

English as a Language of Liberation: Dominant Monolingual Practices in TSWREI Society as a Medium to Empower Students of Underprivileged Communities

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ABSTRACT

English as a language and medium of instruction have pierced so much into the minds of people that it seems so important to acquire proficiency and command over this language without which one cannot survive. With such a mindset, people go so far even to give up on learning and speaking in their mother tongue and decide to never go to a mother tongue medium school because the implications are unimaginable. In the light of this stake, I critique the dominant monolingual practices and initiatives laid in the English language and medium of instruction in Telangana Social Welfare Residential Educational Institutions Society which inevitably 'empower' the students coming from weaker sections of the community and 'liberate' them from various forms of societal stigmas and oppressions.

Keywords: Language, empower, liberate, Social Welfare, learning, speaking, mother tongue

Educate students in Telugu and save our culture

In Nava Jeevana Vadam, a spiritual programme telecasted on ABN Telugu channel every day, Garikapati Narasimha Rao, a well-known Telugu spiritual leader and Avadhani, makes controversial comments on the decision of the Andhra Pradesh government to introduce English medium education in government schools and how the Telangana government is planning on implementing the same, shortly. He says, "the Telugu states should come up with a new policy that makes sure that the student education takes place only in Telugu at least till they reach their fifth standard and take away the LKG and UKG systems to save our culture and culture of education" (translated from Telugu) (01:25 – 01:40 secs). He also opines that English medium education destroys the culture of the nation because students are forced to pick up this 'alien' language, as the culture and the roots of the language are unrelatable

to young children who are just getting used to their cultural and linguistic locality. While the way Rao has addressed this issue might seem controversial to a lot of people, we cannot disregard the element of truth in his words. English as a language and medium of instruction have pierced so much into the minds of people that it seems so important to acquire proficiency and command over this language without which one cannot survive. With such a mindset, people go so far even to give up on learning and speaking in their mother tongue and decide to never go to a mother tongue medium school because the implications are unimaginable. In the light of this stake, I critique the dominant monolingual practices and initiatives laid in the

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English language and medium of instruction in Telangana Social Welfare Residential Educational Institutions Society (TSWREIS from now on) which inevitably 'empower' the students coming from weaker sections of the community and 'liberate' them from various forms of societal stigmas and oppressions.

Education of Dalits: S. R. Shankaran's objective to save children of weaker communities

When S.R. Shankaran was first posted in Kurnool district as a sub-collector in 1959 and later posted in several parts of former Andhra Pradesh as District Collector, he made it his mission to save children of poor and marginalized communities from vetti, a bonded child labour working for upper caste and class households. During his service as the Principal Secretary of the Social Welfare Department of the government of former Andhra Pradesh, he introduced and legalized welfare plans and sub-plans to be executed in rural tribal localities and Dalitavada, the locality distant from the village where Dalits live. Under such schemes, many developmental activities such as addressing religious conversions, protecting women's rights and saving them from atrocities, and Dalit education had come into being. Such an education scheme, eventually created space for Andhra Pradesh Social Welfare Residential Schools (APSWREIS from now on), which after the formation of Telangana state became TSWREIS (The Hans India, 2015). Shankaran's initiatives for the welfare of backward communities not only saved them from oppressive and malicious practices but also provided them an opportunity to change their lives through education and cultivate a progressive way of looking at life. His ultimate objective was to save them from poverty and oppression and provide them with opportunities for their well-being. Although it is a huge political step taken for their welfare, the execution of the objective did not stand a strong presence in the lives of the beneficiaries because the direct and explicit relation between Shankaran's ideology behind this movement and the beneficiaries, is minimal. It was minimal for two reasons: (a) people who were conscious of the atrocities against them were few and (b) even if they were aware, education did not seem like a way through which the oppression

impinged on them could be addressed. However, this particular consciousness eventually grew among the oppressed and this ideology attracted a massive audience after R.S. Praveen Kumar, IPS was appointed as the Secretary of APSWREIS and later for TSWREIS.

