# THE POLITICS OF PARTICIPATION: DIS-CITIZENSHIP THROUGH ENGLISH TEACHING IN A SUBURBAN INDIAN VILLAGE SCHOOL

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## Abstract

Ramanathan (2013a, 2013b) urged scholars to expand the notion of citizenship beyond its typically bounded understandings, towards conceptualizing it as "being able to participate fully" (p. 162). This view highlights the *processual* aspects of citizenship, shifting away from the more categorical meanings that underpin the term (Ramanathan, 2013a; Ramanathan, 2013b; Ricento, 2013). Dis-citizens' ability to participate in different processes is more limited. This theoretical perspective casts new light on the opening statement of an influential Indian language policy report, *The Teaching of English* (NCERT, 2006), which contended, "English is in India today a symbol of people's aspirations for quality in education and a fuller participation in national and international life." India's premier educational research body's imagining English as a benchmark of "participation" in Indian life merits further analysis. This ethnographic case study explores this concept of participation through the examination of the English literacy experiences of students in an English-medium village school. Involving eight focal children from an *anathashram* (orphanage) in suburban New Delhi, the data draws on extended fieldwork at the school in 2011, entailing participant observation supplemented with audio- and video-recording, and interview exchanges. The analysis reveals how the English literacy practices are implicated in the production and reproduction of dis-citizenship, in order to demonstrate how "English-medium" schooling functioned to exclude the focal children from "fuller participation in national and international life."

Keywords: English Teaching, Medium of Instruction, Literacy, Dis-Citizenship, India

## Introduction

This investigation grounds itself in the nascent theoretical concept of dis-citizenship, which derives from Pothier and Devlin's (2006) seminal work within Critical Disability Theory. Pothier and Devlin (2006) argued that those with disabilities are accorded "citizenship minus" (p. 2) by virtue of the multiple obstructions, ostracizations, and exclusions they experience in their lives.

These everyday marginalizations, they argued, give rise to what they cast as "illegitimate hierarchies" (p. 146) within different systems, borne of the competing centrifugal and centripetal ideological forces engendered by citizenship. Inspired by their work, Ramanathan (2013a), in her editorial to the special issue on language policy and dis-citizenship hosted by the Journal of Language, Identity & Education, highlighted the processual aspects of citizenship, marking a shift away from the more static, categorical meanings that typically underpin the term (Ramanathan, 2013a; Ramanathan, 2013b; Ricento, 2013). Moving into this emergent space of citizenship theorization within language education, Ramanathan (2013b) argued that scholars should pay closer attention to the networked nodes of policy and pedagogy. Within this theoretical framework, citizenship encompassed "policies, pedagogic engagements and borders—that do or do not create equitable conditions" (Ramanathan, 2013a, p. 1). This perspective, she argued, would help shed light on the "subtle forms of dis-citizenship" (p. 162) that are not always rendered visible in scholarship, particularly within language education. Importantly, she urged scholars to expand our understanding of citizenship by conceptualizing it as "being able to participate fully" (p. 162). Dis-citizens, within such theorization, are those who have limited ability to participate within different systems. Closely focusing on this construction of participation, I examine the dis-citizenship of young boys from an anathashram (orphanage) in suburban Delhi by investigating the literacy practices at their English-medium school.

To help frame this discussion, it is useful to first invoke a powerful English language policy document from India, entitled "The Teaching of English" (NCERT, 2006). It opened with: "English is in India today a symbol of people's aspirations for quality in education and a fuller participation in national and international life" (p. 1). This was one of several Position Papers released by the NCERT, or the National Council of Educational Research and Training, established in 1961 by the Indian government to assist the Indian Ministry of Education and Social Welfare in its mission of crafting educational policy, curricula, and programs nationwide. These Position Papers were part of the larger articulation of the NCERT curricular framework, which presently forms "the basis for the school level curriculum for all subjects in India in both private and government schools" (Ghosh & Madhumathi, 2012, p. 1). "The Teaching of English" (NCERT, 2006) document engaged with key policy-related issues within English language education in the country. In addition to offering a language policy framework for the nation, this document has been widely used to anchor understandings of English pedagogy within Indian educational literature (e.g., Agnihotri, 2010; Chauhan, 2012; Vulli, 2014). The focal children's English curriculum, importantly, was entirely dictated by the NCERT framework.

