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The Story of My English

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Can an autobiographically-inclined social history reveal the role of English in shaping caste privilege, regulating class mobility and enabling individual agency? This essay risks an answer.

As far as I can remember, it began with the word "similar". I was about seven and my brother was four at the time. We were living in a tiny mining township in what is now Chhattisgarh (then Madhya Pradesh) called Dalli Rajhara, where my father was an engineer in a public sector company.

Our next-door neighbours were a childless couple called Siddiqui, and they encouraged us to visit them. Their living room had a rectangular metal folding table just like the one we had in ours. Instantly recognisable by its dappled aquamarine surface and tubular frame, that type of table was quite common in those days.

Anyway, one evening when the Siddiquis had visitors for tea and the table had somehow become the topic of conversation, I announced to the adults that it was similar to the one that we had. The conversation would have been in the usual Hindi-with-frequent-English-words, and I don't remember exactly what I said, but I did use the word "similar" in an entirely English sentence. The always indulgent Mr. Siddiqui went into raptures, urging his somewhat bemused visitors to join him in praising me. I remember being both elated and embarrassed, in a rather nice way. So much so, in fact, that I ran home at once to tell my mother. I was speaking excitedly in the dialect of Kannada that was our only home language, and at first she did not understand what exactly had happened. Her immediate parental reflex was that she needed to apologise to the Siddiquis for something I had done. But she eventually understood that I had somehow been a credit to her because I knew a certain English word.

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Philosophers tell us that language is our earliest and most fundamental worldly possession. Indeed, language not only gives us our world, in a certain sense it *is* the world. But "English" in independent India is not only or simply a language, it is so much more. It can convey the ease of entitlement or the anxiety of aspiration. It can accurately render the subtle shades of our infinitesimal status hierarchies. "English" is also our most marketed commodity. It is sold to everyone everywhere - on the internet, on highway hoardings (along with vocational diplomas and gold jewellery), and on humble wall-advertisements (alongside the sex clinics and marriage brokers).

At once foreign and familiar, oppressive and emancipatory, instrumental and symbolic, English in contemporary India is a complex and contradictory phenomenon. Its layered and richly textured stories cannot be confined within a single discipline or genre.

The thought that one of these stories could be mine did not occur to me until much later, when I was living abroad in an English-speaking country. In my first year as a doctoral student and teaching assistant at a university in California, I was struck - and irritated - by the frequent compliments I received on my English. My teachers, fellow graduate students, and the undergraduates whom we taught felt obliged to say that my English was impressive, "killer", "real neat" and so on. I did not understand why this praise had the odd effect of annoying me, until, eventually, it started to make me angry.

The flashpoint was reached one afternoon at a downtown bus stop while waiting for a bus to the campus. An earnest and affluent-looking white young man, obviously an undergraduate, joined me in casual conversation. I was not paying much attention until he asked, "How do you speak such good English?". All the accumulated aggravation instantly ignited, and I turned on him with icy sarcasm: Did he ever wonder how *he* came to be speaking English? Was he aware that German came within one Congressional vote of becoming the official language of the USA? Did he know that Spanish was projected to overtake English to become the majority language of California by the year 2000? Would he be interested in knowing that English had been spoken in India since the 1700s, almost as long as it had been in the USA? As he shrank away in bewilderment, the hapless victim of my unprovoked attack was saved by the arrival of the bus.

The bus saved me too. Inexplicable rage had propelled me into dishonesty. My rhetorical claim-questions were: an outright lie (the German vote had actually been on whether some government documents ought to be translated); a significant exaggeration (Spanish-majority arrived in California only in 2014); and a gross misrepresentation (the presence of English-speaking officials of the East Indian Company hardly meant that "English was being spoken in India" in the 1700s).

I was ashamed of myself and forced to introspect. Why had I over-reacted to what was, in the mid-1980s, a fairly reasonable question from someone unfamiliar with India? Surely a brown-skinned person speaking in a strangely fluent yet oddly accented English - sounding unlike other brown, black, East Asian or white people - required some explanation. My innocent interlocutor was simply asking for the story of my English because, from his American viewpoint, there *was* a story there.