From mere educational provisions to massive movement of empowerment: The golden era of TSWREIS under R.S. Praveen Kumar, IPS

I conducted a telephone interview with Venkat Rao (changed name for anonymity), principal of a TSWREI school. This school came into being in 2018 after the Telangana government decided to open 400+ TSWREI schools and colleges. After looking at the growth of TSWREIS under the vision of Kumar by providing several technical and academic coachings and successfully sending the students from these schools into many prestigious colleges and universities in the country and abroad, the government had taken this decision. Rao has been working in TSWREIS for 38 years and witnessed several political and administrative changes that came into being in that course of time. He talked about how after APSWREIS was established, the social welfare ministry of former Andhra Pradesh never really paid attention to improving the quality of education and resources in the schools. He also said there was no direct communication between the head office of TSWREIS and schools about the student welfare and innovation to improve the conditions. As a result, many schools were administered aimlessly and motivated no student to explore their interests. Thus, students had no support or resource for bringing out their creativity. They were not confident or motivated to pursue their interests beyond the mere educational facilities they were given. They did not see the significant of vocational skill in their lives. After Kumar was appointed as the Secretary for these schools' society, Rao said, everyone including administration staff, teachers, and students were given goals to work on and achieve them with rigorous study and practice. He opined that Kumar's introduction of several important initiatives to develop the skill set of the students from marginalized locations prepared them to spark in the competitive world. He also believes that those skills immensely boosted

the self-confidence of the students from oppressed social backgrounds that the oppressive powers no longer held back their liberated selves.

English as a means to powerful identity: Kumar's philosophy of 'development'

In his interview for Naveena programme for the TV9 news channel, Kumar talks about his experiences as a Dalit and how the caste factor affected his education. He talks about his experiences during his graduation at Acharya Nagarjuna Agricultural University, Hyderabad and how socio-economically privileged students and professors humiliated him and many underprivileged people like him as they had no proficiency in English and could not understand what was going on during classes. He strived to achieve his goals and became a proud IPS officer. One day, during a conversation with his mother, who once was a bonded labour herself, he was questioned about his integrity to his people. Kumar studied in APSWREIS at a point in his life, shifted to Hyderabad to pursue higher education, experienced discrimination, and achieved his dream job despite the hurdles. His mother expressed her dilemma whether to celebrate the success of her son or to mourn for the conditions in which the rest of her community is living. She reminded him of his privileges to break away from the discriminatory structures that most of the people from his community do not have (TV9, 2017). This question of integrity inspired him to do something for his people. He realized that his success alone does not change anything and transforming the lives of many people like him only can contribute positive impact on society. He also understood that only quality education could help people like him overcome social fears and build confidence to go out and explore the world. As a result, he decided to go to Harvard University when he was 45 years old, studied public administration, came back to his homeland, and requested the then chief minister of Andhra Pradesh Kiran Kumar Reddy to appoint him as the secretary of the then APSWREIS because he wanted to serve his people, community, and impact their lives. While elaborating on his visions and initiatives for social welfare schools, he said, "only quality English medium education can bring change in the lives of the oppressed communities and help them overcome the challenges of the caste and class hierarchies" (TV9, 2017).

His vision to provide 'quality English medium education' and introduce several innovative teaching and learning practices are the heart of this paper.

