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Historicising English Studies in Indian Universities

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Abstract

The expansion of English as a language of the masses and English Studies as a discipline is a phenomenon. This makes a curious study of the origin of English Studies as an academic discipline in the country of its origin and the exploration of its vertical growth in Indian academia. This brings our focus to the history of English Studies in Indian Universities and how the discipline has expanded over the years. This paper explores the history of English Studies in the country of its origin, then it takes us to the expansion of English Studies as a discipline in Indian universities over the years from British India to the present day.. Here we also discuss what are the problems the discipline is facing and what are the measures needed to strengthen the discipline.

Key words: Discipline, English Studies, Indian Universities, British, research, curriculum

Historicising English Studies in Indian Universities

As a practical matter, 'English' in India has occupied a prominent position both as a language and as a discipline. In fact, the history of the English language in India is closely connected with the rise of British Empire as a political and economic power in colonial India. So, it goes back to Lord Macaulay, who advocated English education in India. As, N. Krishnaswamy (2006) rightly notes, "The story of English is a fascinating story of power and resistance, of invasion and absorption, and of authority and subversion; it is absorbing as any historical novel" (v). In India, we have witnessed several problems related to English as a medium of instruction at all levels; problems related to linguistic nationalism, English being seen as part of elitist and cosmopolitan identity, so on and so forth. Similarly, there are scores of research papers and academic works on Indian English, issues related to its status as a language, among others.

However, we are not much concerned with English as a language issue here, but English as a discipline, as a subject; something called English Studies. The emergence of English as a discipline across the globe is an interesting story. Though, it emerged as a discipline towards the end of the nineteenth century, it has been the

center of academic debates. Over the past two centuries, it has travelled far and wide across the globe due to some historical and political factors such as Colonialism and Globalization, among others.

English Studies in the country of its origin

Before we look further into the status of English Studies in India, let us have a glance at the growth of English Studies as a discipline in the country of its origin. Raymond Williams (1958) points out the original meaning of literature, which has been central to the formulation of English as a discipline. Until the end of the 18th century, it referred to all types of writing; scientific, autobiographical, historical as well as fictional. The notion of literature as a specialized, highly valued kind of writing which deals with the imaginative or creative as opposed to the factual or practical is largely as invention of the post-romantic period. Simultaneously, Brian Doyle (1989) argues the rise of English Studies is a process motivated by social rather than intellectual ends, with the discipline being promoted as uniquely suited to a mission of national cultivation. And, he sees the establishment of academic English as part of a wider social movement developing between the 1880s and the 1920s, identified with events such as the publication of the Newbolt Report and the founding of the English Association which sought to renew cultural leadership by disseminating a sense of tradition, culture and national pride.

Likewise, A J Palmer (1965) asserts that New Universities like King's, Nottingham and Manchester encouraged the study of literature as an agent for social mission much before the subject was admitted into syllabuses at Oxford and Cambridge. Then, John Churton Collins led a campaign to have English literature as an academic subject at Oxford. He believed that if literature was to enter university syllabuses, it had to do so, on the same grounds as other newly professionalized disciplines. It had to demonstrate that, it was marked by objective methods of enquiry and a concern for accumulation of knowledge for its own sake, possess a recognized structure that would map the student's progress from novice to expert through a succession of lessons, examinations and qualifications. However, Oxford's insistence on the canon's centrality was countered by Cambridge's more liberal attitude towards the body of texts that constituted literature.

Along similar lines, F R Leavis (1969) suggests that English should be repositioned as pivotal subject forming a center of attraction and point of liaison for all other disciplines within the university. Leavis regards English as necessarily interdisciplinary, since the work of the great writers which form its syllabus inevitably encompasses a much broader interest in life, society, civilization and thought. His sketch for an English school aims to focus all academic study around the English faculty and strengthen the power base of his own subject. Leavis was engaged in a struggle to consolidate the new dominance of English in relation to classics and philosophy. Leavis felt that the rift between culture and society can be mended through the integrated study

possible within a university discipline. Because, in any period it is upon a very small minority that the discerning appreciation of art and literature depends, Leavis sees the discipline of literary study as the safeguard of this minority culture. He observes that the literary critics' task is to make a kind of strategic retreat from society in order to form an academic discipline which will eventually achieve an interdisciplinary synthesis and a transformation of society. So Leavis' PhD dissertation on the relationship of Journalism and Literature became the foundation for Cultural Studies. Positioning Cultural Studies challenges the disciplinary identity of literary studies by dissolving the category of literature into the more inclusive notion of culture.

To put it in a nut shell, Robert Eaglestone (2000) asserts that English is a system which is interrelated and bound together overtime and space and people by certain principles of coherence. But, at the same time it is a system which is open, always in the making, never closed and never finally made. English has polarized its position on its function in education; from single standard language to recognition of varieties, from emphasis on writing to attention to speech, from dictionary definitions and grammatical rules to flexibility of usage, from canon of great works to open for no canon, from national curriculum to local syllabus, from single dominant cultural identity to multicultural differences and from national views of the subject to conceptions which are at once more regional/local and more international/global. With this background, from history of English Studies in its country of origin, let us narrow down our discussion to English Studies in India.