The emphasis placed on English as a perceived benchmark of "fuller participation in national and international life" (NCERT, 2006, p. 1) by India's premier educational research body merits closer analysis. The document itself

does not offer any further comments on this perception, a point that is highly problematic given the minority and elite status of English and its speakers in India. The document seems to unquestioningly accept the idea that the possibilities of participation – and therefore citizenship – in India are superior for those with access to English. Through this analysis, I will illuminate, in fact, how the participation of those particularly on socioeconomic and linguistic margins are discoursed, enacted, and curtailed through English literacy. Ultimately I show that English-medium schooling, while appearing to be a ticket to "fuller participation in national and international life" (NCERT, 2006, p. 1), becomes a space of dis-citizenship for the focal boys.

## English in India: Access and opportunity

Because this investigation revolves around English, it is important to review the context of its national circulation. English in India is strongly linked to powerful discourses around globalization and modernization (Faust & Nagar, 2001; LaDousa, 2005; Proctor, 2015; Roy, 2014; Vulli, 2014). It is perceived to carry unmatched sociocultural capital and offers *the* path to socioeconomic mobility (Bhattacharya et al. 2007; Christ & Makrani, 2009; Kachru, 1986; Khubchandani, 1983; Mohanty, 2008; Parameswaran, 1997; Proctor, 2015; Ramanathan, 1999; Roy, 2014; Vaish, 2008; Vulli, 2014). Its perception as a powerful international language makes it highly desirable within a dynamic, shifting landscape that prizes transnational mobility (LaDousa, 2005; Vaish, 2008). Moreover, the predominance of English within higher education has helped to further fortify its exalted position within the linguistic hierarchy in India (Christ & Makrani, 2009; Khubchandani, 1983; Parameswaran, 1997; Roy, 2014).

English does not, however, have widespread circulation in India; it is primarily aligned with privileged urban networks within India, with the middle and upper classes, and, consequently, as in colonial times, with the ruling elite (LaDousa, 2005; Mohanty, 2008; Parameswaran, 1997; Ramanathan, 2005; Roy, 2014; Proctor, 2015). It is worthwhile here to reflect on the tricky business of the circulation of English within India. There is little consensus, unfortunately, on the number of Indians who "speak" or "know" English. Moreover, the criteria for what constitutes "speaking"/"knowing" English differs across estimates. The National Knowledge Commission (2000), for example, proffered that 1% of Indians use English as a second language. Crystal (2003), however, estimated the same at 20%. Meanwhile, Hohenthal (2003) pegged the total number of English speakers at 4% of the population, while Mishra (2000) claimed it was 5%. Mohanty (2006) approximated that less than 2% of Indians "knew" English. Sonalde and Vanneman (2005), meanwhile, found that 4% of Indians could speak English fluently, and that 16% could speak it a little. Despite the wide variance, there is clear consensus that English speakers constitute a small and – most importantly—elite minority.

Because of its associations with structures of power, there has been exponential rise in private English-medium schooling, primarily un- or semi-regulated, targeting the poor (Aggarwal, 2000; Annamalai, 2005; De, Majumdar, Samson, & Noronha, 2002; Jhingran, 2009; Nambissan, 2003). Socio-economically disadvantaged parents send their children to such schools at great costs, based on the "myth of English-medium superiority" (Mohanty, Panda & Pal, 2010, p. 214). Such schools aim for "cosmetic Anglicization," where, despite the nominal importance of English, vernacular languages dominate (Mohanty, Panda, & Pal, 2010, p. 216) (see also, Annamalai, 2005; Bhattacharya, 2013; Khubchandani, 2003). In such contexts, students typically acquire "bookish," non-communicative language skills in English; what they learn, he claimed, is to imitate, not interpret texts. Elites, in contrast, as Mohanty (2006) pointed out, enabled "with …positive attitudinal and environmental support for English" (p. 269), are able to access far more effective English instruction. Sheorey (2006) has thus called English a "divider rather than a unifier" in India, pointing out that the "advantages and the 'power' inherent in English literacy are enjoyed primarily by the middle and upper classes" (p. 18). These are beyond the reach of students who are hindered by their financial and social conditions (Ramanathan, 1999). Either they cannot access English instruction or the kind of English they acquire is insufficient for today's demanding job market (Mohanty, 2006). The medium of instruction, as Mohanty (2006) noted, reflects, maintains, and perpetuates socio-economic divides in schools (p. 269). In this manner, "English-medium education widens social fractures in Indian society by creating and reinforcing a social, cultural, economic, and discursive divide between the English-educated and the majority" (Faust & Nagar 2001, p. 2878). This linguistic divide thus continues to be hardened both by questions of access to English as well as the differential quality of English instruction available across different socio-economic groups (Annamalai, 2005; Bhattacharya, 2013; LaDousa, 2005; Mohanty, 2008; Proctor, 2015). It is within this hierarchically ordered, unequal, and high-stakes linguistic landscape that this present investigation takes shape.