English-centric initiatives for development: Language policies and methods of teaching

Under the ministry of Scheduled Caste Development of government of Telangana, the Telangana Social Welfare Residential Educational Institutions Society is currently running a total of 268 schools and colleges, including 15+ women degree colleges. One of the prime objectives of this establishment is to "provide qualitative education to the children belonging to Scheduled Castes and other weaker sections" (TSWREIS, 2020). Their vision is to "build an outstanding government educational institution which provides high quality holistic and value based education to the marginalized children on par with the other advantaged children in the world" (TSWREIS, 2020). I found this information produced by the TSWREIS in response to the Right To Information (RTI) case filed requesting for basic administrative information on which the Society functions. I have come to learn from principal Rao that the visions of TSWREIS were reformulated during the time of Kumar while objectives mostly stayed the same. The comparison drawn between the children of the advantaged background who usually study in private elite schools and the children of marginalized background who end up studying in government schools is important. Thus, his aim to create such a qualitative educational environment in government schools to keep up with the standards of the private schools becomes evident. This aim clearly reflects in the innovative initiatives he had taken to improve the quality of education and over-all development of the children. Let us now look at some of the innovative practices that he had launched in APSWREIS and TSWREIS during his time of service.

When Kumar was appointed as the secretary for APSWREIS in 2012, he spent the next six months of his service visiting different schools and colleges across the former Andhra Pradesh to get familiar with the conditions of the schools, quality of education, problems with infrastructure, and lack of resources. What stood out the most for Kumar, a bigger problem, Rao says, is the fear to communicate in English and under-confidence to

present themselves effortlessly. So, Kumar decided to break the issues of fear and confidence towards English in the most passionate way possible so that the relation of students to English grows beyond academic purposes. This motivation gave birth to E Plus Club, an English-speaking and writing club (Karunakar, 2019). During this club, students direct their thoughts around a particular topic, think about it, and then write it down. Once that is done, they present their views with the rest of the class. The teacher is the facilitator of this activity who will correct grammatical errors in their writing, help them pronounce the words, encourage them to learn from their mistakes, and ask them improve their writing, speaking, and presentation skills for the next time. Rao was a Post-Graduate English Teacher when this club was initiated and was impressed by the results that it yielded. According to Rao, E Plus Club activity shook away students' fears and built confidence among them. On the other hand, students were inferior to speak in their mother tongue/dialect before everyone because it has strong cultural presence in it. The proficiency improvements in speaking a dominant language such as English gave them the courage to work harder and get better. Kumar also launched Math Plus Club, Physics Plus Club, Quiz Club and many such clubs conducted in an informal classroom environment (TSWREIS, 2020). Students shared their feelings, experiences, and knowledge with the rest of the class and felt good about doing such exercises in a language that is dominant and powerful in their understanding. The Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) model of assessment mandated by the Right to Education Act, India in 2009 further exploded the positive results among the students from TSWREIS because the club activities were immensely helping them in appearing for CCE assessments in more responsive, productive, and capable ways possible. This CCE learning model complemented club activities and mediated through English language making the learning easy, normal, and unique to each student. Another interesting set of initiatives provides resources to students to earn command over subjects and languages and nurture the ability to present their understanding of knowledge of the subjects. S. R. Shankaran Super Lecture Trophy program, for instance, is an outstanding initiative by Kumar

where students with a passion to teach are given an opportunity to teach their peers "in a live interactive telecast on government-run MANA TV" channel after their performance is screened by professionals in the concerned subjects (Karunakar, 2019). This program aims to enable both learning and earning for the talented students: "earn while you learn" where students are presented with a decent amount of honorarium for their excellent performances. The best performers earn S.R. Shankaran Trophy with cash prizes in the range of ₹ 10,000 – 25,000. This initiative again is linked to the Green Gurus program where "students who showed excellent performance in Super-Students Lecture Series [are] selected as Green Gurus ... [who are] sent to various schools facing the shortage of teaching staff" (Karunakar, 2019). These students also earn ₹ 3,500 per month for their efforts and services in teaching their fellow students. There are many such wonderful initiatives such as making students part of online interactive sessions with the higher officials of TSWREIS where they can present their innovative ideas or express their concerns and problems and address them. Best teachers and students facilitate online teaching and learning processes. And, during summer vacation they have a variety of summer camps that train students in different skills, learning by practice, and coaching. Some of such examples are Young Journalist Camp, Competitive Exams Coaching Camp, NDA & NA Coaching Camp, Craft and Jewellery Making Camp, Brighter Minds Camp, Robotics Camps, Horse Riding Camp, Trekking Camp, Boating Camp, Sailing Camp, Leadership Camp, Voice for Girls Camp etc. (Karunakar, 2019). It is important to establish the fact that the medium of instruction and learning during these camps is English. All the sessions, games, and other extra-curricular activities take place in English. Such extensive use of the English language in academic, non-academic, personal, professional, entertaining, and many such contexts lead to a particular kind of normalization of English usage to them in their daily life and breaks the notions of English being the language that is used in only particular professional and academic contexts. Such conscious decisions around English language use make the speaking capabilities of students efficient and easy to use that language in all the contexts possible. It is my ethical duty to implant the fact that Telugu and Hindi, the

