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RELEVANCE OF ENGLISH LITERATURE AS A SUBJECT OF STUDY IN THE PRESENT
TIMES

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ABSTRACT

The Information Technology revolution and the process of globalization have brought about the primacy of technical education to the forefront, and relegated the study of humanities and Literature to the background. Indian education system is churning out close to a million engineering graduates every year. While the number of colleges and students increased, there has been a discernible fall in the academic standards. It is just a consequence of the general degradation in idealism and morality in our democratic polity and society. Some of the surveys revealed that many of the technical graduates lack proper communicative ability and core technical skills. Many eminent scholars and writers of the previous generations emphasised the sanguinary effects of teaching English Literature to students. Some the advanced countries have now realised the need for revival of the study of Humanities and Literature. Perhaps it is time in India too to revive interest in Humanities and Literature and make them part of the curriculum even in technical streams and reap the dividends of their humanising influence.

Key Words: Curriculum, English Literature, humanities, globalisation, technical education

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INTRODUCTION

English Literature as a subject of study in the higher education had made its appearance sometime in the later part of the nineteenth century in Europe and America. At that time the study was limited to the Literature produced by the British writers. The focus of English Literature was mainly on grammar, rhetoric, appreciation of literary compositions like poetry, drama etc. American Literature became a part of this study sometime in the early twentieth century. It was mainly dependent on the study of the printed texts, aimed at improving the analytical reading and improved writing skills, as well as exercises in rhetoric and persuasive expression. Commonwealth and post-colonial literatures entered during the middle of the twentieth century.

Study of English Literature during the nineteenth and early twentieth century meant an intensive study of British and American literary masterpieces, with emphasis on three core skills—analysing literature, a process that required logic and reflective analysis; creativity and imagination; and an understanding of

different cultures, civilizations and literary styles from various periods. The focus of teaching English was growth of intelligence and sensibility. It came to be accepted that reading good literature sensitively makes people better human beings—morally and socially, and perhaps politically. It was considered at that time that the influence of popular press, films, advertising, cheap fiction were all morally depraving and corrupting. Therefore, it was considered that government and education should be in the hands of those whose intelligence and discrimination had been nurtured by great literature. Some even held the view that literature could be used as a humanising agency to counteract the soul destroying evils of a rapidly changing society.

Percy Bysshe Shelley in his essay *A Defence of Poetry* said: "Poetry strengthens the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb"¹. George Gordon, an early Professor of English Literature at Oxford said: "England is sick, and ... English literature must save it. The Churches (as I understand) having failed, and social remedies being slow, English literature has now a triple function: still, I suppose, to delight and instruct us, but also, and above all, to save our souls and heal the State"². In the words of Terry Eagleton: "In the early 1920s it was desperately unclear why English was worth studying at all; by the early 1930s it had become a question of why it was worth wasting your time on anything else"³. Again from Eagleton: "English was an arena in which the most fundamental questions of human existence—what it meant to be a person, to engage in significant relationships with others, to live from the vital centre of the most essential values—were thrown into vivid relief and made the object of the most intensive scrutiny". F.R. Leavis, during the 1930s, continued this argument. He claimed that utilitarian values had so throttled the life force of twentieth-century culture, that it was only in reading really great literature that our moral and spiritual bearings could be recovered.

The spread of English Language and Literature far and wide and away from the shores of Britain is the direct result of the adventurous nature of the British people and their trading interests. Over a period of time the British established their authority over several countries and also colonised new continents. Gradually over a period of more than a century, spread of English literature as a subject of study had been spectacular, not only among the nations under the control of the British Crown but to the far corners of the world as well.

With reference to the Indian context, a great debate preceded the actual introduction of English education in India. It started with the passing of the Charter Act 1813 that granted power to the East India Company to assume a new responsibility towards native education. This was followed by the famous Macaulay Minute, and then the English Education Act 1854 that required the natives to submit to English education.

On introduction of English education in India, Surendranath Banerjee is said to have declared that "it may be a silent and bloodless revolution but one of the greatest revolutions ever witnessed in any age or country. If, today, India is instilled with a new spirit and new life, if new ideas have broadened the horizon of our vision, it is all due to English education"⁴.

Globalization and English

The process of globalization that had started sometime towards the end of twentieth century had dramatically thrust the necessity of proficiency in English language communication as one of the essential ingredients required for free trade across physical, national, linguistic and cultural boundaries. Globalization is essentially a reintroduction of capitalism albeit in a new avatar under the camouflage of a new disguised nomenclature. The main difference being that this time around it is transnational business across boundaries. It is seen by some as an economic imperialism imposed on third world countries by the large multinational corporations from the developed world to convert the third world countries as large markets. Some would call it a commercial hegemony by the Big Brother and its Western allies. Gone were the days when the influence of English language was viewed as cultural pollution and imperialism. Now the free trade across national boundaries happens largely through English-language medium. This has become a sheer necessity as the business is transacted across nationalities and continents.

