AP: English to be the medium of instruction in state-run schools

What is the issue?

- The Andhra Pradesh (AP) government is set to make all government elementary schools 'English-medium'.
- The plan is to change it from the academic year 2020-2021.

Why is there a push for English as the medium?

- The push for English as the medium of instruction in government schools in Andhra Pradesh, as in other States including Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, is due to two related factors.
    1. There is a belief that English-medium schooling can guarantee good jobs.
    2. The economically constrained families are shifting their children from free government schools to private English-medium schools.
- It is to try and reverse this trend that many State governments have made at least some of their schools English-medium or started English-medium sections.

Why this may not a good move?

- **Research** - Children who get educated in their mother tongue learn better than those who start school in a new language.
- A new language in the early school years, especially one that is not used outside school, can become a barrier to learning.
- **Common sense** - If a child speaks or understands the classroom language, engaging with new concepts, ideas and information is easier, as is learning to read and write. This is plain common sense.
- Even researchers who advocate privatisation of schools as a quality improvement measure accept that English-medium schools are not the solution.
- **A study** of learning outcomes in government and private elementary schools in AP has found that children perform best in Telugu-medium schools.

What does ignoring the evidence mean for different people?

- **Governments**, while making policy changes favouring English-medium schools, have ignored the evidence.
- For **politicians**, it is a win-win situation - they are able to give a mass of voters what they appear to want, at no significant additional cost.
- For the **influential middle class**, it is comforting to believe that poor children are getting a leg-up through English-medium government schools.
- Even some **Dalit intellectuals** hold that it is English-medium schools that will emancipate them, and that those who disagree are hell-bent on retaining the status quo.

What do such English-medium schools need?

- At the very minimum, such schools will need **teachers** who, apart from being knowledgeable in the subjects they teach, are also **fluent in the medium of instruction**.
- The vast majority of them have had their entire education in their mother tongue or the State language, and have spent their working lives teaching in that language.
- With rare exceptions, any English they have is bookish.
- **Retraining** them, through short-term language courses, wouldn't transform them into teachers for English-medium schools.
- On the contrary, it will handicap them, making the best of them resentful, and the disinterested even more so.

What are the other problems?

- **Skewed in-egalitarian system** - The problem lies not in the medium of instruction, but in an in-egalitarian education system that is completely skewed in favour of the inter-generationally privileged.
- **System Design** - The annual school calendar, the syllabus, textbooks, teacher engagement and the high-stakes board exams.
- This is a system whose design ignores the vastly different socioeconomic realities of a majority of children.
- The focus on English medium pulls a veil over these knottier problems.
- Politicians and the middle class have for too long promoted the canard that if you give everyone the same thing, it makes everything equitable.
- Making Telugu-educated school teachers instruct children, with no English, in English will not transform A.P. government schools into any high kind of the institution.
- On the contrary, such schools will be a parody of the elite schools, like the 'affordable' private English-medium schools that children most often move to from government schools.
- In these schools, teachers, with barely any or no English, read from English

textbooks and use the mother tongue or State language to communicate; students have to cram the English textbooks or prepared answers for their tests.

- The result is that they develop a hold over neither their mother tongue/State language nor English.
- This is what the government English-medium schools will offer, with the only difference that they will be free.
- This sort of 'English-medium education', far from making education more equitable and closing the social gap, will accentuate inequity.
- A government really concerned about education and making English accessible to poor children in government schools should focus on the children's natural receptiveness to new languages by teaching English as a language.
- Investing in modern language-teaching education (not short-term training) for English-language school teachers is essential.
- Anything else is just eyewash that people will soon be wise to.

Source: The Hindu

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