first and second languages for these students, are also part of some of these initiatives. For instance, under the IGNITE program, students engage in competitions such as elocution, debate, essay writing, and quiz. There are competitions for Telugu elocution, Telugu debate, and Telugu essay writing as well. I did not come across any data that present Hindi as part of these competitions, even from my interviews. Thus, the importance given to acquiring the English language in multidimensional ways is prominently visible and other languages seem to have been placed as part of the extra-curricular activities with less or no motivation to encourage students to participate in them.

In a way, the administration, which runs with a particular ideological framework rooted in achieving particular aims, established a hierarchy between these languages and their use. In this context, it is the ideological framework of Kumar and his objectives intended to empower the larger backward community and equip them with skills and confidence to face the requirements of the world. While I acknowledge his point of reference and understand his objectives, I disagree with these dominant monolingual practices of education that detach students from their language and culture which are detrimental in the long run. To show this, I will base the latter sections of this paper on my findings from the telephone interviews conducted with Principal Rao of TSWREI School, and Sai Priya. V, a Fellow at Teach for India Foundation and an Alumni of APSWREIS school and TSWREIS college. I will further extend my arguments in relation to my understanding of the importance of bilingual education and how monolingual educational practices at TSWREIS are leading to problematic political associations in students' minds.

Politics of mother tongue and 'master' tongue: Impacts on the bilingual competency of students

The ministry of education of the government of Andhra Pradesh had taken an important decision in 2003 when it found out through the report submitted by the Commissioner and Director of School Education (C&DSE) of Andhra Pradesh that Telugu is not imparted as one of the three languages for study in adherence to the three-language formula policy of Indian education system by some private schools. The ministry of education thereby made it

compulsory for all the schools in Andhra Pradesh to follow the three-language formula in the form of a Government Order (G. O.) which conferred to suspend or cancel the license of such schools if are found to neglect this order (AP Gazette, 2003). The government had come down to take such a strict decision if found that the law is not obeyed because the law was placed in execution for a reason. The reason is to make sure that the student is proficient in his mother tongue, the language of the larger population of the country, Hindi, and the language of choice, offered by different boards of education in various forms in different states of the country. I think this order not only emphasizes a mere law that was executed across educational boards but also draws our attention to the importance of acquiring the mother tongue with which we also acquire our culture, ethics, and being in our location. So, the objective of the three-language formula was not to merely produce a multilingual generation but also to take forward our cultures, identities, and associations we have with our culture.

However, in the context of TSWREIS, the student's relationship with their mother tongue is complicated. The majority of the students in TSWREIS are Dalits who speak a particular dialect of Telugu. The culture of people in Telangana, at least, not only varies from one geographical location to the other but is also based on their caste, religion, class, the community, communal experiences, and literacy. Most of the students studying at TSWREIS are first-generation literates who have no access to powerful cultural capital, resources to study, and financial support from their families for an expensive education. Language plays such a crucial role in their lives that even if they have good merit and ranks and qualify for good jobs, they are identified to be of a certain caste, class, and religion based on their jargon, dialectical variations, and cultural references. So, it is the inevitable relation between their caste, language, and culture that determines if they would be respected in society or not. For the same reason, these children face discrimination on daily basis because of their lack of understanding of profound spiritual lessons rendered in old Telugu texts, discussed and articulated in a particular language that these marginalized groups do not have access to. So, they become so conscious of their cultural and literary location that they associate