But that made my anger even more puzzling. Further digging, already difficult and uncomfortable, brought me to an even more embarrassing discovery about myself. Praise for my English offended me because it seemed to signal surprise at its being *unexpectedly* good. Bluntly put, I was affronted because people had not recognized my proper social status, and seemed to place me lower than they should have. This was petty, because it involved the unreasonable expectation that foreigners identify the status markers that Indians recognised effortlessly, even unconsciously. It was also mortifying because I thought I had made myself into a person without "status hang-ups" or "ego problems". Mystery solved, I trained myself to respond conventionally to compliments and queries, and that seemed to end the story.

Almost a decade later, back in India, I read another story that reopened mine all over again.

II

"The story of my 'Sanskrit'" is the title of a famous essay by Kumud Pawde, professor of Sanskrit, well-known Marathi writer, and dalit-feminist scholar-activist. It was originally the third chapter of *Antahsphot* (literally "Implosion"), a collection of Prof. Pawde's autobiographical essays, known as a milestone in dalit-feminist writing.

As the author acknowledges, it was the English translation of this particular essay that brought her a world-wide readership and stoked interest in *Antahsphot* . In it, Kumud Pawde (née Somkuwar) describes her struggle to overcome casteist opposition on the way to fulfilling her lifelong ambition to become a Sanskrit scholar. For a young Mahar woman in the Nagpur of the 1950s, 'Sanskrit' had to be set apart by quotation marks - it was not allowed to be just a language, academic discipline or personal ambition.

> Kumud Pawde leverages the obvious tension between her dalit identity and 'Sanskrit' as a quintessentially brahmanical object to produce a powerful text that indicts the practices of caste discrimination.

In the short space of roughly ten pages, Pawde describes her journey from a childhood fascination with the sound of mantras being recited at an *upanayana* ceremony, to earning an MA with Distinction in Sanskrit, and finally, (after the intervention of a Central Government Cabinet minister and the Chief Minister of Maharashtra), getting a job as a lecturer at a government college. It is an eventful, friction-filled journey scarred by the derision and contempt of the non-dalit castes, specially brahmins, capped by the venomous condescension of a famous university professor. But it also acknowledges the warm encouragement of a brahmin school teacher, impartially fair undergraduate teachers, and various other non-dalit well-wishers, in addition to the support of her own family and community.

Clearly, "The story of my 'Sanskrit'" is about caste and not about Sanskrit. In fact, as a claimant to the genre of the "testimonio", *Antahsphot* is not even (or only) the autobiography of Kumud Pawde - it is a first-person account, or testimonial, of the life-experiences of a community. The hallmark of the testimonio is that it is a sort of "resistance literature" that seeks to voice the experiences of a hitherto silenced and oppressed community. It challenges dominant literary conventions by asserting its representative function, which in turn is justified by the compelling moral claims of the community being represented.

Given her political intent, Kumud Pawde leverages the obvious tension between her dalit identity and 'Sanskrit' as a quintessentially brahmanical object to produce a powerful text that indicts the practices of caste discrimination.

It was only gradually that the possibility of a connection between the very different stories of her Sanskrit and my English dawned on me. The link was the perverse reaction to praise that we seemed to share. Kumud Pawde spends the first two pages (or almost a quarter) of her story explaining how and why praise for her Sanskrit felt "like hot spears", like being stung by gadflies, or scorched by hot embers. This was because upper caste praise (which often expanded to include her pronunciation, cooking skills, and overall

"brahmin-like cultural refinement" (*brahmani susanskrutpana)*), was invariably provoked by the "dreadful anomaly" (*bhayanak visangati*) of her caste identity as a dalit.

Coming from the opposite direction, my annoyance at praise that seemed to underestimate my social status did not (at that time) seem caste-related to me, nor was it as viscerally upsetting as it was for Pawde. But even the faint echo of a similarity prompted further questions.

If the benefits of privilege and the costs of prejudice are two sides of the same coin, can we produce progressive accounts of privilege using roughly the same techniques used to produce redemptive accounts of struggles against prejudice? Can I as a brahmin-born man tell the story of my English in such a way that it uncovers my caste privilege in a manner comparable to that in which Kumud Pawde, as a dalit-born woman, tells the story of her Sanskrit to expose the caste discrimination that she faced? This is the difficult and risky question that I eventually grasped that I wanted to ask.

> We do not yet know how to push descriptions of privilege beyond the conceptually unhelpful confines of disavowal and guilt.

