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ENGLISH AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper aims to show the connection between languages, specifically English, with women empowerment. In the complex, modern world of ours, English is vital. English has now become the way to a better standard of living, better access to opportunities, and so on. In such a scenario, the Indian woman is taking to upgrading their skills by not just attending schools to learn, but to learn everything that would contribute towards their skill. In these times, it is unfathomable and highly unjust that women be subjected to lack of access to education. A number of steps have been taken to educate women to empower them. This paper mentions some such efforts while also throwing light on the high drop-out rates thus suggesting that lot more still needs to be done to make the system a lot more just and inclusive.

Keywords: English, Education, Empowerment, Women, Literacy Rate, Inclusive Growth.

English and Female Learners in India

English and empowerment both are buzzwords – words with a remarkable frequent usage to get across thoughts, ideas, and plans, and to sell products as well. There is a growing demand for English in India, and English is no longer the “library language” it once used to be. Everybody wants to talk in English, and the demand for English-medium schools is at an all time high. And while the demand for English is growing, the quality of learning the language does not point at similar graph figures. The EF EPI Report 2018 shows that the proficiency trend for Indian has been on a decline. India started at the global rank 30 (which falls under the band “low proficiency”), ranked at number 14 (“moderate” band) in 2012, coming down to number 28 in the latest 2018 Report.

However, the Report does mention that the female India population leans more towards learning English than the male population, 59.03 per cent females are more interested in English than 56.23 per cent males. Both the figures are higher than the average global and Asian numbers. As such, it is crucial to empower women and girls in achieving gender equality. Core skills for all should be the agenda, and by way of education life

English and Empowerment

English leads to betterment of lives and this has been observed in the English-learning, English-speaking phenomenon. But how does English help women? How does a foreign language help women to empower themselves, to be independent, and to live better and more fulfilled lives? Our main question of concern in this paper being: do English and female empowerment go together?

The Ministry of Women and Child Development, GOI says: The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. The Constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women.

Empowerment begins as soon we realize and understand the language is a tool of symbolic power. Bourdieu (1982) in his seminal work *Language and Symbolic Power* says, "The field as a whole is defined as a system of deviations on different levels and nothing, either in the institutions or in the agents, the acts or discourses they produce, has meaning except relationally, by virtue of the interplay of oppositions and distinctions." So far, English has largely been studied to improve one's economic and social status. English is preferred for the tangible economic reasons that one is more employable and attains a better standard of living. The social reasons can be a little more complex. English is seen as an "elite language" therefore speaking in English elevates one's position and power in the society. In a similar context, English, the global language, bridges the gap between the world and the women in India.

Access to education has been gender-biased for centuries now. We now observe the girl child attending schools and colleges. Even then, there is a huge disparity in the education of males and females. While, urban India has grown to accept and access education for females, a lot of work still needs to be learn in the rural parts of the country. That being said, lower income urban class females still lack access to standard education and schools. The Indian demographic consists of 58,64,69,174 females with the sex ratio of 940 females per 1000 males (Census, 2011). Female literacy, according to 2011 census, is 64.46 % while the male literacy rate is 82.14%. The states which have the largest number of literate women in India are Kerala (92%), Mizoram (89.4%), Lakshadweep (88.2%), Tripura (83.1%) and Goa (82%). At the same time, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal have the largest number of women entrepreneurs in the nation (Census 2011).

To address this disparity, the governments have continually rolled out several initiatives. Some of the important ones are:

1. *Beti bachao, beti padhao* was started in 2015. This plan addresses the issue of the declining Child Sex Ratio (number of females per thousand males aged 0 - 6) across the country. It is a joint initiative by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, and the Ministry of Human Resources. Some of the focus areas of this strategy are to stop female foeticide, increase the number of girls attending schools, decrease school dropouts, implementing rules regarding the right to education and increase the construction of toilets for girls. It should be noted that the school dropout rate in India for females is 63.5 %. Most of the female students dropout during the adolescent years.

In the same context, ASER 2018 mentions:

With 70% of rural children still attending government schools, and the government's continued commitment to the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE), the distribution of learning outcomes in government schools becomes extremely important. The RTE was envisaged as a tool to guarantee access to education to all children in the country, thereby levelling the playing field and removing disadvantages associated with poverty, caste and gender. To a large extent it has been successful in achieving that goal. Even though enrollment in the 6-14 year age group was already over 96% in 2010 when the RTE came into effect, there were still large numbers of children out of school in the 11-14 year age group, especially among girls. In 2010, close to 6% girls in this age group were out of school and 9 major states had numbers in excess of 5%. Today the overall number has decreased to 4%, and there are only 4 states where it is more

than 5%. Therefore, the RTE, as an overarching legislation, has also reduced the inequalities in access between states.

2. There has been substantial progress has been made in the northwestern part of India, especially in Rajasthan. Renewed efforts have been made to boost the number of girls attending school and a summer coding camp aims to introduce computers to girls. Some of the volunteers seeking to change the situation are: Michael Daube, an American artist and founder of a New York-based nonprofit, raising money for an all girls' school; Manhattan Architect Diana Kellogg is building an exhibition hall where female artists can showcase and sell their creations.
3. Since the launch of literary campaigns and consistent efforts by the governments, there has been a rise in the female literacy rate. With a focus on improving every aspect of education, thus giving way to quality education, the Indian Government lays emphasis on the fact that economic growth can be achieved by an increased role of women. This takes many forms: increased female labour force participation, reduced discrimination and wage differentials that encourage greater effort, and improved advancement practices that promote talented women into leadership and managerial roles. Indeed, empowering half of the potential workforce will have significant economic benefits that goes beyond promoting just gender equality. For all of this to be possible, the female population will have to have a better and open access to quality education. This includes all aspects of educations – the sciences, the humanities, and the languages.

Such literacy campaigns have heightened the awareness of women towards education. In addition to acquiring knowledge, the women want to communicate more and effectively. Interaction with

other people has broken their shackles and they are paying attention to their communication skills. The National Literacy Mission mentions that, "Total literacy campaigns have provided illiterate adult women, who have been denied access to formal schooling, with a great opportunity for reading, writing, increasing awareness levels and skills training. Literacy campaigns have thus actively promoted gender equity and have sought to empower them as to decision making about themselves, their families and their communities. The impact of literacy on women's life has often been dramatic." All in all, there has been recorded, a heightened social awareness about education, especially regarding reading, writing, and speaking.

Conclusion

Women are one half of the society. They have long been subjected to oppressive forces, kept bound in the shackles of the social stigmas and taboos. Now, women are reclaiming their position in the society. Linguistic evolution is cultural evolution (Chater and Christiansen 2010). This powerful change will greatly contribute to the dilution of gender inequality. English acts as the great equalizer. India today can boast of a large number of speakers, and women taking the lead adds to the various dimensions (social, economic, political) of growth.

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