English Studies in India

The origin of English Studies in India can be related to the famous Macaulay's Minute. It declared that it was necessary and possible to make natives of this country, good English scholars and that to this end their efforts ought to be directed. Even Lord Bentinck asserted that the great object of the British government ought to be the promotion of European literature and science among the natives of India and all funds appropriated for the purpose of education would be best employed on English education alone.

However, after independence, British influence on English in India diminished. As, C D Narasimhaiah (1993) says that the very emergence of India and other erstwhile colonies of Great Britain as free nations coincided with the cessation of British influence on English Studies outside England. Likewise, in America a major national literature emerged and Australia too initiated a counter-romantic movement in its poetry and in fiction.

English Studies in Indian Universities

Indian Universities responded to the assertion of national and racial identity and felt the urge to give something of their own. So, Indian academics began to talk about the indigenous writers and these writers infiltrated English departments and became respectable in the eyes of students and teachers. As a result,

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undergraduate students began to demand that an Indian novel be prescribed under general English in place of an English novel. Further, Indian writers found favour with research scholars too. To a great extent, Indian universities responded to Indian writing faster than American universities responded to their own literature. In late seventies, Commonwealth Literature caught attention of research scholars. As a result, comparative approaches to criticism became inevitable. Revival of interest in traditional Indian poetics due to the awareness of the relevance of cultural criticism gave birth to creative work as well. Consequently, the Indian student discovered the benefit of working in a pluralistic and highly rewarding milieu.

Nevertheless, Meenakshi Mukherjee (1993) says that perpetual framework of postcolonial India continues to be conditioned by the original impulse that formulated English Studies in British India. She says that, a concealed academic hierarchy still places literature in English above the literature of any other Indian language even now.

To sum up from the above derivatives, in this present context of India, English Studies consists of literature, language, linguistics and cultural studies. Meanwhile, in postcolonial context, English language was looked at as a language of both domination and marginalization. It created a new class of people who controlled the knowledge society and others felt marginalized. Social inequalities brought by proficiency in English language and the increasing domination of the English language in multilingual Indian context, are the issues to be addressed when we discuss the position of English in India. Due to globalization process, English language has got more prominence than what it was supposed to be in the present Indian job market. So, there is an increased demand for English language proficiency and skills, which has become a prominent part of prescribed syllabus of English education now. Corporatization of education system has put increased pressure on English language teaching to focus on employability skills. So, it led to attract more funding and investment to English language teaching and less on literary studies.

Meanwhile, numerous issues and crises in the discipline in English Studies have been addressed and measures have been taken, mainly focussing on English Language Teaching. In a larger perspective, these concerns have encouraged splitting the discipline of English Studies as diverse departments in order to study Literature, Linguistics, Communication Skills and Cultural Studies separately, as it is already done in some universities in India as well as abroad. On the other hand, these crises debates encouraged expansion of English Studies into a major discipline to study the world literatures in large, inclusive of every aspect of it.

English Studies in India has often been an object of enquiry. It has generated stimulating debates in the academia. Some of the issues discussed in the debates are the problem of alienation in the teaching of English literature; the issue of cultural baggage that the English literature carries; the need for introducing Indian

Literature and reducing our focus on British literature; resisting mono-lingual and metropolitan bias by taking advantage of bilingualism and traditional culture in our approach to the practice of the discipline; lang-lit debate, so on and so forth. Further, several conferences and papers more often than not have debated on the issue of teaching of English as a language at the tertiary level; the relevance of teaching English to culturally diverse groups; curriculum design debates, some of which argue for teaching English for employability purpose, etc. These issues, especially questions regarding English Studies, have been investigated by several scholars and here we can undertake a review of some significant debates on English Studies. Some of the most important studies in this mode on crises in English Studies in India are by Gauri Vishwanathan (1989); Swathi Joshi (1991); Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan (1992); Sara Suleri (1992); Sudhakar Marathe et al. (1993); and Susie Tharu (1997). Realistically speaking, when we look at these studies, we understand that above mentioned studies certainly engage with several vital problems, from pedagogic questions to ideological and cultural questions. It might be argued that few studies have paid close attention to understand research trends in English Studies.

In this context it is worth noting that the only paper that directly deals with research in English departments in Indian universities is, Shastry's (1993) article "Objectives and Meaningfulness of Research", which narrates personal observations about the status of research in English Studies. He also examines that there are certain areas neglected in research like Influence Studies, Translation Studies, Lexicographical Studies, Comparative Aesthetics and Travelogue.