## Method

### The study context and participants

This investigation unfolded in Noida, a bustling suburb of the Indian capital, New Delhi. Noida is an ethnically, culturally, linguistically, and socially heterogeneous city, with about 650,000 inhabitants. The languages of state administration, business and commerce, and schooling are English and/or Hindi, although many inhabitants speak other languages at home.

The *anathashram* was situated in an *ashram* (a Hindu religious commune) in a quiet residential area in Noida. The priest/administrator, two assistants, and the Board of Directors managed the ashram. The focal children's ages ranged from 5 to 14, and they received room, board, and/or education free of

charge or at subsidized costs. The children spoke Bengali, Bihari, Punjabi, and/or Nepali as their mother tongue, and Hindi as a second or third language. The eight focal children were selected on the basis of several, pre-decided criteria, including that they: had been residing at the orphanage for a minimum of six months prior to the start of data collection; were five or older; and had rural backgrounds. The decision to focus on eight children was motivated by a desire to arrive at a thick description (Geertz, 1973) of the language and literacy contexts given time constraints.

While they resided in an *anathashram*, not all children were entirely parentless. A few of the children had two living parents, and the rest had single parents, guardians, or access to family networks. The children's parents or guardians were all migrant workers, having arrived from rural parts of Bengal, Bihar, or Nepal to the Delhi area a few years ago.

The school in which the children studied was Subhash Chandra Bose Public School (SCB), located in Madhupur village (private schools in India are referred to as "public" schools). The school had approximately 250 students. Madhupur was home to around 3,500 inhabitants, a mostly floating population of migrant workers. School was in session from 8:00 am through 1:00pm, Monday through Saturday. Fees were reduced for the poorest students (including the *anathashram* children), and supplies offered at subsidized rates for everyone. All the teachers participating in the study had been educated in Hindi-medium schools, and held post-graduate degrees in various disciplines from local and regional universities.

## Procedure

This study draws on eight months of ethnographic fieldwork between December 2010 and August 2011 at an *anathashram* (orphanage) and village school in suburban New Delhi. The data for this study included 250+ hours at the sites, involving nearly 100 hours of classroom observations at approximately 4–6 hours per week when the school was in session, and more than 150 hours at the *anathashram* at 4–6 hours per week, from December through August. The data collection process entailed participant observation, structured and semi-structured interview exchanges, and informal conversations to provide depth and detail (Patton, 1980). The variety of methods employed for data collection allowed for the triangulation of data (Denzin, 1970). While I use some data here that I have examined elsewhere (Bhattacharya, 2013), the data in this study are interpreted within an entirely new theoretical framework. Where the previous analysis had focused on the medium of instruction and its role on curtailing access to language and content, this study analyses the data using the theoretical perspective of dis-citizenship.The subjects of this study included eight focal children from the *anathashram*, the *anathashram* administrator and two assistants, and five teachers at the school. Written artifacts consulted included: textbooks, homework, schoolwork, Unit Tests, Mid-terms, final exams, *anathashram* records, fieldnotes, interview notes, and relevant

local and national policy documents (including the NCERT document noted in the section below). Data analysis was conducted both during the data collection process and after the collection process ended. For this analysis, the data were coded for "English teaching," "English learning," "participation," and "dis-citizenship." The coded data were then explored through analytic memos. These memos illuminated emerging themes; those elucidating dis-citizenship are explored through representative examples in the findings section.

