

In the Era of 'English-Vinglish': Dreams and Aspirations of First Generation Learners of English

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Abstract: *This paper presents the case profiles of two aspirational young adults, who are first generation learners of English. Their dreams and hopes of wielding respect in society and getting white collar jobs, which they perceive as being well paid and more prestigious in society are tied up with they call being 'English speaking'. To be English speaking to them means proficiency in the ability to read, write and speak English, which they also perceive as the mark of social success in contemporary urban Indian society. In their own jargon they call it the era of 'English-Vinglish.' Being third language learners of English, they harbour feelings of inferiority at not being able to come up to the standard of first language speakers of English. Their trials and tribulations in becoming part of the English- Vinglish culture are discussed in detail in the paper.*

Background and Context of the Study

This study is about two male young adults whose dreams and aspirations for success in life and the utopian future that they visualize for themselves, are centred in the singular belief that competence and dexterity in the English Language, particularly in being able to speak the language competently is the means to achieve them. They consider knowledge and proficiency in the use of English Language as a window to a new identity and as the ladder to upward social and occupational mobility. "Identity" can be described as the distinguishing character or personality of an individual. "Self" is a concept often used in a more abstract and global context, whereas "identity" is linked to specific aspects of self-definition (Deaux, 1992). Interaction with the world and sense of self give rise to an individual's identity.

The zest for upward occupational and social mobility can be related to their socio-demographic background which they wish to transcend and change. Their life stories begin in the humble origins of a childhood spent in a backward village, where till date there is no electricity, potable water that is readily available, no pucca houses or roads

and non- existence of public services for health-care, banking or postal exchange. The village has a population of about 10,000 persons who live in different hamlets. The dominant population group is that of Muslims whose socio-political position is also very strong by sheer largeness of their number and the fact, that they hold the position of office bearers in the Village Panchayat and other local bodies. Both the young men belong to Dalit Hindu families, the population of which is about 400 people. They constitute the minority in their village by caste and religion. The occupations available to them are subsistence farming and selling of goods and wares in local shifting village haat markets. This is the image of the village they reconstructed from their childhood but also emphasized that not much change has taken place even today.

The condition of basic education in the village is particularly abysmal. Both boys recall 'being part of a single teacher school in which they went to school, ate their mid-day meal, sat in a group of 300 odd children, did what they wished, and passed out of class 5 without having learnt anything.' Struck by the hopelessness of their life situation, one of them, Rohan ran away with a friend and came to Delhi in



the hope of studying, earning and making a better life for himself. The other boy, Rahul was actually brought to Delhi at the end of class 5 by a benevolent relative, who was already living there and admitted to the local government school.

How their Stories Unfolded

This section traces their present status and experiences and also captures their dreams and aspirations. I gave both of them tuitions in English and thus had the opportunity of interacting with them closely. As their tutor, I not only taught them English but inadvertently became their mentor and adviser as well.

Rahul is 18 years old at present. Rohan is 25 years old. They are cousins. Rohan works as a helper with a family where he is being encouraged to pursue his education through the National Open School System and is given immense support physically and psychologically for the same. Rahul has just completed Class 12, has taken up a job in a food chain and is also pursuing his graduation through Distance Education. He aspires to become a teacher since he sees this as a job which wields social respect and dignity and places a stamp of being 'educated and knowledgeable' on a person. If not a teacher, he would like to work in a managerial position in a private company, preferably a multinational one since once again this will accord him status, money and a comfortable life.

Rohan had seen extreme poverty and started working at a very young age. He had been working since the age of 12. He managed to work hard and get a good salary to support his family back home in the village. His persistent hard work had finally moulded him into 'self-made human being' and he felt that with all the struggles that he was used to facing, he would like to resume his education and change his life further. He aspires to work in an office for which he feels that knowledge of English and computers is necessary. He has already obtained proficiency in computers through a three year certification programme that he attended. At present it is the pursuit of English that is haunting him.