The difficulty of the question has to do with the lack of symmetry between privileged inclusion and prejudiced exclusion. Although it is true, in a general sense, that caste is a relationship and as such the privileges and disprivileges it nurtures are part of a zero-sum game, this is not necessarily, or not often, available to individual experience. For example, the humiliation that a "lower" caste person experiences because of an act of caste discrimination does not, immediately or always, produce its equal-but-opposite sense of affirmation or dignity in an "upper" caste person. Even where a counterpart seems to exist, it is difficult to establish that it has an equal-but-opposite symmetry. In sum, privilege is something more than the mere absence of disprivilege, and something other than its simple reversal.

The risk inherent in the question is due to the divergent consequences of descriptions. Modernity has created a standpoint from which the oppressed may speak in a manner that redeems both the oppressed and the oppressor. There is no comparable standpoint for those burdened with the identity of the oppressor. We do not yet know how to push descriptions of privilege beyond the conceptually unhelpful confines of disavowal and guilt. Even well-intentioned attempts to describe privilege - if they fail to pull off the difficult feat of simultaneously undoing it - may degenerate into sanctimonious odes to "merit", or worse, into unabashed celebrations of caste-class entitlement. Last but not least is the risk of inadvertent appropriation. There are those who argue that privilege should only be condemned, and further, that the space from which it is condemned should be exclusively reserved for those with historical links to the oppressed.

However, to the extent that they are real, the difficulties and risks of describing privilege cannot themselves be described away - they must be faced.

III

Aside from the uncanny but mild resemblance in our reactions to praise, there is almost nothing in common between the stories of Kumud Pawde's Sanskrit and my English. How could it be otherwise? Apart from the obvious differences between the individuals involved and their circumstances, there is the unbridgeable gap between the two languages. English is not Sanskrit; in fact, it is unlike any other Indian language today. This is because of the unique position that English occupies in relation to two key areas of social concern, mobility and distinction.

Social mobility, or the process by which the social status of individuals and groups changes over time, is not just a matter of climbing the income and wealth ladder. It necessarily involves alterations in non-economic markers of identity such as occupation, residential neighbourhood, food habits, and other life style practices, including the claiming or disowning of languages. Acquiring English is one of the most common methods of seeking social mobility in India.

> English is among the most widely used methods for publicly marking privilege or social distance.

Social distinction refers to the various ways of setting oneself or one's group apart from others in a hierarchical context. In practice, it mostly involves methods of distancing oneself from one's (supposed) inferiors. Once again, English is among the most widely used methods for publicly marking privilege or social distance. Thus, though it is far from being the only modality of either mobility or

distinction, English is arguably the most privileged among modalities. To say only this is to state the obvious; more useful are good descriptions of how English does what it does.

There is also a non-instrumental side to English that is not so obvious. This is its role in producing a sense of agency. A key term in social theory, agency refers to the sense of self or of personhood that an individual acquires and develops through their life. This is the sense of being the author of one's actions, of possessing an independent will that can lead to conscious action in pursuit of a chosen goal. Of course, the sense of agency is subject to the constraints of society, which in turn are determined by one's social location. Moreover, one can acquire a sense of agency in many different ways, not only through language. But for increasing numbers of Indians today, English is becoming a route to acquiring agency.

Because of its massive material importance in today's world, English carries too much weight of its own to be subordinated. A story about English, no matter whose story it is, will always be mostly about English - it cannot be made into a story of something else entirely, like caste or class, mobility or distinction. On the other hand, in India today, stories about caste or class will usually, and stories about mobility and distinction will invariably, include English as a significant strand.

> [I]t...seems possible that a careful telling of the stories of English may tell us more about mobility, distinction or agency, and how they relate to other axes of identity like caste, class or region.

Stories about English are complicated for three reasons. The first kind of complication arises from the fact that today, English is an Indian language in a real and meaningful sense, even if it is unique and unlike all others. It provokes contradictory reactions not only from different sections of society, but also within the experience of a single person or group. This makes it hard to locate English on the social map. Calling it a foreign language is quite unhelpful because that tells us nothing about how English produces the effects that it does in our society. And for the very same reason, it is foolish to pretend that it is just another Indian language.