discrimination, impurity, and slavery with their language and culture. Simply, these children are not proud of their language and culture. For children coming from such a structure of feeling, a general feeling common among many, access to English education seems to empower and liberate them from their location. Speaking, reading, and writing in English is the most proficient way possible, for them, seems to enable a particular kind of power that has no caste, cultural, or religious connotations. So, what Kumar did by introducing and opening avenues for these children to learn mediated by English is something that they could never think of. It is not like APSWREIS was not an English medium establishment before. But, Kumar's conscious and explicit philosophical conversations with these students about the importance of English and how it can change their lives and lifestyle deeply impacted and impressed their hearts. As a result, there was this exuberant energy among students to learn this language by actively participating in every initiative and competition coming their way. They made the best use of those opportunities and resources to achieve something that they as a community failed to do for a lot of reasons. It is in this context that English education and proficiency in English stand to be a crucial component for students that it seems like a way to liberate themselves from oppressive practices imposed on them for ages. Unfortunately, the same English education further pushes them away from their dialects because of the associations made with the language and culture.

To further complicate the relationship of these children with the world of languages and job opportunities, the multinational corporations (MNCs) and related businesses have a set of requirements for employing people. And, aspirants from underprivileged backgrounds do not have the resources to meet those requirements. Because they are highly paid jobs placed in different parts of the world, it is the life dream for many people to get a job in MNCs such as Apple, Microsoft, Google, Amazon etc. One of the main objectives of these MNCs is to reach more people and sell their goods and services to customers. So, it is important for an employee working in an MNC to have a command over international languages and to be able to effortlessly communicate with the customers and assure the best quality services. Because, the

objective of the MNCs is to make money, they design the terms and conditions of their companies in such a way that the customer gets attracted to use their services. And for such MNCs working in branches in different parts of the world with employees from different parts of the world and linguistic locations, a common language of communication is important. By default, that language happens to be English in many cases. According to Kumar's ideology, English is the language of liberation and empowerment for students of marginalized communities because it opens avenues such as MNCs for those students and changes their socio-cultural and financial conditions. This he describes is the power of English that has the potential to change marginalized lives tremendously. When such a direction is constantly fed into the minds of students through different academic and coaching camps and speeches, they tend to think of English as the only way to change their lives. So, the message is, this is how the students of marginalized communities can have access upward mobility, one of the important aspirations of humankind. This English model of empowerment is the most practical and rational choice taken by not just the students from marginalized communities but outside those communities as well. The education models seem to have changed to meet the requirements of the corporate companies not just in India but across the world. But what are the implications of such models of learning? What is happening at the ground level in TSWREIS.

A critical view of the monolingual initiatives of Kumar: Reflection

Sai Priya had studied in APSWREI School GV Gudem in Nalgonda. She explained the situation of her school education before Kumar had become the secretary. She said that there was no motivation for her and for her friends to study and aspire to achieve success. That was the condition also because the teachers and the administration were not motivated enough to encourage students to be creative and allowed space to explore their interests. So, her schooling was purely mediated by books and exams and nothing else. She talked about how her teaching staff and the administration were irritated by the initiatives Kumar had brought during his initial days. Teachers felt that the extra-curricular