Potential ethical issues arising in data collection and analyses include biases inherent in interviews, pitfalls of participant observation, the researcher's own implication and influence in contexts of interaction and observation, and researcher bias (Diener & Crandall, 1978; Kelman, 1982; Merriam, 1988). These have been minimized here through prolonged periods of data collection, informant interviews, triangulation of data through multiple sources, and reflexivity regarding my own positioning. My personal history as an Indian, a New Delhi native (where I spent the first 22 years of my life), a married Hindu Bengali woman in her thirties, playing the multiple roles of *didi* (Bengali, 'elder sister') and researcher, a product of the Indian K-12 system and part of American academia, and as someone interested specifically in the learning and teaching of languages (especially English), had influenced the nature of the data collected and analysis conducted, and provided an additional source of reflection on the data.

## Data and analysis

In this section, I offer a glimpse into core literacy practices at the SCB School, focusing on those that specifically help create conditions for dis-citizenship.

### *Multigrade Pedagogy*

Multigrade pedagogy was a key characteristic of classroom teaching at SCB School, as it is in most classrooms in India (Alexander, 2008). In this section, I argue that multigrade pedagogy placed constraints on the children's ability to participate in the language learning process within the classroom. Multigrade teaching is defined as "the teaching of students of different ages, grades and abilities in the same group" (Little, 1995, p.1). SCB schools were multigrade out of compulsion, since the K-12 and nursery classes had to be packed into only six classrooms, and for most of the data collection period the school had only five teachers on the payroll. Typically, two classes were seated in one classroom, with a short aisle separating the two. In addition, the classes only had half-walls on either side. Teachers would be simultaneously in charge of between two and four classes. This meant teachers would "actively" teach one class, and assign "quiet work" to the other class(es) they were also responsible for. Thus students who were not being "actively" taught were typically assigned tasks to copy texts into notebooks, told to do "handwriting practice," or instructed to silently commit texts to memory. The result was a strongly teach-

er-centric environment, as well as heavy reliance on Hindi, a language in which the teachers found it easier to maintain control. The students who were being "actively" taught, meanwhile, found themselves being given few opportunities to speak because the teachers again desired to maintain control. This partially alienated the teacher, the centralized resource of the classroom, from all students, since the focus was primarily on noise control and discipline. This classroom design resulted, then, on constraining the students' ability to participate within their own classroom; furthermore, their learning process was dictated by the need for noise control rather than on their educational needs. Both these factors combined to marginalize the children within the learning context.

***Translations***

Observations at the school revealed that English was taught largely via translations of words, phrases, or sentences into Hindi. This study revealed that the unsystematic paraphrasing and translation practices led to serious difficulties in understanding English texts for the students, and placed constraints on their ability to participate in their own learning. Below, for example, is an extract from a lesson reading sequence, of Chapter 12 from a Class V Baby Birds English textbook (observed on 2/7/2011). A teacher, *Bade* sir, read the text out loud and simultaneously translated it in the following manner (all words in Italics have been translated from the Hindi by the author):

> "Once a mouse was roaming a house." "Once" *meaning one time*, "mouse" *meaning* [Hindi word for mouse], *the mouse was roaming around*, "in the house." *One time one mouse was roaming around in a house*. "He was also hungry" *He was also hungry*. "He went into all the nooks and could not get anything," *the mouse had entered the house, was hungry, also therefore he went to all the rooms but he could not find anything to eat, he was not able to get anything to eat*. "At last" *meaning at the end, where did he reach?* "Kitchen" *he reached, in the* [Hindi word for kitchen]. "In search of food," *he was searching for food*.

As is evident, texts were mostly translated and paraphrased into Hindi without pointing out which syntactic and lexical items were being introduced or excluded in the process of translation. Students' ability to understand meanings of individual words was adversely affected as a result, as multiple observations and interviews I conducted revealed. In fact, interviews showed that without exception, the focal children could not understand most of the English in their textbooks across subjects, because of the difficulty they experienced in decoding and comprehending English texts when they studied texts by themselves. This, in turn, led to increasing dependence on memorization for tests and exams. Since teachers controlled the translations of the English, the children found themselves distanced from the language. This further constrained their ability to participate in the learning of English, since the language had to

be mediated through translations by the teachers. The process of translation thus reduced their ability to directly access the language, and, in this manner, I argue, created dis-citizens of the children in the classroom.

