

Review Article

English Studies in India: Contemporary and Evolving Paradigms (2019)

Edited by Banibrata Mahanta and Rajesh Babu Sharma

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In the context of the changing times and gradual evolution of what we know now as ‘New Humanities’, it is time for us to re-evaluate the role of English studies. As the hangover of colonial ideological control and the reigns of ‘universal truths’ waned and as new generations of students, teachers and academic administrators took control of the discipline, English studies began to face new ideological and pedagogical challenges. Moreover, the perception that the study of Humanities does not have much utilitarian values and hence government funds should be diverted to the study of science and technology has put English studies in a precarious condition. At a time when the academic fraternity is wrestling with discursive questions on textual-methodological orientations, pedagogical experimentations and innovative teaching-learning designs in order to sail through the adversity, the publication of the book under review is a welcome event.

English studies in India began to face serious challenges from the second half of the 1980s. During the next few decades, it witnessed several paradigm shifts, and ideological fissures were quite palpable. It was a time of academic contestations and new quests. These are, according to Smithson and Ruff, nothing unusual in English studies: “Disputing, revising, and transforming the principles, theories, methods, subjects, and goals of English studies – activities common in the 1990s – are not new to English studies” (p. 3). We did not have a well-researched book which traces the trajectory of the history of the discipline and captures the ideological turmoil of the present time. *English Studies in India: Contemporary and Evolving Paradigms* edited by Banibrata Mahanta and Rajesh Babu Sharma fills up the gap and offers a picture of the contemporary reformative activities related to the discipline.

The book is a collection of eighteen articles which, except the editorial one, are divided into three sections: a) those dealing with ‘perspectives on history, practices of literary creativity in India and

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the relationship between ideology and the literary narrative' (p. 13); b) those dealing with 'effects of English studies on Indian social, cultural and intellectual geographies' (p. 13); and c) those related to teaching-learning pedagogies.

Mahanta and Sharma in their editorial article provide a comprehensive picture of the history of English studies in India. They discuss how English studies journeyed from its mother country to India, where it gradually settled down to function as an ideological bedrock for intellectual 'conquest'. They trace the trajectory further into the postcolonial times when the colonies including India proclaimed their 'appropriation' of the foreign language. Even then, for some decades, Indian academic moorings in colonial ideology had been evident in the practice of syllabus framing. However, ultimately the process of refashioning the English studies started. It became much more inclusive as more and more non-British texts, including Indian English literary texts and translations from Bhasa literatures, began to appear in the syllabi. This reviewer appreciates the way the editors have critically examined recent documents including *UGC Model Curriculum: English & Other Western Languages* (2001) in order to reconfigure the new paradigm shifts.

Part I begins appropriately with Mahasweta Sengupta's personal narrative "Reading the World: Growing Up in the 'Discipline'" which looks at the world of the English studies from the unique perspective of a student growing up in the 1970s to become a scholar and teacher. The experience of this 'travelling' scholar, which is juxtaposed with the journey of English studies in India, shapes up her own idea of what the discipline was like in the 1970s (and later) and what it should have been in a 'decolonised' country. This reviewer growing up more or less in the same period in a similar non-metropolitan university environment shares the same experience of how English studies was exclusively dependant on the 'pure' British literary works. The gap between the text and the immediate socio-cultural environment of the student resulted in his/her growing up in a vacuum. She strongly recommends the more inclusive 'contrapuntal' reading strategies to overcome the problem in postcolonial situations. The truth in Sengupta's diagnosis of the hiatus in the reading-learning environment in the colonial nation is borne by Santanu Niyogi's treatment of how William Shakespeare was taught as an iconic figure displaying the superiority of the Western culture during the colonial period. Niyogi mentions how David Lester Richardson's teaching of Shakespeare's texts in the classroom ideologically inspired his students who developed an antipathy to native socio-cultural habits and veered towards the Western culture. Niyogi thinks that '[a]ny form of ideological manipulation or monitoring entails epistemic violence' (p. 37), and asserts that "If this is not epistemic violence, what else is?" (p. 41). Evoking a Foucauldian term, he argues that Shakespeare 'transcended from a proper name to an "author-function"' (p. 42).

Amritjit Singh dwells more on the debates on nomenclatures (such as 'Indo-English,' 'Indo-Anglian' and 'Indian English') as well as on the ethics and pragmatics of the use of a foreign language as a medium of expression than on the English studies *per se*. In the Indian context he considers the growth of the Indian English language in a positive way. The 150-year long 'coexistence with regional languages and Bhasa literatures' has produced excellent Indian English writers. Their 'creative energy' (p. 47), he argues, has been energised in the context of multilingualism and multiculturalism.

