English with upward social mobility. They also have a positive attitude towards themselves. But given the home atmosphere they come from and the illiteracy of their parents, they are not properly motivated to take up seriously the learning of the English language. Besides, in their own opinion, they do not get much English language as input. They do not feel that their English teacher makes a study of the English language easier for them.

One fact that has emerged from the study is that we can conclude that the TGLC can be termed as the economically disadvantaged child. He meets all the

conditions that typify him as the disadvantaged child- from an economically poor home, the first generation of 'active' learners in the TGL community. With the workforce of more than one million, the Plantation industry in India is considered as the one of the largest employers. Yet, unlike other industries, the labourers in the tea industry are an exploited lot – amongst the lowest wage earners. Remotely situated, the tea gardens in Assam do not offer any other employment opportunities apart from the Plantations. Illiterate immigrants, they have no knowledge or awareness of their rights. The fight for the raising of wages and bettering the social and economic conditions is today a long fought unending battle.

Given the circumstances that the TGLC is today placed into and the changing economic scenario both at home and the society around, one prime tool that can come to his rescue is the learning of the English language. Equipped with the English language, he can carve for himself a niche in this fast changing world where there is a potential for different job opportunities apart from what his forefathers had taken up. The situation seems optimistic as today the English language is no longer an alien language for the tea garden workers. Besides, with the spread of education opportunities, there are a number of English schools that have penetrated the remotest part of India and the tea gardens in Assam are no exceptions to the rule. A learning of the English language not only opens up a scope for a better means of livelihood but can also serve as a boost towards growing into a universal, race-less, culture-free identity. Besides, the government of India has taken up initiatives in this respect by placing the TGLC in the category of the backward, minority section in the community and reserving seats in all premier educational institutions and jobs in the country. Interviews with some of the successful candidates who had cleared their Board exams from the tea garden school show that the knowledge of the English language as well as their capacity to use it confidently in public was a major factor that contributed towards their success in getting jobs in various national and multinational companies.

## Conclusion

The present study arrives at the following conclusions that act as determinants in the role of the English language in the academic and professional progress in the TGLC.

1. The parents of the TGLC are illiterate and come from poor economic conditions where the prime need is to earn enough to run the family. The children are hence, encouraged to earn from a very small age rather than motivating them to get proper education. The causes may be a complete ignorance to the usefulness and applicability of school learning.
2. However, the TGLC seems to have the basic positive attitudes towards education in general and the English language in particular and seems to realize in full the potentialities of the language for their economic empowerment.
3. The TGLC is accustomed with living in a closed society where the prevalent feeling is that the English language learning is required only to move out of his community in order to make a separate world of his own away from the society he was born in.
4. As most of the teachers are not from TGL community, they show an indifferent attitude towards the education of the TGLC. Not only do they consider the TGLC as coming from a tribal, backward community, but they are convinced that the TGLC can never learn the English language as he does not have the conditions necessary for doing the same.
5. However, there are a few candidates of the TGL community who have come out successful in acquiring formal school education and also learning the English language. They are found to be well-placed in government and private sector job both nationally and internationally. In every sphere of life, from teaching to

professionals, literary men to politicians, we have representations from the TGL community. All of them have agreed to the importance of English in their social mobility and upliftment.

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