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CULTURAL CAPITAL AND LINGUISTIC HEGEMONY: REVISITING CASTE THROUGH LANGUAGE EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Recurrent debates regarding the status of English and the vernaculars in India extend far beyond a simple native–foreign language dichotomy. These discussions, framed within postcolonial discourse, often position adherence to foreign language as antithetical to nationalist sentiment, while advocacy for native languages becomes aligned with nationalism. Yet, implicitly at play is the pursuit of power and political dominance by those championing native languages. Language, being intrinsic to human consciousness, significantly shapes our understanding of and ability to transform the world. This paper critically explores how language shapes people's lives in India, legitimizes hierarchical structures, and normalizes hegemony. It highlights the material implications of language education and the resulting social outcomes. The connection between language education and caste identity—particularly noticed by some marginalized caste groups—offers a fresh perspective.

Keywords: Postcolonial Framework, Native Language, Caste, Hegemony

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1. INTRODUCTION

The caste system is often condemned as a social evil rooted in religious and social stratification. Yet, postcolonial narratives that champion indigenous revival frequently turn a blind eye to the exploitation of lower castes that existed pre colonially and persists today. Educated members of lower castes became increasingly aware of their oppression under traditional rule, recognizing education as a means of empowerment. They protested for broader access to education, which eventually gained constitutional recognition and legal reinforcement. However, even after caste-based discrimination became unlawful, the growing divide between caste and class persisted, especially through diverging educational mediums. Language is imbued with ideology, making theories about language inherently political (Holborrow 3). Political theories of language education rooted in Said's Orientalist critique advocated for nationalism via native-language instruction in state schools. Policies in ostensibly educational institutions, in practice, served as tools of power. Debates around language education often revolved around an insider–outsider dichotomy, emphasizing native language preservation over broader educational goals.

2. LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN VERNACULARS:

When debating university-level vernacular language education, discussions often focus narrowly on textbook content, assessment formats, and aptitude analysis, masking deeper institutional agendas. The paper argues that changes (or resistance to changes) in vernacular language education are fundamentally political. Insisting on vernacular instruction is perceived as an effort by the dominant class to reassert cultural hegemony and solidify social dominance. What appears academic is, in reality, ideological conflict (Holborrow 24). As Voloshinov (9) explains, language and society are intertwined—language signifies more than literal meaning, reinforcing social relations embedded in vernacular usage. According to Cummins (2000), language in education is an "intervening variable" impacting knowledge construction, participation, and self expression. Non-linguistic political, social, and economic factors shape language education to serve vested interests, transmitting values and attitudes that reinforce inequality in economic assets and class structure. Curriculum in vernaculars often perpetuates caste-class hierarchies. As Said (127) notes, storytelling by marginalized groups highlights their agency and challenges dominant knowledge forms. Yet elite bias in both primary and higher education preserves existing caste structures; state educational and language policies complement these inequalities.

Economic capital (Bourdieu 241) has perpetuated caste inequality since long before colonialism. Under colonial land ownership patterns, lower castes remained economically disenfranchised (Kalaiyarasan 2022). Agrarian studies continue to adopt a Eurocentric Marxist lens that treats caste as cultural tradition, ignoring its intersections with class and land ownership (Jodhkar 18). Post-Independence land reforms failed to significantly alter lower castes' status. In modern India, capitalism has largely benefited elites, leaving lower castes outside economic capital. As society transitioned from agrarian to modern economy, access to economic capital remained constrained by socio-cultural institutions, including educational systems. Although constitutional rights enabled broader access to education, diverging instruction mediums reinforced caste-class divides: vernacular education remained spatially distant from modern scientific thought and global discourse, reinforcing social hierarchies through traditional content.

Electoral politics in post-independence India has been fundamentally shaped by caste dynamics. Caste identities remain pivotal in political mobilization, with parties frequently tailoring their agendas to cater to particular caste groups. These political strategies are aimed at securing votes in exchange for public benefits and access to state resources. This caste-targeted resource allocation is institutionalized through affirmative action policies, which reserve seats in higher education, government jobs, and legislative representation for members of historically disadvantaged communities, such as Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs).

Despite the intention to dismantle historical exclusion, these reservations have also reinforced caste as a decisive factor in public life. Within caste groups, strong networks of internal cooperation have formed, supporting localized economic systems that operate independently of broader social hierarchies. These networks often enable resource sharing and collective economic mobility within the caste but remain largely exclusionary to outsiders.

Cultural practices such as endogamy—marriage within the same caste—and limitations on inter-caste social interaction contribute to a rigid social structure and spatial segregation. The Rural Economic Development Survey (REDS, 2006) and the India Human Development Survey (IHDS, 2005) found that over 95% of Indians marry within their caste or kinship group, thereby reinforcing caste-based networks and localized solidarities (Munshi 4). These networks not only preserve social boundaries but also serve as systems of economic assistance, as REDS data indicate that individuals most often receive financial support from members of their own caste during times of crisis.

In a rapidly changing economy, business success demands access to capital, knowledge, and networks. However, caste hierarchies remain significant impediments to entrepreneurial mobility for lower-caste individuals. As Max Weber argues, the caste system functions as a barrier to labor mobility and entrepreneurial endeavors (Weber 1958). Gadgil similarly observed that modern India's business class has largely developed from specific caste groups that had pre-existing access to resources and familial business traditions: "The history of the rise and growth of a modern business class in India is largely the history of the activities of members of certain groups" (Gadgil 16).

