

Confronting English at a Women's College in India: Stories of (Dis)empowerment and Decoloniality

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The coloniality of English in India continues to be a source of tension and paradox. The language maintains its elite metropolitan prestige yet holds the aspirations for social mobility among millions in peripheral communities. Its spread is publicly condemned by nationalist politicians yet English-medium schools continue to proliferate. Patriarchal codes implore boys to learn English to boost their job prospects but urge girls to instead mind their marriage prospects. Most scholars lament the social divisions English has brought, while others insist that English represents a tool for decolonial resistance, offering economic opportunity, voice and agency to those in marginalized communities who otherwise face relentless barriers of gender, class, caste and religion. In this talk, based on research for my doctoral thesis, I explore how young women from disadvantaged and non-metropolitan communities navigate the many tensions around English as they complete their higher education and plan their lives beyond. The study was conducted at an English-medium women's college in a small city in the state of Andhra Pradesh, where promises of student empowerment through English collide with the intersectional barriers of gender and social class, and wide disparities between the English haves and the have nots. Through the lens of student narratives, interactive interviews and the capability approach theoretical framework, I examine how English both empowers and disempowers students' capabilities like aspiration, autonomy and voice. I further probe the role of status, fear and patriarchy as structural constraints which hinder the development of key capabilities. Finally, I propose a decolonial pedagogy which challenges elite and 'native speaker' standards, nurtures translingual and participatory learning spaces, and emboldens students to use English on their own terms.

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