An excerpt from an article published in *The Economist* under the title *A World Empire by Other Means: The Triumph of English* reads thus: "It is everywhere. Some 380 million people speak it as their first

language and perhaps two-thirds as many again as their second. A billion are learning it, about a third of the world's population are in some sense exposed to it and by 2050, it is predicted, half the world will be more or less proficient in it. It is the language of globalisation—of international business, politics and diplomacy. It is the language of computers and the Internet. You'll see it on posters in Cote d'Ivoire, you'll hear it in pop songs in Tokyo, you'll read it in official documents in Phnom Penh. Deutsche Welle broadcasts in it. Bjork, an Icelander, sings in it. French business schools teach in it. It is the medium of expression in cabinet meetings in Bolivia. Truly, the tongue spoken back in the 1300s only by the 'low people' of England, as Robert of Gloucester put it at the time, has come a long way. It is now the global language"⁵.

Concurrent with the process of globalisation, we find that the education sector got opened up to private players and India saw big trajectory of growth in technical education. There was mushrooming growth of engineering colleges throughout the length and breadth of the country. Suddenly there was a spurt in the number of engineering graduates passing out each year. The sudden jump in the growth of colleges threw up challenges of competent faculty and adequate facilities. This has resulted in falling of standards to some extent. It is generally said that not more than 10% of the students graduating out of engineering streams are actually employable in the industry. Rest are all queuing up for small time jobs. One would wonder that nowadays even police constable jobs would see engineering graduates competing. This is a very pathetic state. Among the reasons cited by the industry that such a large number of graduates not being found employable is that their lack of communications skills as well as technical competency.

An excerpt from the World Bank report published in 2011 under the title: "Employability and Skill Set of Newly Graduated Engineers in India" reads thus: "After classifying all skills by factor analysis, the authors find that employers' perceive Soft Skills (Core Employability Skills and Communication Skills) to be very important"⁶. A news item published in The Hindu, Delhi Edition on 26-06-2013 under the title "Nearly 47% Graduates in India Unemployable" reads thus: "That graduation is a stepping stone to the employment market holds no good in present times with a latest report finding out that as many as 47 per cent graduates in India are not employable for any industry role. Their lack of English language knowledge and cognitive skills were identified as the major obstacles to their suitability in the job market".

National Spoken English Skills (NSES) Report 2015 was released by Aspiring Minds in August 2015. A portion of the Executive Summary of the report is reproduced here: "Of the six hundred thousand engineers that graduate annually, only 2.9% candidates have spoken English skills (SES) for high-end jobs in corporate sales/business consulting. These candidates show capability to understand and speak English fluently to both natives and non-natives with ease. Around 3/4th engineers do not have SES required for any job in knowledge economy. This signals that there is a need for higher emphasis not only on written English but also on SES. The spoken English capability of engineers needs substantial improvement. Given the high growth rate in jobs in knowledge sector that require English, there is an urgent need of interventions to improve the spoken English of engineers. Additionally, focusing on language and literature as a subject in engineering where students are exposed to and encouraged to read varied books would result in incremental benefits"⁷. This report identifies 'focusing on language and literature as a subject in engineering' as a need to improve the spoken English of engineers.

In the globalised world, the importance of soft skills need not be over emphasised. One of the important components of soft skill is the communicative ability—in English that is! This takes us back to the original concept of teaching English language through Literature. Even though many people today do not profess language teaching through Literature, because of the cultural baggage that Literature carries; it still remains one of the potent and proven ways of language learning.

Relevance of English Literature:

The aim of this paper is to look at the relevance of study of English Literature at this point in time. 'Present times' here refers to the second decade of the twenty first century. English Literature was considered to be a relevant subject of study during the British rule, and immediately after independence well into the seventies or the seventh decade of the twentieth century. Even though its relevance had been called to

question immediately after the independence, it held its ground for quite some time. It is worth noting that several All India Services Officers belonging to the Indian Civil Service under the British, and also Indian Administrative Service after Independence were graduates or post-graduates with English Literature as their major subject. Officers belonging to the Civil Service at that time rendered distinguished service that earned the sobriquet 'steel frame'.

Ascendency of technical education gathered momentum concurrent with the process of economic liberalisation. As a part of the liberalisation process, the education sector also got opened up for private enterprise. This has contributed to opening of numerous private engineering colleges. With the multinational companies setting shop in India, it became imperative that the educational needs are tailored to suit the needs of technical and managerial personnel for such enterprises. To get a measure of the growth of technical education in India, there were 50 engineering institutions with a total intake of 3700 students during 1950. This has gone up to 337 institutions with a total intake of 66600 students in 1990. After liberalisation it has gone up to 1668 institutions with an intake of 653290 during 2007. This means that in the first 40 years after independence, there had been an 18 fold increase in the intake in engineering colleges, and thereafter in a matter of 17 years, up to 2007 it has gone up 10 times.