The urban–rural divide compounds these inequalities. Lower-caste individuals from rural areas, typically educated in vernacular languages through state-run schools, often lack the linguistic and cultural capital necessary to navigate higher education or urban employment markets. This form of education, rather than empowering them, tends to instill

a sense of diffidence and dependency. Consequently, many continue to rely on state affirmative action policies for government employment rather than achieving economic self-sufficiency.

Furthermore, traditional vernacular education often fails to interrogate the mechanisms through which upper-caste elites benefit from structural advantages. As a result, the lower castes are not equipped with the critical tools necessary to recognize or resist the systemic reproduction of upper-caste privilege. Traditionalist knowledge systems, deeply embedded in the vernacular curriculum, obscure the realities of economic capitalism and its alignment with elite interests, thus curbing the lower castes' potential for transformative resistance.

Pierre Bourdieu's influential work The Forms of Capital (1986) introduces a comprehensive framework that interrelates various forms of capital—economic, social, cultural, and symbolic. Economic capital refers to material wealth and financial resources, while social capital involves networks of influence and mutual support. Cultural capital, crucially relevant to education, manifests in three distinct forms: the embodied state (deep-seated attitudes, behaviors, and dispositions), the objectified state (physical cultural goods like books or instruments), and the institutionalized state (academic qualifications and credentials) (Bourdieu 241–245; Bennett 29). Symbolic capital, meanwhile, refers to prestige and recognition, often accumulated through the successful conversion of other forms of capital.

This theoretical model is particularly useful for understanding the dynamics of language education and its intersection with caste hierarchies in India. The current emphasis on vernacular language instruction—especially in public schools attended predominantly by lower-caste students—subtly reinforces structural inequalities by limiting access to the type of cultural capital that can be exchanged for economic advancement. In Karnataka, for instance, efforts to institutionalize Kannada as the medium of instruction in government-run schools and administrative functions are often presented as a form of reclaiming national or regional capital. However, this national capital lacks tangible exchange value in globalized or high-capital economic sectors and, in practice, tends to exclude lower-caste students from meaningful socio-economic mobility.

Lower-caste students enrolled in K–12 government schools frequently internalize a form of cultural capital that is embedded in vernacular traditions. This education, while fostering cultural identity, often lacks emphasis on scientific reasoning, critical thinking, or global competitiveness. As a result, students are less equipped to question or analyze their societal position, effectively reproducing their marginal status within the caste hierarchy. Conversely, elite students, especially those attending English-medium private schools, inherit and cultivate cultural capital that aligns with institutional norms of success. Through this capital, they are better prepared for academic excellence, professional careers, and socio-economic mobility.

As Bennett and colleagues observe, "Those parents equipped with cultural capital are able to drill their children in the cultural forms… predispose them to perform well in the educational system" (Bennett et al. 31). This intergenerational transmission of capital ensures that children from dominant caste groups are not only academically successful but also able to transform their cultural capital into institutional credentials, thereby securing access to further economic and symbolic capital. Thus, Bourdieu's framework reveals the hidden but powerful mechanisms through which language policy and educational structures perpetuate caste-based disparities in access to opportunity.

3. CONCLUSION

India's language policy appears increasingly misaligned with the foundational purpose of education: to nurture critical, autonomous, and well-informed individuals capable of participating meaningfully in democratic society. Rather than serving this transformative function, the current policy framework often reinforces hegemonic cultural narratives, cloaked in the rhetoric of tradition and heritage preservation. This is particularly evident in the prioritization of vernacular languages as the medium of instruction in public education, especially at the primary and secondary levels. While preserving linguistic diversity is indeed valuable, the emphasis on vernacular instruction, in its current form, has inadvertently contributed to the marginalization of lower-caste students by restricting their access to cultural capital that holds currency in national and global markets.

For students from historically disadvantaged communities, English-language proficiency functions as a vital form of cultural capital. It offers access to higher education, competitive job markets, and transnational opportunities that vernacular languages often do not. However, by reserving English as the primary medium in higher education while relegating vernaculars to early education, the state inadvertently cements the socio-economic divide. Lower-caste students, educated primarily in vernacular institutions, find themselves at a disadvantage when transitioning to English-

dominant higher education or employment sectors. This language divide reinforces the rural–urban and class-based dichotomies, mapping directly onto existing caste hierarchies.

The disparities in language instruction thus reflect—and perpetuate—deeper inequities in both social and cultural capital. Access to English-medium education is not simply a matter of language choice; it becomes a gatekeeper to upward mobility. Those denied this access remain confined within traditional social roles and occupations, reinforcing the cycle of subordination. Conversely, those equipped with English-language proficiency are better positioned to convert their cultural capital into economic gains and symbolic prestige, as Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital suggests. Therefore, the language used in education should not merely reflect cultural heritage but should empower learners, particularly those from marginalized communities, by equipping them with skills that facilitate participation in a modern, globalized economy. Language policy, then, must be reimagined not just as a tool of cultural preservation but as a strategic instrument for social justice and economic inclusion.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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