### *Communicative Language Teaching*

In this section, I argue that the largely lecture-style, teacher-centric pedagogy the children experienced in school limited their opportunities for using English communicatively, and, as a result, contributed to their dis-citizenship within the classroom. While their textbooks valorized communicative language teaching (CLT) methods and the lessons were organized around them, exercises demanding interaction, group work, or communication were invariably ignored. For example, the Interactive Skills section in the Class III Baby Birds English textbook contained the following exercise, which, as usual, the teacher skipped over. The exercise, on "good habits," had an exchange that students were asked to read out loud in groups of two (each of the pair of students was to read alternating lines):

> **A) Talk about the good habits. Talk in pairs**:
> Joy: I plucked a flower from the garden.
> Tina: Don't pluck flowers.
> Manu: I speak to her loudly.
> Rina: Always speak softly.
> Rony: Let us run on this soft grass.
> Nina: Don't run only walk on the grass.
> Ali: Let us fly a kite on the terrace.
> Raja: My room is all messed up.
> Tara: Keep your room tidy.

Beyond this example pointing to the teachers' avoidance of communicative tasks, this exercise, as we see, shows how the lessons offered only stilted and decontextualized speaking practice, a point characteristic of most exercises provided in the children's textbooks. The *kinds* of communicative exercises offered by the textbooks, therefore, also need to be recognized as constraints within the language-learning context.

A reason for the neglect of the communicative component by the teachers was possibly because CLT methods used in the SCB textbooks contained exercises that were modeled on approaches that had been created elsewhere, under different conditions, and for a different population of students and teachers (Block, 2010; Canagarajah, 2005). At SCB, thus, communicative exercises were, as noted, invariably sidelined, and teachers continued teaching using grammar-translation methods, which was how they themselves had acquired English. The disconnect between the two resulted in students not only getting limited or no communicative practice, but the students also found themselves stuck in a puzzling situation where their textbooks' pedagogical motivation

clashed with classroom practice. Both these aspects obstructed the children's English language development, and thus further contributed to their educational dis-citizenship.

***Rote Memorization***

There was a great deal of emphasis on memorizing texts, an aspect that, alongside other literacy practices, as I argue in this section, led to the children's dis-citizenship. Typically, study periods involved either students' copying texts or memorizing large chunks of text. Students memorized stories, poems, entire lessons, and also questions and answers posed at the end of the lessons (see next section). Here is an example of a model composition for the topic prompt "The Cow" for Class VI provided in the grammar reader:

> 1. The cow is an useful animal. 2. We call her Gau Mata. 3. She has four legs, two ears, two eyes and two horns. 4. She eats grass and straw. 5. She gives us milk. 6. She gives calf. 7. The calves plough the field. 8. They are also used in cart. 9. Hindu worships the cow. 10. Cow are found in black, white and brown colours.

The Class VI students were expected to memorize these essays for their unit tests or exams. The same topic prompt, "The Cow," for Class VII, the next in the grammar series sequence, contained only marginally modified text:

> Ram has a cow. She is domestic and gentle. She is brown. She has four legs, two eyes, and two ears. She has two horns. Her tail is very long. She has her calf. She loves her calf very much. She eats green grass and straw. She is very fond of gram and wheat. We worship and call her Gau Mata.

For class VIII, the same topic was provided with the following model in the next level in the grammar series:

> The cow is a useful animal. They are white, black, brown or spotted. She eats grass, straw, oil cake or anything that is given. She gives us milk. Milk is good for all. She gives us calves. They plought fields. Her dung is good for farming and cooking food. The Hindus worship her.

Most of the memorization activities were focused on remembering texts for unit tests and mid-term or final examinations. While rote learning can play a positive role in teaching contexts, the almost exclusive reliance on rote learning at SCB School, resulted, regrettably, in a context where teaching was focused on test performance rather than learning. This limited the English that the children acquired, as both observations and interviews revealed, since there were few incentives for the children to understand English or to compose in the language. Ultimately, the emphasis on memorization resulted in the de-

valuation of the children's own voices and, yet, again, led to the children's dis-citizenship within the learning process.