The second type of complication is due to the plurality of English. It is often said that Indians speak English in many languages. But the many versions or types of English in India are not like dialects. The numerous Indian avatars of English are distinguished mainly by their uses and their users. Because it is not singular, stories about English are necessarily multi-layered and multi-vocal.

The third kind of complication has to do with the fact that, socially, English almost always works in juxtaposition with other Indian languages. In this sense, the potency of English essentially depends on relations of contrast with other languages, or with other varieties of itself. Therefore, even though stories about English cannot be made into stories about something else entirely, they also cannot be told without involving other languages.

In spite of all these complications, it still seems possible that a careful telling of the stories of English may tell us more about mobility, distinction or agency, and how they relate to other axes of identity like caste, class or region.

IV

I first realised that there was a story to my English when I was living abroad and understood that non-Indians needed it to make sense of my relationship to that language. At that time, it was merely an explanatory story needed elsewhere - I did not think it needed telling in India. This changed decisively after I read Kumud Pawde. Now, my story was no longer an explanation, an account of something already known and understood, a kind of end-point. Instead, it became a kind of starting-point, the source of new questions that challenged the earlier explanations whose taken-for-granted-ness I had taken for granted. It was a way of discovering how the weft of my personal history meshed with the warp of a larger social history that was also mine. Most crucially, the story of my English was no longer for the benefit of ignorant others; it was mainly for myself and others like myself - and for our collectively cultivated ignorance.

> I did not inherit my English, but I inherited the conditions that allowed me to acquire it.

So, when I recall that evening at the Siddiquis and claim it as the site where the story of my English began, I do so from a vantage point in the present, with the benefit of many kinds of hindsight. This is not a disinterested but a motivated account that has been continually amended and re-oriented. There are no lies or knowingly uttered untruths here, but there is occasional embellishment and constant selection, apart, of course, from silences and omissions whether conscious or unconscious. In short, this is a deliberately recounted rather than a spontaneously told story; you could even call it calculated.

The (many) initial drafts of the first paragraph were all written as though English was the only language present on that evening. But in fact, as is now evident in the current version, it was one of three. And both Hindi and Kannada played crucial supporting roles even if English (or the word "similar") was the undisputed hero of the story. English became English only in contrast with the other two languages.

Imagine what would have happened to the narrative if the Siddiquis and their visitors had been conversing exclusively in English, or if I could have explained the incident to my mother in English. In either case, my story could not have begun there. An entirely English sentence - even when spoken by a seven-year-old - would not have been noticed by adults accustomed to speaking exclusively in English. And if my mother could speak English, then surely the story would have begun much earlier.

This does not make the beginning any less subjective or arbitrary since it is a self-chosen piece of personal memory. There is also an irony to this choice since it is marked by praise. The seven-year-old boy is thrilled at being complimented on his English, while the young man of 27 is annoyed and angered. The difference tells you something about the role of English as a status marker for people of my caste-class background. It also reveals the significant change in my status across the two decades that separate these events. However, this largely personal change, experienced individually, was nevertheless embedded within the broader trajectory of change traversed by the family that I was born into. It was by groping my way through this family history that I realised that the story of my English began as a story of mobility.

I did not inherit my English, but I inherited the conditions that allowed me to acquire it.

There is a story told about my paternal grandfather and his life-long friend (who also happened to be his family priest or *kula purohit)* when they were college students for a brief year or so. There was a public function to which entry was restricted, but college students were being allowed. Told by their seniors to say "student" to the gatekeepers in order to be admitted, my grandfather and his friend could not remember the word at the right time. They said "schoolant" instead and were thrown out. Whenever they recounted this much-told tale in their seventies, each insisted on blaming the blunder on the other.

As a *deshpande* or revenue collector, with rights over more than a hundred acres of land, my grandfather was not very keen on the life of a "schoolant". As he used to tell us gleefully, he was only too happy to drop out as soon as Mahatma Gandhi gave a call to boycott government institutions. Whether because of his bad luck and lack of worldly guile (according to some), or because of his arrogant stupidity and sheer neglect (according to others), he managed to "lose" almost all of the land that he held customary rights over when the new tenancy and ceiling laws came after independence. Once a wealthy local notable due to his hereditary caste-based land rights, my grandfather precipitated the rapid downward mobility of his family in his middle age.