Sanjoy Dutta-Roy sees English Studies in India as caught in the vortex of conflicts of 'language and identity' (p. 61). He finds the schism between the Western and native ideologies reflected in the academia which is the inevitable result of colonialism. The English language with 'its global baggage of accessories' produces familiarity with different world cultures while nativist discourses

(such as put forward by Nemade and Ganesh Devy) put their feet deep into the culture of the native soil. Caught in between these two poles, English Studies in India needs to come out of a purely Western, metropolitan canon and adopt a comparatist critical methodology. Going beyond *marga/desi*, *picara/naïve* binaries, the practitioners of English studies need to accept a non-hierarchical structure and place it in the midst of global and native linguistic cultural traditions. The comparatist aspect mentioned by Dutta-Roy has been discussed in more detail by Santanu Biswas. He focusses on Comparative literature both as a discipline and methodology. This approach is an antidote to the English Studies being exclusive in scope and ‘colonial’ in nature. It deals with the history of the rise of Comparative Literature and the response of the Indian academia to this phenomenon. Biswas could have discussed how comparatist methodology is useful in the field of English studies.

Prabhat K. Singh’s essay is an important contribution because it discusses English studies in the context of the current crisis of Humanities as a whole. The emergence of ‘a new canonical structure, utility-centric, not humanistic’ (p. 89) has dealt a severe blow to art and literature. The urgency, he argues, is to adopt interdisciplinarity and an integrational vision which would combine the values of both science and arts. He asserts, “Imagination and logic, more or less, are the domains of both science and literature” (p. 93).

Part II opens with Kamalakar Bhat’s essay where he innovatively adopts Dipesh Chakrabarty’s concept of ‘provincialising Europe’ as ‘a paradigm for English literary studies in India’ (p. 102). The act of ‘provincialisation’ necessarily involves an act of displacement. Displacement in this context refers to a strategy for ‘re-contextualisation’ which also fits the postcolonial scheme of replacement of canons and the canonical value of universalisation. While reading a canonical British text in the classroom, ‘performance idiom’ is necessarily displaced to suit the local conditions and values (p. 104). Chakrabarty feels that ‘European thought is at once *indispensable* and *inadequate*’ but ‘the task of exploring this thought...*may be renewed from and by the margins*’ (as cited in Bhat, p. 103, emphasis added by Bhat). Bhat effectively demonstrates his scheme by discussing Wordsworth’s well-known poem “Daffodils.”

Bharti Arora in the next article critically analyses how lack of access to the English language can lead to the disenfranchisement of the marginalised categories. The arrival of women who can speak and write in English, particularly those who hail from lower class and caste, is a big step towards the empowerment of Indian women. Arora asserts that ‘English and translations into English could also be deployed as effective tools for a reflexive interrogation of the allied structures of caste hierarchy’ (p. 114). As to the kind of English to be deployed in this context Arora is in favour of Makarand Paranjpe’s idea of ‘vernacularization’ of the English ‘tongue’ and asserts that ‘the vernacularisation of [the] English language and translation play a significant role in democratising access to the work of hitherto disenfranchised women writers...’ (p. 117). In this respect she speaks of the effective role played by Women’s Studies programmes. Although it is a well-written, meticulously argued article, it reads more like one on a feminist issue. Arora could have elaborated on how vernacularisation of English and other related strategies might be deployed in the re-formation of the syllabus of English Studies and for other pedagogic purposes.

In his article “The Organic Intellectual and English Studies in India” Prabhat Jha calls for a change in the syllabi of English Studies through the inclusion of the Indian oral tradition. In doing so he advocates for a mass-based approach to the English Studies. In this context, he underlines the need for the organic intellectuals ‘who will break the chain of colonial and neo-liberal hegemony’ (p. 121). Jha does well to borrow Antonio Gramsci’s concepts of ‘traditional intellectuals’ who continue the status quo irrespective of radical changes in the society and politics, and ‘organic

intellectuals' who 'most of the time work against hegemonic order' (p. 122). The curriculum should produce organic intellectuals who must unsettle the colonial system which was geared towards the production of traditional intellectuals.

In her article 'Journey of English in India: Experiments, Contradictions, and the Tribal/Dalit Question' Richa places the issue of education of the Tribals and the Dalits in English at the centre of her discourse. She makes a foray into the history of how the Dalits and tribals were brought within the purview of English education. Richa points out that English education for Dalits was not as organised as that for tribals. After independence while the demand for 'development' and job opportunities were associated with English education, the new education policies tended to initiate spiritual and Brahminical materials into the education system. Sometimes there are attempts to inject 'selective ancient knowledge' to reinforce the ancient hegemonic order. Thus, internal colonisation and external colonisation, or the amalgamation of both, in education, stifle the prospects of the marginalised communities.

Partha Sarathi Nandi in his essay "United by a 'Foreign' Language: The Evolution of English in Multilingual India" takes, like Amritjit Singh, a positive view of the presence of English in India. Instead of looking at English as a tool in the hands of the colonisers, he traces the journey of English through the colonised landscape as a beneficial one for both the colonising and colonised cultures. He, for instance, mentions the rise of the novel in Bengal as a result of the cultural interactions and points out that English education promoted Indian nationalism and political unrest. The new attitude fostered by English education (in school and colleges) generated an 'energetic mix of vernacular and the English' not only in India but in all colonised countries, and the hybrid English 'has now become the *lingua franca* for the people of multilingual nations' (p. 153).

