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## UNIT 2 TEACHING THE UNDERPRIVILEGED LEARNERS

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### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

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The Unit will help you:

- Understand your underprivileged learners and their problems in learning English;
- Identify the upper class/culture biases in the textbooks and test materials meant for them;
- Adapt some of the text material and tests to the need/level of your underprivileged learners; and
- Develop a healthy/positive attitude towards your underprivileged learners.

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### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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In India, as in other underdeveloped/developing countries, we often come across a large number of underprivileged learners in every class. Depending on the location of schools, whether in a rural or an urban area or in a slum or a posh locality, the number of these learners in a class vary. But most of us come across such learners in some of our classes. This justifies the need for this unit.

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## 2.2 THE UNDERPRIVILEGED AND THE UNDERPRIVILEGED LEARNERS

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### Pre-Reading Tasks

Think for a while over the following questions and jot down the answers on a piece of paper.

- 1) Who are the underprivileged?
- 2) Why are they underprivileged?
- 3) What are some of the characteristics of the underprivileged learners?

### 2.1.1 Who are the Underprivileged?

The term 'underprivileged' refers to the disadvantaged section of people who are economically, socially and locationally in an unfavourable situation compared to the rest of the population of the society. Thus it is a relative term. They are underprivileged in relation to the middle class or upper class people of their society. Educationists and social scientists have used many other terms such as 'deprived', 'psycho-socially deprived', 'culturally deprived', 'socioeconomically deprived', 'locationally deprived', etc. to describe these sections of the population of a country. On account of their poverty and low social status, they are denied the privileges available to the upper classes. The underprivileged in India include the poor, the ethnic minority groups such as the SCs and STs, the refugee immigrants, and the socially, economically and locationally backward learners.

### 2.2.2 Why are they Underprivileged?

The causes of the backwardness of the underprivileged are many. However, some very general causes of their backwardness are as follows:-

#### i) Poverty

Poverty is common to all unprivileged groups. It is the root cause of their backwardness. Most of the opportunities in life are denied to them just because they are poor. Take, for example, the case of education. Poor nutrition prevents unprivileged children from making full use of their intelligence. This is seen more during the early stages of development of poor children. This leads to poor performance in school, which, in turn, reduces the chances of their employment.

#### ii) Exploitation and discrimination by the privileged

Since the beginning of history, exploitation of the underprivileged by the privileged has been a very common occurrence. With the progress of time, while the visible exploitation is on the decrease, the invisible exploitation of underprivileged by the privileged is on the increase. The education system, for example, is based on the privileged culture. History and other textbooks hardly ever mention the contribution of the underprivileged to the mainstream culture. This causes a negative self-image among unprivileged children and a negative attitude to their own culture which, in turn, contributes to their disadvantaged status.

**iii) Locational disadvantage**

The underprivileged tend to live either in remote rural areas or in the slums in towns and cities. Their locational disadvantage denies them some of the opportunities available to the privileged people who live in better locations.

**iv) Urban-middle class and dominant-culture based education system**

The existing schools are based on urban middle class culture. The textbooks, the teaching methods and the system of examination are more suitable for the middle and upper class students. The medium of instruction is often the language of the privileged group. The culture of the underprivileged groups, their life and learning styles are hardly taken into consideration. Thus, for learners who belong to the privileged culture, the school is a continuation of the home. But, for the underprivileged learners there lies a wide gap between the home and the school. This is primarily responsible for their poor performance in school, which, in turn, makes it difficult on their part to rise socially and economically.

**v) Low motivation for upward social mobility**

Economic, social and locational disadvantages prevent the underprivileged from cherishing long-term goals. They are more present-oriented. They are found to have low self-concept. All these are responsible for their low motivation for upward social mobility. Most of them are found to be satisfied with what they have, with little desire to rise above their present status.

### **2.2.3 Characteristics of Underprivileged Learners**

Present-day psychologists have shown that the idea of some races being more intelligent than others is false. According to them, intelligence is learned rather than inherited. But they agree that the early years of a child's life are very important for his/her intellectual development, to which the home and early social environment contribute a lot. As most underprivileged learners come from similar homes and social backgrounds which are not congenial to learning, they display certain common characteristics which create problems for their education. A number of research studies conducted on underprivileged learners have identified some of the characteristics of the underprivileged learners.

**i) Low motivation to learn**

The parents of most underprivileged learners are illiterate and, therefore, hardly encourage their children to learn. Their poor socio-economic background has made them more present-oriented, that is, most of their time, energy and means is spent to satisfy their present needs. They cannot think for the future of their children, and fail to have long term goals for them. This is responsible for their children's low educational and occupational aspirations which, in turn, is responsible for their lack of motivation to learn.