> [W]here my father's English wore the signs of its acquisition on its sleeve, mine hid these signs - it made opaque the concrete mechanisms through which it had been acquired.

My father did not inherit English either, but he did inherit, albeit indirectly, a professional education and thereby a government job. My grandfather sold a few precious acres from his meagre post-land reform holdings to send his second son (my father) to engineering college. Some years later he sold a few more acres to send his youngest son to study medicine. Meanwhile, the eldest and the third sons had managed to get lower-level but secure government jobs in the railways and the postal department respectively. Eventually, all four sons were in government jobs, three of them within a 50km radius of the "native place". In his old age, my grandfather presided, albeit ceremonially and powerlessly, over the gradual upward mobility and urbanisation of his family.

A civil engineer who spent almost his entire working life in government service, my father acquired his English painstakingly in high school and college, through the kind offices of "Renendmartin", the grammar bible for his generation. It was a text he invoked often and with conspicuous reverence. He was surprised and not a little suspicious when he discovered that it was not prescribed in the expensive convent school that he had reluctantly sent me to. Until he presented me with my own brick-red hardback copy (when I was in the seventh or eighth class), I did not know that "Wren and Martin" were two separate names, or that one of them began with a 'W'.

My father approved of English but was never enthused by it. Whatever appreciation he had seemed to be reserved for the grammar rather than the language. He had only one kind of English and used it unselfconsciously in all contexts, whether public or private. But I do remember as a pre-teen child that he had some favourite informal phrases that he invoked as a sort of check list when helping me and my brother dress for special occasions. "Sunday is longer than Monday" meant that an undergarment was showing beyond the

upper garment, and "Post Office is open" meant that the fly was unbuttoned (zips came later); we had to ensure that neither was true.

Such exceptions apart, my father always sounded like a government form on the rare occasions when he spoke or wrote to me in English. One phrase that he used frequently was "the same". His brief monthly letters in my first year of college would invariably include the sentence: "Look after your health and do not neglect the same." I still feel the sudden tug of memory whenever I come across the phrase.

Looked at through the lens of English, "schoolant", "the same" and "similar" are the generational signposts that trace the uneven path of upward mobility followed by my family. In terms of historical time, this covers the period from the 1940s to the 1970s. Until the end of this period, roughly until I finished middle school, there was no significant difference between my father's English and mine.

But in the early 1970s, between high school and my first year of college, the story of my English took another turn. Its trajectory became more individualised and somewhat detached from that of my family. Most importantly, the story became less about mobility and more and more about agency and distinction. This happened because of massive investments in my English made by my school, my teachers, my school and college libraries, and by my peer group in college. Of course, I contributed my labour to the project that my English had become, but it is quite clear that all the cultural capital came from elsewhere since I possessed none at that time.

These investments and the returns they generated soon made my English so different from my father's that they seemed to be entirely different languages. This was not just an apparent but a real and decisive difference. My father's English was a laboriously acquired skill that he wore like a formal dress or uniform. By the time I finished college, my English - also acquired with effort - had transcended the status of clothing and become skin.

Though I only recognized this decades later, the kind of English that I had begun to inhabit had the peculiar ability to obscure its own origins. Like my father, I had not inherited English but acquired it; like him, I had to work to acquire it. But where my father's English wore the signs of its acquisition on its sleeve, mine hid these signs - it made opaque the concrete mechanisms through which it had been acquired. His English remained recognisable as a tool or instrument, mine began to seem like a character trait or a personal attribute.

V

> By appearing to be ...[a] personal quality rather than a pragmatic ... skill, my English hid the fact that it was functioning as ... [a] marker of my caste-class identity.

To uncover the meaning of the difference between my father's English and mine, I must try to separate the interwoven strands of individual weft and social warp without unravelling the weave of a lived history.

By appearing to be an ingrained personal quality rather than a pragmatically acquired skill, my English hid the fact that it was functioning as an indelible marker of my caste-class identity. It was the malfunctioning of this marker - its failure to produce in California the unspoken yet unerring social recognition that I had taken for granted in India - that got me started on this story. However, even after I knew that my irritation with those who praised my English was caused by a kind of status umbrage, I never thought that it had anything to do with caste. In fact, caste was not part of my personal horizon; like everyone else in my peer group, I thought of my own social status in intellectual and class terms.