Pinak Sankar Bhattacharya in his essay examines the role of English in the sphere of religion and religiosity. He rightly observes that 'language and religion are both agents of the ideological state apparatus' (p. 157), and both play an important role as 'mask' of conquest. Bhattacharya discusses how Indian religious leaders utilised the English language in various ways. Brahma Sabha/Samaj leaders in Bengal such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Keshab Chandra Sen employed the language for the greater understanding of the world and other religions. Their objective was to "apply them therapeutically to the wounds and vices of Indian religious faiths" (p. 159). English also played an effective role in the sphere of communication with the British administrators for carrying out religious reforms. Vivekananda, however, used English as a tool to interlink faiths.

Part III begins with Somdev Banik's essay "Teaching English Literature/Language: Perspectives from a Non-metro University." The article pays attention to a well-known but neglected aspect of English education in India. Indian universities as sites of institutionalised learning do not present a homogenous picture. Although supervised by the apex body University Grants Commission, they represent asymmetrical standards. Banik quotes Anjana Desai who said that both the students and the teachers in the non-metro universities "are dazzled by their urban counterparts, who are not perceived as peers but models" (as cited in Banik, p. 168). Lack of language competence, gaps in scholarship, and lack of exposure are some of the reasons for which the students in particular, and some teachers with non-metropolitan and less privileged social background are often denigrated. Banik cites the example of his own students, mostly from rural and middle- and lower middle-class backgrounds, who opt for 'English Grammar and Usage' and 'English Language Teaching' courses rather than 'Popular Literature' and 'Postcolonial Literature' courses. Banik points out that students' disinterestedness in the literary texts is often explained as the result of 'psychological and cultural inadequacy.' He, however, feels that their apathy arises

mainly from their lack of interest in the cultural unfamiliarity with the backgrounds projected in the British texts. The texts, he feels, should be liberated from their cultural moorings (p. 173).

In “Testing English Studies in India: Problems and Possibilities” Stuti Khare looks at English Studies from the perspective of the examination system. Syllabus framing and implementing the objectives of teaching/learning process ultimately culminate in the evaluation process. Khare asserts that there are yawning gaps in between these stages. These gaps are reflected in the questions set in the examination papers. She offers some very useful models of questions. She also criticises the semester system borrowed mindlessly from the West. In view of a different ground reality and faulty implementation of the system, students and teachers face time crunch and the former resort to rote learning and the latter get down to set predictable questions, creating hurdles to the proper assimilation of knowledge.

The next article (“English Studies in the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Mode: Possibilities and Challenges of Pedagogy”) by Nandini Sahu and Srideep Mukherjee offer a new dimension to the discussion of English studies scenario. This is an aspect that is usually kept outside the purview of discussion of English studies probably because Open and Distance Learning (ODL), as the authors state, is a supplementary approach to higher learning. With its broad base of learners (a sizeable section of them from non-privileged backgrounds) scattered across the rural and urban spaces, ODL represents a truly democratic mode of teaching-learning process. It takes the help of ICT and has learner-friendly delivery and outreach mechanisms. The authors, citing surveys and documents, argue that syllabus in English studies in the ODL mode needs to be oriented towards indigenous cultural contents such as folklores and should adopt comparatist approaches in teaching-learning processes.

Ravindra B. Tasildar’s essay focusses on the vocationalisation of English studies in India. He locates two phases in the process – in the 1990s ‘Communicative English’ gave way to ‘Functional English’ and in the second phase in the new millennium add-on courses which were basically career-oriented were introduced. He locates the problems in the areas of teaching-learning processes with the help of survey reports and suitable charts and other examples. Asima Kumar Parhi argues that English studies is now no more ‘synonymous with the formal, institutionalised medium’ (p. 222) and should adopt a flexible attitude to the content and style of teaching and learning of English. With the help of elaborate examples, he discusses several examples culled from print and electronic media to show that English is going through a process of experimentation and change. He suggests that in the classroom situation these may form ‘valid corpus for teaching English noncanonically’ (p. 222).

About two decades back Aijaz Ahmed spoke of ‘pressures’ coming from two directions ‘to re-think English studies, to restructure English departments.’ One source of pressures came from the ‘above’ – ‘global centres of imperialism’ – which directed us “to assimilate English studies into post-modern epistemology”; the other source put pressures from ‘below’ – these were “pressures for democratization” (p. 48). Ahmed was in favour of the latter. He vouched for non-hegemonic and comparatist manner: “English would be taught, not as the primary privileged focus but in a comparatist manner, in relation to other Indian languages and literatures, depending on linguistic region and historical period” (p. 51). Many of the articles in the volume under review, as we have already seen, argue for what Ahmed called for in his article. As part of their postcolonial discourse they strongly advocate the import of a comparatist methodology and non-hierarchical approach. In editing this volume, the editors have carefully curated the specific areas and angles that should be covered in the volume: history of English studies, contact with other languages, caste and class angle, gender perspective, reception of English across urban and rural divide, examination, and

different sites of pedagogical experiments such as ODL, vocational education, print, electronic media and so on. The volume thus covers a wide range of areas which have surfaced prominently in the last three or four decades. The book will be considered a significant contribution to the study of English studies in India.

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