### *Giving answers*

In this section, I argue that the teachers' providing answers to questions in the textbooks also contributed to the children's dis-citizenship. Teachers provided almost all answers to the questions posed in textbooks, which the children then memorized for tests. Let us take a closer look at this. During observations on February 7, 2011, *Bade* sir offered responses for the chapter, "Bachendri Pal," about the first Indian woman to scale Mount Everest, from the Class IV Baby Birds English textbook that he had just recently taught. He pointed to the question: "(B). Write the root words for the following words," followed by a numbered list of eight words that appeared in the lesson. *Bade* sir walked up to the blackboard, then wrote out the answers: 1) mountain, 2) teach, 3) learn, 4) high, 5) continue, 6) climb, 7) success, 8) complete. He then wrote out the answers to the remaining WH questions from the book, until the bell rang for lunch.

The stress on memorizing answers for testing meant that critical engagement with English – the language in which questions were posed – was minimal, with students being expected to memorize and regurgitate answers supplied earlier by their instructors. There was another issue. The children also thought that they were given answers because, in the words of one focal child, "They don't think we are capable of answering questions." Thus, both these aspects contributed to the children's dis-citizenship in the classroom; the children were not only robbed of the opportunity to answer the questions posed in their books, but they were also made to feel as if they were not capable of answering them. In this manner, the children were further marginalized in the classroom, "dis-citizened" within the learning process.

## Concluding remarks

### Obstacles to fuller participation

The data thus revealed that there were multiple aspects of classroom instruction which posed obstacles in the English learning experience for the focal children, and thus contributed to their dis-citizenship. Firstly, the multigrade pedagogy modified teaching and learning in several ways, leading to a focus on minimizing disruption rather than learning. It also restricted their access to their teacher in the classroom. Secondly, the heavy reliance on unsystematic translation and paraphrasing techniques further alienated the students from English. Thirdly, the disconnect between the Communicative Language Teaching model used to organize the textbooks and the teachers' grammar-translation approaches resulted in difficulty for the students; furthermore, the neglect of communicative activities constrained their ability to produce Eng-

lish. Finally, the extensive reliance on rote memorization and teaching to the test (by giving out answers) resulted in limiting students' access to content as well as English. This kind of "English-medium" instruction, I argue, does not offer students the pathway to "fuller participation" invoked in the *Position Paper* (NCERT, 2006), since it does not offer real access to English. In fact, it instead creates further dis-citizenship for marginalized students, by offering English instruction, more or less, in name alone. In this manner, the socio-economic disparity in India gets exacerbated through English instruction, just as Mohanty (2006) and Sheorey (2006) found.

**Towards fuller citizenship in the classroom**

In this concluding section, I outline some core issues and questions for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to consider going forward:

- **Language policy**: There should be a reconsideration of the relationship between language and citizenship in the Indian context. Some questions to consider are: What are the criteria for citizenship in multilingual India? How does it relate to language? How do we problematize the kinds of dis-citizenship resulting through the "fuller participations" engendered through English, given that it is a minority language? How do we problematize this within language policy discourses, such as the *Position Paper*?
- **"English-medium" instruction**: As this investigation indicates, "English-medium" is a problematic construct. There are important questions to consider. What criteria are used to determine a school's (self-)labeling as "English-medium"? What differential opportunities are afforded through different forms of "English-medium" schooling?
- **Teaching to the test**: A modification in pedagogy is recommended, one focusing on learning and comprehension, rather than rote learning and test performance. This is a larger ideological issue which will require greater dialogue within the national educational consciousness.
- **Teacher training**: Additional support is necessary for Indian teachers who battle complex language encounters, multigrade teaching contexts, limited supplies and resources, ideological disconnect with textbooks, to name only a few aspects. The current Indian educational system does not adequately cater to these issues in teacher training; it is imperative that urgent attention is brought to bear on these issues.
- **Vernacular support**: Finally, given India's multilingual wealth, it is of urgent importance that there be a strengthening of the vernacular education base in conjunction with the English educational foundation. It is particularly important that higher education in vernacular languages be encouraged so that English does not continue to play the exclusionary role it does presently.

Ultimately, in order for all Indians to be able to "participate fully" in the national arena, we have to transform the discourse, from focusing on the acquisition of English as a symbolic entity towards the acquisition of knowledge for the good of society.

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