activities were a burden on their defined duties as a teacher and protested against the initiatives. Eventually, several meetings and workshops both for teachers and the administration department motivated them to introduce innovative teaching and learning techniques to students and attempt to continuously work on them. She said, "I never thought our classes would turn into interesting spaces for debates and conversations where the binary between the teachers and the students was minimal and the hierarchy of teacher-student relationship is limited to a great extent" (Priya, 2022). The effort of teachers and administration to change the mode of teaching and learning and encourage students to explore their interests was something that was stuck in her memory. However, the story did not stay positive and fruitful entirely. She opined that the direction of the motivation for students and what they needed to do was defined by power structures. The space to explore was constructed by innovations such as E Plus Club, Youth Parliament, and IGNITE competitions and something always seemed to have missed out of the context. She realized that when one of her friends from a different school within the Society, who was interested in teaching and learning Telugu and rendering Telugu poems was disqualified from the district-level screening test for the S. R. Shankaran Student Lecture Trophy program. She vividly remembered the comments made by the judges who demotivated the student to not choose Telugu as her topic of choice for such a prestigious program and disrespect the aims of Kumar. The judges also pointed out that there is nothing in Telugu subject that she had to teach because it is the mother tongue and if students just read the lessons, they will understand the story. The same student was disqualified for the next two years because he wanted to teach only Telugu and was not given a choice. She also noticed a significant change in their timetable and the timings allotted for different subjects. She noticed, especially during her class eleventh and twelfth, that only one period was allotted for a Telugu class in which the lecturer was expected to finish two or more lessons. She talked about how they always used to wait for their Telugu classes before because they get to share their stories, sing poems, and write essays on their topic of choice. After Kumar became the secretary, more periods were allotted to subjects

such as Math, Physics, Chemistry, and English and not to Telugu. "I remember, one day," she says, "the math lecturer entered our classroom when Telugu class was going on and asked the lecturer to give his period to him so that students at least would learn something new and important and not just listen to his Telugu stories" (Priya, 2022). If this is the way the lecturers addressed each other and created a hierarchy between subjects and especially constructed an unethical relation between technical subjects mediated through English and Telugu, the students also tend to perceive, associate, and practice such hierarchies for the rest of their lives without consciously thinking about why they look down upon Telugu and aspire to learn technical subjects and English only. "This immensely affected our associations with subjects, and we were forced to change our focus that was equally distributed across subjects to direct our focus on English and technical courses," she said (Priya, 2022).

The attention given to English was layered in many intricate ways: a) English is the dominant and powerful language of communication that asserts one's power and social status and transcends social standards, b) all the technical courses are designed in the English language and are taught in English, c) English is the requirement to gain employment opportunities, d) Telugu language alone is not going to provide students with good carrier opportunities, e) the Telugu students from marginalized communities speak is further seen down because of cultural implications, and f) the dialect of Telugu these students speak creates an inferior, insecure, and powerless feeling among the students. These are the reasons why English had received the stature it had received in the implementation of innovative teaching and learning techniques at TSWREIS.

Sai Priya is currently working as a fellow and Teacher Associate at Teach for India Foundation and placed in a low-income private school with English as the medium of instruction in Hyderabad, a category of school establishments that run on fewer resources and need financial help to accommodate more resources to provide quality education. She deals with primary grade students and observed that they are more proficient and comfortable writing and speaking in English than in Telugu. Her students look down on Telugu and do not like to spend

more time reading or writing Telugu and instead want to listen to English songs and watch English movies for study and discussions. This is what English had done to many schools, she said (Priya, 2022). She wonders how the educational system is going to affect their life in the future because their parents encourage them to speak in English even at home and feel proud and happy seeing their children speaking in English and watching English channels. In a way, the mother tongue extinctions have begun for this generation, and shortly, it would be no wonder to see many mother tongues die because there are no speakers of that language. So, how do we ensure that bilingual or multilingual education becomes the model of teaching and learning? While we cannot disregard the fact that languages such as English are important for national and international communications and good higher education and employment opportunities further, we cannot get away with mother languages. It is time for a revolution to start to promote bilingual or multilingual education because such changes need to feature in educational policy documents. The death of a language is the death of a culture and the rich history and ethical and cultural roots associated with that culture. It is time we do something about it.

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