Yet, this lack of focus on the analysis of the research aspect of English Studies actually is not to be seen as a gap in the field nor a serious lacuna, because research in English Studies has gained momentum very recently in India. To save the phenomenon, the history of English Studies justifies such a marginalization; it was a natural outcome of the historical milieu. Earlier, just doing MA in English was enough, as it met the professional demand. Research in the humanities in general and in English Studies in particular was limited to the universities. There was neither a condition created nor any professional demand to carry out research.

So, the major issue discussed above is the interpretation of English literary texts and need to come out of colonial mind set. There is also the need to form Indian theories of literary criticism like Rasa, Alankara, Dhvani etc, instead of structuralism, deconstruction, Reader response theory etc. The main propagator of this Postcolonial thought is Edward Said. He emphasizes that there is political subtext of the mainstream western writing. Similarly, Gramsci talks of literary texts as inducing the conquered to accept the ways of thought, beliefs, culture and the system of values of the conqueror. So many literary scholars feel the need to decolonize our English Studies by judging English literary texts not by just European critical theories, but also by Indian critical theories. They also feel the need to remove certain colonial English texts from the syllabi of

Indian universities, as these texts were used to subvert us, naturally made us feel inferior. Many of these texts are irrelevant in the context of Indian culture and society.

But, excessive emphasis on Indian response to English literature should not make us feel isolated from the rest of the world in this era of globalization. As C D Narasimhaiah (2002) argues that Indian writing in English cannot and must not replace English literature. It should be inclusive of all literature and let Indian Writing in English share in a major way with the best efforts of English literature.

So, we can't afford to remain aloof from the latest developments in the field of world literature. We may stand against English literature, but not against English language as it is the global language. It is the language of research works in major fields of study. So, English should be taught without any western or eastern prejudices. The study of English language and translation from world literature in addition to vernacular literature should be discussed in the Indian universities. So, what constitutes to the institutional life of English Studies in Indian universities? From general understanding, it comprises; literature/s, language, teaching, learning, translation studies, relation between literary studies and linguistics et al.

In Indian context, there is a recent study conducted by Ravindra Tahsildar (2011). *English for Researchers: A Study of Reference Skills* which identifies research skills required for carrying out research. However, a detailed empirical investigation of doctoral research in English Studies has not been attempted so far. Again, Ravindra B. Tahsildar (2004) in his survey of 'Research Trends in English Studies in Indian Universities', examines that British literature enjoys the privilege place in Indian universities till today. He observes that English Studies in India is more than 190 years old and has been a topic of discussion in the last decade of the twentieth century through seminars and conferences. The question of relevance of teaching British literature has been a topic of discussion through many seminars and conferences. These discussions centred on teaching experiences in postgraduate departments in English in recognized institutions in Indian universities. Though some universities have started offering non-British literature like Indian Writing in English, Indian Literature in English Translation, American literature, Commonwealth literature, but they are offered only as optional papers. Literary Criticism is a core paper in most of the universities in India. Indian Poetics is hardly touched upon. English Linguistics is introduced in some universities due to the recommendations of various committees. The intention behind introducing Linguistics is to train and enable the future English teachers. Due to globalisation, some universities have introduced papers namely; English Language Teaching, Spoken English, Communication for Business, English for Specific Purposes. With increased enrolment of girl students to post graduate programmes; Women's Writing and Gender Studies are introduced. However, Translation Studies and Aesthetics are neglected areas still. Interestingly, Shakespeare is finding his way slowly. Recently, we find unorthodox papers like Indian Diaspora Writing, Literature and Gender, Film and

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Literature, Postcolonial Perspectives on Texts and English Studies in India are included. Culture Studies, Film Studies and Media Studies are the new interdisciplinary papers included. Globalization has opened new opportunities for English Studies. And it has made English Studies a utilitarian one like management and technical education. Decline in the enrolment to traditional post graduate courses, has brought this change in curriculum to make the course, job market friendly. So, Communicative Skills in English is the latest subject which most students opt for. Of late, some universities have introduced research related papers like, Research Writing Methods and Writing for Academic and Professional Purposes. These application related papers have overtaken the place of literary studies.

To conclude, when we look back at research activities in English departments in Indian universities we could see a pattern of shifting interest areas among the scholars. Initially, British English literature was the main focus of interest among the research scholars. Then onwards, American literature as well as Commonwealth literature were introduced. Meanwhile, Indianization of English department became the topic of all major conferences and research papers in the postcolonial context. As a result, Indian Writing in English found flavour among researchers and it was followed by Vernacular literature in English translation which grabbed attention of scholars after Independence. In other way, impact of English literature on vernacular literature was also an interesting study. Whether to follow English model for the study of our own literature or develop our own model was much debatable question. So, departments moved on from English literature to literatures in English. Indian writings in English translation also attracted the attention of the research scholars. Comparing English works with vernacular works became very popular field of interest among research scholars in English Studies.

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