**ii) Low cognitive abilities**

Underprivileged learners have low cognitive abilities. Cognitive abilities refer to those abilities of an individual which are necessary to function at a level of abstraction, and include perceptual, conceptual and linguistic abilities. Underprivileged learners, for instance, tend to learn in a physical

fashion. They can think through a problem only if they can work on it with their hands, whereas most of the advantaged learners learn in a symbolic way-getting a picture of the task and then solving it in their heads. This is mainly due to the fact that the environment of the underprivileged learners lacks the richness required for the development of concepts in them.

**iii) Low self-esteem**

Underprivileged learners are found to have negative attitudes towards their own people, culture, language and also towards themselves. One's attitude to oneself, as you know, is primarily influenced by what others think of us. People from dominant cultures have negative attitudes towards underprivileged learners. Racial and caste stereotypes (fixed negative attitudes of people of one caste and race towards others) that exist in a society contribute to their low self-esteem.

**iv) Poor readers and slow learners**

Underprivileged learners are usually poor readers. This is primarily due to the fact that their homes hardly have any books and they get few chances to develop the habits of reading. Their learning style is slow and cautious.

**v) Greater sense of independence and responsibility**

So far we have talked about some of the negative learning characteristics of the underprivileged learners. But they have also some very positive characteristics. In contrast to the privileged learners, they are often found to possess a greater sense of independence and responsibility. Underprivileged learners from their childhood days learn to make decisions on their own and take up responsibilities. They share household chores with their parents, learn to take care of their younger brothers and sisters. But unfortunately the educational system has not been able to exploit these very positive characteristics of the underprivileged learners.

**Let us reflect back and think**

Compare your notes (we asked you to make at the beginning of the section) with the information we provided. Did the information help you to become more positive in your attitude towards the underprivileged learners?

**Check Your Progress-1**

1) Who are the underprivileged?

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2) Why are they underprivileged?

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3) What are some of the characteristics of the underprivileged learners?

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4) Make a list of the types of underprivileged people in India.

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## 2.3 EDUCATION OF THE UNDERPRIVILEGED LEARNERS

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### Pre-Reading Tasks

Think for a while over the following questions: What has been the history of the education of the underprivileged learners? What is wrong with our current approach to their education?

How can we make our system of education better suited to the needs of the underprivileged learners?

### 2.3.1 A Brief History of the Education of the Underprivileged

There are three clear stages in the history of education of the underprivileged. These are: Isolation, Assimilation and Integration

#### i) Isolation

The early stage of education for the underprivileged all over the world was marked by isolation. Separate schools were established for the underprivileged learners. In America, for stance, there were separate schools for the black and the white American children. In India some states had separate schools for tribal children, and in other schools the untouchable learners were made to sit separately from their high caste upper class counterparts.

#### ii) Assimilation

The second phase of the education of the underprivileged is marked by a tendency to assimilate. Provisions were made for educating underprivileged learners along with the privileged learners in the same school. In India, for some time, there was a stage of isolation-assimilation during which the untouchable, low-caste learners were asked to sit separately from the children of higher castes in the same class/school. But the school and the system of education was based on the dominant or the advantaged group and the aim of education was to assimilate the underprivileged into the privileged culture.

### iii) **Integration**

In the third phase of integration, attempts were first made to educate the underprivileged in their own language and culture so that they would develop a positive attitude to their own culture and language.

Depending on these approaches/stages, mainly three theories have been put forth to explain the poor school achievement of the underprivileged learner. Earlier their poor school performance was ascribed to their innate or hereditary qualities (the native endowment theory) and later to their environment (the cultural deprivation theory) and currently the blame is on the school (the institutional deficit theory).

Though historically there are three distinct stages of the education for the underprivileged, this does not mean that one stage came to an end giving way to another – for instance, isolation leading to assimilation. At times it is found that all these three stages co-existed at a particular period of time in some countries.

### 2.3.2 **What is Wrong with the Current System of Education for the Underprivileged?**

One of the major means of transforming the underprivileged into privileged is education. But unfortunately the current education does not help them much in this regard. This is primarily due to the fact that the current system of education is based on the culture of the privileged. Let us discuss, in some detail, how the different aspects of the current educational system do not help the underprivileged in their hope for transformation of their lives, in spite of the special incentives provided to some of the underprivileged learners (S.T., S.C., and O.B.C) by the Government.

#### i) **Textbooks**

Textbooks play a very important role in teaching/learning, particularly in developing and underdeveloped countries. But these textbooks are often written from the point of view of the culture of the privileged. The history textbooks, for instance, hardly ever mention the contribution of the underprivileged class to nation building. There were not less than a hundred tribal uprisings against the British Rule before the first war of independence in 1857. But most of the history textbooks are silent about these uprisings.