The downside of this phenomenal growth in numbers in the technical education is that the quality of the education and the quality of the students coming out of these numerous colleges has gone down drastically. A report published in The Times of India, Mumbai on July 14, 2014 states that: "The third edition of the National Employability Report, Engineering Graduates - 2014, released by a private employability solutions company, revealed that though 18.33% of the engineers are employable, 18.09% actually get a job. Of the 1.2 lakh candidates surveyed across multiple states, 91.82% lack programming and algorithm skills, 71.23% lack soft and cognitive skills, 60% lack domain skills, 73.63% lack English speaking and comprehension skills and 57.96% have poor analytical and quantitative skills".

This indicates that the education planners and administrators are more concerned with the numbers i.e. quantity rather than the quality of education. Churning out large numbers does not necessarily make us a strong nation. However, it must be admitted that in this bleak scenario of numbers game, India still has beacons of very reputed technical institutions like the IIT's, reputed management institutions like IIM's, ISB etc.

To get a measure of where we stand today, let us look at what Fali S Nariman wrote in The Tribune: "Our Constitution did work — and worked well for the first 19 years after independence. What happened after that? I think the answer lies in this — it ceased to work well the moment politics in this country became immoral and unprincipled. We have not been able to work the Parliamentary system — we cannot work any system — unless we re-inject some degree of idealism and morality into politics". He also wrote: "Our failure to learn from the legacies of our political past — the British built a wall of separation between those in governance, and the governed. When the British left, we kept this wall of separation but discarded the idealism which had inspired generations of public officials in British India". "there is a crisis of competence: Every election after 1951 has thrown up men and women less and less proficient, less and less scrupulous than the past. The downward trend is most noticeable—it is also significant"⁸.

The reference point for comparison of the present scenario would be the period immediately before and after the attainment of Independence. The most visible and noticeable change is the erosion of human values in public life and falling moral standards. Unabashed selfishness and hypocrisy seem to be the order of the day. This is most evident in the no-holds-barred approach of the political parties and leaders who hanker for power and money. There is no need to elaborate much on these unpleasant aspects as they are visible to every discernible and sensitive person. An elixir is needed to cleanse the society of its current disease of moral depravity.

To arrest this downward spiral into the abysmal depths, one feels that there is urgent need to resurrect the study of humanities and literature. The need for revival of the study of humanities subjects has already been felt in some of the developed countries. The Commission on the Humanities and Social Sciences

was convened by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences at the request of Senators Lamar Alexander (R-Tennessee) and Mark Warner (R-Virginia) and Representatives Tom Petri (R-Wisconsin) and David Price (D-North Carolina). The Commission submitted its report *The Heart of the Matter* on 19-06-2013. A portion of the Executive Summary of the Report is reproduced here: "As we strive to create a more civil public discourse, a more adaptable and creative workforce, and a more secure nation, the humanities and social sciences are the heart of the matter, the keeper of the republic—a source of national memory and civic vigor, cultural understanding and communication, individual fulfillment and the ideals we hold in common. The humanities remind us where we have been and help us envision where we are going. Emphasizing critical perspective and imaginative response, the humanities—including the study of languages, literature, history, film, civics, philosophy, religion, and the arts—foster creativity, appreciation of our commonalities and our differences, and knowledge of all kinds. The social sciences reveal patterns in our lives, over time and in the present moment. Employing the observational and experimental methods of the natural sciences, the social sciences—including anthropology, economics, political science and government, sociology, and psychology—examine and predict behavioral and organizational processes. Together, they help us understand what it means to be human and connect us with our global community"⁹. This is simple and straight and it does not need elaboration or explanation.

Curt Rice, Rector at Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences lists nine arguments as to why humanities are important. (1) The humanities help us understand others through their languages, histories and cultures. (2) They foster social justice and equality. (3) And they reveal how people have tried to make moral, spiritual and intellectual sense of the world. (4) The humanities teach empathy. (5) They teach us to deal critically and logically with subjective, complex, imperfect information. (6) And they teach us to weigh evidence skeptically and consider more than one side of every question. (7) Humanities students build skills in writing and critical reading. (8) The humanities encourage us to think creatively. They teach us to reason about being human and to ask questions about our world. (9) The humanities develop informed and critical citizens. Without the humanities, democracy could not flourish¹⁰.

We in India are yet to wake up to this realization. The arguments put forth above are amply clear and need no further explanation.

Conclusion

Penetration of technology into every aspect of human life has brought tremendous opportunities for the youth in technology sector for career opportunities, at home and abroad. As a corollary to this, demand for technical education has received tremendous boost. Globalization has opened gates for private enterprise in education sector. As a result, opportunities for technical education have also tremendously increased. In this scamper for technical education, somewhere the students have lost the moral bearings—the values that they beget out of the present system are scramble for money, power and glory. The present scenario is a painful reality. However, revival of the study of humanities and literature hold a beacon of hope that one hopes would happen sooner than later. And the study of Literature would perhaps make students better human beings and make the world a better place to live.

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