My peer group consisted of academics, activists, journalists, civil servants and so on. All of us were highly educated in the elite institutions of India and Anglo-America. Even the non-academics amongst us were sufficiently in touch with the world of scholarship to justify the broad label of "intellectuals". With rare exceptions, we all belonged to one segment or the other of the "upper middle class". Culturally, however, we were part of an elite even within the English-speaking minority, and we knew it. And of course we were all "upper caste", but we were also confident that we had transcended our caste identities.

What we could not see was that our confidence was so unmistakably *upper caste* that it had transcended quotation marks. Such a self-consciously articulate, well-informed and secure group could not become blind to its own social identity by accident - it had to be schooled into blindness. What were the sources of this schooling?

Part of the answer has to do with the pre-1990s social science scholarship on caste, particularly in disciplines like sociology and social anthropology. Both disciplines studied caste intensively; however, when seen from the perspective of my peer group, the vast literature

that they generated tended to distance caste from our own lives. Taken as a whole, scholarly work on caste suggested that while it was indeed a dominant institution in Indian society, it operated mainly in rural society and among the middle and lower castes, far away from people like us. To the extent that it related to the urban upper castes, contemporary caste was portrayed as a waning institution that held sway only in limited areas of personal life, having lost its hold over the everyday. In fact, by the late 1980s, some anthropologists were rebelling against the obsession with caste, arguing that it was the product of a neo-orientalist tendency in western theory to imprison non-western cultures like India within the confines of concepts like caste hierarchy.

But the bulk of the answer has to do with the larger legacy of independent India and its dominant attitude towards caste. The dominant attitude towards anything is usually the attitude of the dominant, which in this context meant the upper castes. Having led the nationalist movement and supplied almost all of its leaders, the upper castes inherited power seamlessly from the British raj. Under the leadership of Nehru, they vigorously promoted the belief that, between them, the Gandhian moral campaign against untouchability, and a caste-neutral constitution that nevertheless guaranteed reservations for the scheduled castes and tribes, had permanently settled the caste question. All talk of caste was banished from the public sphere, but no serious attempt was made to disturb its economic, social and cultural foundations. Caste was abolished in principle and allowed to flourish in practice.

> We were the first generation that was afforded the material and mental resources to repress our caste-determined history. We believed - implicitly and mostly sincerely - that we were caste-less.

For the upper castes in 20th century India, the most significant practices of caste were those aimed at its modernisation. Many of the campaigns for caste "reform" and even some that sought to "abolish" caste were effectively absorbed into the modernisation drive. A key component of this drive was the conversion of caste-linked capital (such as land) into secular-modern credentials that led to professional careers, and eventually to new kinds of economic and cultural capital delinked from caste. The Nehru era intensified this process and expanded it massively; it was the golden age of the upper castes. The generation that came of age during the 1950s - my father's generation - was moulded by this movement for modernising caste. It was a generation that could believe that it was sacrificing its caste identity at the altar of the liberal-modern project of Nehruvian nation building.

My generation of upper-middle class, upper caste Indians came of age with Indira Gandhi's National Emergency (June 1975 to January 1977). As the beneficiaries of prior processes of modernisation, the norm for us was a partly chosen and partly inherited secularised identity that denied caste and diminished class. We were the first generation that was afforded the material and mental resources to repress our caste-determined history. We believed - implicitly and mostly sincerely - that we were caste-less. Because this belief was also a compelling and universal moral imperative, we could not see that it was precisely our caste location that had provided us with the wherewithal to recognise it, and that our response too was caste-determined. As for class, we made light of it by convincing ourselves that as long as we sought security and not wealth, we were immune to its effects. We did not think that this made us class-less, but we accepted our upper-middle class status as a sort of benign destiny.

And then, suddenly, the 1990s arrived like a tsunami and swept away most of our still-young certainties. By fundamentally transforming India's economy, polity and society, the Market-Mandal-Masjid decade forced fundamental changes in our habits of thought. Among the many mutinies of the mind enacted in its early years was an epiphanic re-imagining of caste. It was in the wake of these churnings that I encountered Kumud Pawde's story and was compelled to rethink mine.

But what specific part did English play in the generational dramas of the upper castes? I hope to explore this question in another essay.