Moreover, most of the textbooks are difficult and packed with too much information. Thus, most of them are suitable for the highly motivated learners. But, as underprivileged learners have low motivation, they fail to make good use of these textbooks.

Besides, when learners of the privileged class fail to make good use of these textbooks, they take the help of private tutors and teaching shops, but the parents of the underprivileged learners cannot afford such outside help.

#### ii) **Methods of teaching**

Like the textbooks, the methods of teaching are also based on dominant, privileged culture. One of the principles behind most of the methods of teaching learning for example, is reward and punishment – reward for doing well and punishment for not doing well. The children of the privileged class

get trained in this principle as they grow up in the family. But this is not the case in the family of an underprivileged learner.

### iii) Testing

A major cause of the poor performance of the underprivileged learners in examinations is the dominant culture biases in the tests and test materials. The content of the question, the instructions, the time factor, in other words the total testing procedure is based on urban middle class culture, which creates problems for the unprivileged learner. It is found, for example, that in the examination students are asked to write essays mostly on urban-oriented themes such as ‘A Circus Show You Have Visited’, ‘Your Favourite T.V. Programme’, etc. Setting up a strict time limit in tests create problems for tribal learners as they have not learned to give great importance to time while growing up in underprivileged families.

### iv) Teacher training

Most of the teachers teaching underprivileged learners are from the middle or the upper middle class. They share some of the negative attitudes of the privileged class towards the underprivileged. Some teachers, for example, consider the underprivileged learners as genetically inferior to the privileged learners. Existing teacher training programme do not help them become aware of their negative attitudes. Neither do these programmes help them identify the cultural biases in textbooks, methods of teaching and test materials for the underprivileged learners.

### v) Problem of learning language

The language of the privileged class is often used as the medium of instruction in education. But most of the underprivileged learners are speakers of dialects or speakers of some minority languages. In most cases, their language learning load is greater as they have to learn their own language/dialect and also the dialect/language of the dominant groups.

Because of all the problems mentioned above, the school appears alien to the underprivileged learners whereas it becomes an extension of home for the privileged learners.

## 2.3.3 How to Make the Present System of Education Useful for the Underprivileged Learners

We have observed so far, that the current state of education for the underprivileged is beset with a multiplicity of problems. The problems examined are very complex and their root lies deep. But unfortunately the solutions we offer for these problems are simplistic and do not deal with the deeper underlying causes. For example, to solve the problem of dropouts among tribal children in some states of our country we have extended their stipend for an additional year. But this will hardly have any effect on the dropout rate of tribal children as the causes of their dropping out is very complex – the school, the textbooks, the system of evaluation, the teacher – all based on non-tribal high caste culture. Thus the real solution to prevent the dropout rate is to adapt the school, as far as practicable, to the tribal culture. This is true of other underprivileged learners as well. The current system of education can be adapted to the culture of the underprivileged learners provided positive changes are made in the following important areas of education.

**i) Preparation of textbooks**

We have observed how the current textbooks are biased in favour of the privileged class. There is, therefore, a need to remove these biases as far as practicable. The subject matter of the textbooks needs to be relevant, interesting and enjoyable for the underprivileged learners. The theme, structure and the cultural content should be carefully graded. The content, wherever possible, should foster in the underprivileged learners a positive attitude to their culture and people.

**ii) Methods of teaching**

In devising and selecting methods of teaching for underprivileged learners, their learning styles should be taken into account. For example, if we devise methods of teaching for tribal learners who constitute a major section of underprivileged learners in India, we have to take into consideration the tribal style of learning through play, music, memorisation and learning from peers. Taking into account their learning styles we have to select and/or adapt some of the existing methods of teaching/learning. For instance, methods such as oral reading, recitation, group work, role-play, peer-learning can be effective in case of tribal learners. We should also take into account some of their positive characteristics – greater sense of independence and responsibility, for example.

**iii) Evaluation**

We have observed how the existing tests and test-materials are biased in favour of the privileged class. Underprivileged learners, therefore, lack test-taking skills and perform poorly in such tests. Attempts, therefore, should be made in two directions: reducing the dominant culture biases in tests and training underprivileged learners in test-taking skills. Biases should be removed in all the four areas of tests – content, language, test-taking situation and the time and competition involved. Instructions to the test should be made very clear and, where possible, be given in the language and dialect of the underprivileged learners. Initially the time limit should be relaxed for these learners and they should be trained in the skills of test-taking.