For both the boys, being able to speak fluently in

English and being able to do work in English are tied up with a large number of social beliefs and personal dreams and aspirations. They see English as a means to getting a prestigious blue collar or white collar job. They feel those who do not speak English, remain have-nots and remain relegated to doing menial jobs. English is thus seen as a passport to upward mobility in status and work. Their sense of adolescent identity is also tied up with this. They carry the adolescent dream of having good jobs, their own vehicle, their own home, enough money to enjoy life and be socially known. For Rohan, being a waiter in a good five star hotel or even a chef are seen to be of far more social worth than working in a private home where the money and comforts are better. He also feels that in a public place, those who speak fluently in English immediately draw attention whereas those who don't are looked upon with contempt. His view is that society has a peculiar classification system which places non users of English into a lower category.

Implicit in his desire to get a good job is also a concern for improving the circumstances and future of his own family. He wants to make his house pucca, start a small business for his father and educate his younger siblings in private schools.

Rahul has all the dreams that Rohan holds as well but he has had the advantage of attending school for twelve years with regularity. His role models are thus drawn from what he has studied, his own school teachers and also persons in corporate jobs. To fund his education, he worked part time as a courier boy with a firm of Chartered Accountants. That is where he developed a yearning to be financially literate and know enough English to be able to converse with everyone. The top company managers and executives whom he saw, in a sense became his sources of inspiration.

After a prolonged stay in the city, both Rahul and Rohan have adopted a lifestyle characterized by owning motor bikes, android mobiles, watching movies in PVRs, visiting malls, dressing in trendy clothes etc., so they want that the persona that they have acquired, gets matched with proficiency in English as well. Rahul's aim is to acquire the status of a **Sahib** who is more respectable and dignified in society. In Rohan's dreams is also the possibility of



working in a good foreign country for which once again, English is necessary. In a sense both of them want to quit the menial jobs which they are at present engaged in, get trained and free themselves from the subordination of higher educated employers.

Tutor's Observations

I would like to present my own analysis of the scenario described so far. While the boys' dreams and aspirations related to being English speaking are an important aspect, of equal significance are the reasons that account for the difficulties faced in learning English, especially since they are first generation learners and English is a third language for them. As a starting point, I believe that it is important to know their sociolinguistic context. Both hail from the interiors of Bihar, bordering with Bengal. Their first language is Bengali (dialect); in Delhi NCR they are comfortable with Hindi. While using Hindi, they occasionally mix the intonation of Bengali. In school, Hindi is the medium of instruction. Neither of these languages support the acquisition of English. Rather, they interfere with it because sentence construction has to be significantly altered in English. It cannot be a one to one translation. The grammar and lexicon of English are much more complex and there are many words and phrases which have no equivalent words in Hindi.

Further, learning English requires an appropriate environment and some cultural capital which they severely lack. Although, Rahul studied English in school, the quality of teaching in his own judgement was very poor. Since the medium of instruction was Hindi, this was given much more importance. What compounded the problem was also the no detention policy in which Rahul went from class to class with little addition to his knowledge or competence in English. I also observed that there is no differentiation in the curriculum and pedagogic approach used for first, second and third language learners of English. This needs serious attention.

The other important inference that I drew was that in the case of Rohan, he was not able to study during his impressionable years in a formal learning environment. At the expense of education,

he set out to work for his family. However, while he was working for the family he got access to banking work since the family he worked for were senior bank officials. Several bank officers used to visit their home. He was influenced by them and also wished to acquire a status similar to them. Here the place of work influenced his dream and aspirations and his imagined sense of identity.

Both of them believe that English is the ladder to reach the height of success in this globalized and industrialized society. In this era where English is given utmost importance, they aspire to learn to it. It was also seen that the prolonged period of work with the English speaking persons motivated Rohan to work hard on listening to the language and trying to comprehend what he was hearing. He was also able to learn new ways to communicate and some new vocabulary in his work place.

I would like to end by explaining the use of English Vinglish in the title of the paper. It is drawn partly from the film wherein identity issues and social recognition were tied up with knowing the English language, but has also been drawn from the booming quest to learn English which can be seen in different metropolitan cities. The conversation of those aspiring to learn English for upward occupational and social mobility usually carries the refrain, "English Vinglish seekh lo, to naukri pakki aur future bhi better ho jayega" (If we learn English, we will get a job and our future will be better).

Conclusively it may be stated that Rahul and Rohan are prototypes of a growing community of persons in today's world!

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