

Wheel Turns Full Circle

Early this January the West Bengal government gave a three-month extension to the Ranju Gopal Mukherjee committee with the brief to develop an “unambiguous and clear-cut” policy on the teaching of English at the primary school level in the state. The committee’s report had, along with some 250 recommendations, contained a “personal opinion”, vaguely worded to boot, that English should be taught at “the primary level”. The government was evidently not satisfied with this beating about the bush and wanted the committee to come out unambiguously on the subject. The 13-member committee set up in 2001 had been charged with looking into various aspects of primary education in government and aided schools in the state, including syllabi, introduction of vocational education and, more controversially, the question of teaching of English at the primary level.

The government’s dissatisfaction with committee’s vague formulation is understandable because, following the recommendation of the Pabitra Sarkar report of 1998, English is already being taught from Class III in all government and aided schools in the state. The reintroduction of English from Class III marked a revision of a 15-year policy under which English was taught only from Class V as had been suggested by the Ashok Mitra commission. The question for the Ranju Gopal Mukherjee committee to answer was thus whether the teaching of English should begin from Class I itself instead of from Class III as at present. The committee has been now asked to face the issue squarely.

For some time there has been growing support within the state government and outside for the reintroduction of English from Class I in government and aided schools. In fact the government has been exploring ways of moving in that direction acknowledging the growing urge for learning English among large sections of the state’s population. For the last 12 years a non-government body, the Primary Education Development Board, has been conducting a scholarship test for Class IV students which has proved increasingly popular. In 1991 when the test was launched some 20,000 children had appeared for the examination, but by 2002 the number had risen to 2.94 lakh. Even the government’s school education department concedes that parents find it attractive to prepare children to take the test because performance in the test has come to be accepted as evidence of ability in English. That apart, the fact is that while English may not be taught in government and aided schools, parents have been opting to bear the not inconsiderable cost of having the subject taught privately. According to a recent SCERT study, even in rural areas of the state parents are increasingly preferring English medium schools for their children’s education.

Political parties in the state have not been oblivious to these trends and over time reintroduction of English in primary schools has become a live political issue. In the 2001 assembly elections, the joint election manifesto of the opposition alliance had included a promise to reinduct English at the primary level. More recently several teachers’ organisations, both Left and others, threatened to launch agitations if the government bowed to the Mukherjee committee’s ‘opinion’

which, it was felt, could be interpreted to justify a shift of English teaching from Class III back to Class V. Even organisations linked to the CPI and the Forward Bloc criticised the committee for not having consulted them on the matter.

The state government itself has accepted in principle the global consultancy firm McKinsey’s suggestion that teaching of English should be vigorously encouraged so that girls and boys from the state could compete on equal terms for job opportunities in, for example, the IT sector. In this context the government has been advised to take careful note of the policies followed by other states with regard to the teaching of English so that job aspirants from the state were not placed at a disadvantage.

All indications are that the reintroduction of English in Class I is now only a matter of time in West Bengal. The Pabitra Sarkar committee had in any case already paved the way in 1998 by recommending teaching of English from Class III immediately and a further review of the policy in 2004 on the basis of a survey to decide whether English teaching should begin from a lower class still.^{EPW}