**iv) Education through the language and dialect of underprivileged learners**

Educationists today agree that it is better to teach a child to read and write in his/her native language before introducing him/her to any other language. They believe that it is easier to develop reading and writing skills in the learners' mother tongue/mother-dialect first, which can easily be transferred to other languages learned subsequently. A learner who already knows how to read in one language, for instance, does not have to struggle with the problems of reading all over again. Where the languages are closely related, there is almost complete transfer of reading ability. Even when the languages are entirely unrelated, the essential process involved in decoding graphic symbols remains the same. Thus attempts, wherever possible, should be made to use the language/dialect of the underprivileged learner in education. Language, as we all know, is a vital element of culture and the loss of language is a major step towards loss of culture.



v) **Teacher preparation**

The role of teachers in teaching underprivileged learners is very important. The changes suggested in the areas of textbook preparation, evaluation, methods of teaching and use of the language/dialect of the underprivileged learners are, due to various reasons, not always possible. But, if the teacher is willing and capable, she can implement some of these changes at his/her level. For example, if the, textbook has privileged class bias the teacher can remove these bias while teaching. Similarly, s/he can use the language/dialect of the underprivileged learners in the classroom even when the system of education has made no provision for these language/dialects. Unfortunately, the conventional teacher training course/programmes do not help teachers develop these skills. Thus special teacher training programmes should be designed for teachers teaching underprivileged learners, to equip them with these skills.

**Check Your Progress 2**

- 1) We have, in some states in India, separate schools for the tribal learners. Does this go well with the current approaches to the education of the underprivileged?

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- 2) List some of the problem areas in education for the underprivileged?

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- 3) Out of the five solutions suggested which one needs to be done first. Why?

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## 2.4 TEACHING ENGLISH TO UNDERPRIVILEGED LEARNERS

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### Pre-Reading Task

Think over the following questions:

- 1) What are some of the special needs for learning English for the underprivileged learners?
- 2) On the basis of our discussion so far, can you predict some problems that underprivileged learners are likely to face in learning English?
- 3) Can you think of some ways of making teaching/learning of English enjoyable, interesting and useful for them?

We have seen how the current educational system makes provision for teaching underprivileged learners. So does ELT (English Language Teaching). There exists a variety of special English programmes for underprivileged learners around the world. In most of the developed world there are ELT programmes to teach English to the ethnic minorities who are disadvantaged in relation to the majority culture. Reading materials, methods of teaching and testing procedures in English teaching have been adapted to the needs of underprivileged learners. Thus, like EST (English for Science and Technology), ESP (English for Specific Purposes), TED (Teaching English to the Disadvantaged) has become a current movement in ELT.

### 2.4.1 Why should Underprivileged Learners Learn English?

The underprivileged learners' need for education is greater than their privileged counterparts. So also their need for learning English is greater.

- 1) Learning English in India, because of historical and practical reasons, has become essential for every educated person. It has developed into a variety in its own right – 'Indian English'. Besides, English in India plays an important role in education, particularly in Science and Technology where it is the medium of instruction. It forms a major subject for selection tests for prestigious jobs both at the state and the national level. An adequate command of English is also necessary for getting a good job in the private sector. In view of all these factors, the need for learning English on the part of underprivileged learners is really great if they are to join the mainstream. It is largely because of their poor command of English that their representation in class I jobs is very low. In fact underprivileged learners joining All India Institutes of Science and Technology on the basis of reservation are found to dropout partly because of their poor command of English.
- 2) Underprivileged learners have some special needs for learning English. English in India is associated with elite culture. It has a high status symbol. Thus, an adequate command of English on the part of underprivileged learners will raise their social status. It will act as an agent of status equalisation for them.

## 2.4.2 Underprivileged Learners' Problems in Learning English

While the underprivileged learners' need for English is great, their proficiency in English is found to be very low in comparison to their privileged counterparts and they have more problems in learning it. Some of their major problems in learning English are as follows:-

### i) Fear of English as a subject of study

For various reasons underprivileged learners have a great fear of English which comes in their way of learning it. Their fear of English is partly due to the association of English with the elite culture in India and partly due to the inappropriate, ill-prepared text-books and teaching methods. The teachers of English who are often the members of the privileged class are also responsible for creating this fear in their underprivileged learners.

### ii) Language load and poor reading skills

Underprivileged learners in India are often the speakers of a non-standard variety of a language or of a minority language. Education through their language and dialect has not been possible so far. Reading skills are easy to develop in learners through their first language. As this has not been possible for most of the underprivileged learners in India, they are poor in reading skills. But reading skills in English are very important in India as reading constitutes the most important resource for exposure to English.

### iii) Inappropriate textbooks, teaching methods and testing procedure

English textbooks are biased in favour of the privileged class. So also the methods of teaching and testing. The content, characters and even the pictures in English textbooks, for example, are all biased in favour of the privileged learners. The characters one finds in an English textbook are from the upper class culture. Similarly the test materials and testing procedures are based on upper class culture. Underprivileged learners, as said earlier, lack test-taking skills (see 2.3.3). All these factors need to be taken care of when teaching English to underprivileged learner.

## 2.4.3 Some Tips for Teaching English to Underprivileged Learners

Given below are some tips for teaching English to underprivileged learners. Although these tips are equally useful for teaching any other subject or other kinds of learners, they are especially important for teaching English to underprivileged learners.

- i) Take your underprivileged learners into confidence and try to understand their problems in learning English from their point of view.
- ii) Be generous in giving them feedback. Praise them for partly answering a question.  
  
Move close to them, touch and pat them to encourage them to learn. They need your help most.
- iii) Allow them to answer in a word, a group of words. Do not insist on full sentences.

**The Role of the Learner and the Teacher**

- To begin with, ask them easy questions which can be answered by ‘yes/no’.
- iv) Allow them to answer in their first language when they fail to answer in English.
  - v) Do not concentrate your attention only on the privileged learners. Rather the underprivileged learners need your attention and help more.
  - vi) Underprivileged learners tend to occupy back seats in the classroom. Encourage (but do not force) them to occupy front seats. Make them sit close to some of the best students of the class and encourage them to learn from these students.
  - vii) Provide them with more clues when your underprivileged learners fail to answer. For example, ‘The answer is in the fourth line’.
  - viii) Protect your underprivileged learners from bullies. See that the privileged learners do not make fun of them.
  - ix) Tolerate their errors. Instead of public correction, choose a time and place where you can correct their errors privately.

**Check Your Progress 3**

- 1) Within ELT (English Language Teaching) TED (Teaching English to the Disadvantaged) has become a movement. Is there a need for such a movement in the field of ELT in India? Provide reasons.

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- 2) State two very important reasons for learning English for the underprivileged learners in India.

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- 3) State briefly some of the problems of underprivileged learners in learning English.

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## 2.5 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit we made you aware of the problems and different needs of the underprivileged learners. Since in almost every classroom there are students who are deprived due to certain socioeconomic reasons, it is essential that a teacher understands both their emotional as well as academic problems.

In this unit, we have very meticulously outlined the characteristics of underprivileged learners, and the educational flaws in dealing with them.

To rectify the scenario, we have given suggestions to improve the situation, with special reference to English.

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## 2.6 KEY WORDS

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**cognitive** : any mental process which learners use in learning. This may include mental processes such as thinking, remembering, perceiving, recognizing, classifying, etc.

**dialect** : variety of a language, spoken in one part of a country or by a particular social group, which is different from other forms of the same language in the pronunciation, lexicon or syntax.

**motivation** : the factors that determine a person's desire to do something.

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## 2.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

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Gumperz, JJ. 1982 ed. *Language and Social Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Stubbs, M. 1976. *Language, Schools and Classrooms*. Second ed. 1983. London: Methuen

Trudgill, P. 1975. *Accent, Dialect and the School*. London: Edward Arnold.

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## 2.8 ANSWERS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) The underprivileged are people who are socially, economically, educationally and locationally backward. These include the poor, the ethnic minority groups, the refugees and the immigrants.
- 2) Some of the causes of their underprivileged status is their poverty, exploitation and discrimination by the privileged people, dominant culture-based educational system and their low motivation for upward social mobility.
- 3) Some of the characteristics of underprivileged learners are low motivation to learn, low cognitive abilities, low self-esteem, poor reading ability. But at the same time, they have a greater sense of independence and responsibility.
- 4) The poor, the STs and SCs, the refugees and immigrants. (Your list may vary depending on your locality/state.)

**Check Your Progress 2**

- 1) As the present approach is integration, separate schools for tribal learners do not go well with the present trend.
- 2) The main problem areas in education for underprivileged learners are textbook preparation, methods of teaching, evaluation and teacher training.
- 3) It is always difficult to solve all the problems at one go. But if the teachers are properly trained, they can at their level, adapt the text books, teaching methods and the system of evaluation to suit their underprivileged learners. Teacher training is, therefore, the most crucial factor.

**Check Your Progress 3**

- 1) In view of the large section of underprivileged learners in India and their great need for English for upward socio-economic mobility, there is a huge requirement for a movement like TED in India.
- 2) English language skills open up avenues of employment in India. It is also a status symbol in this country.
- 3) Some of the major problems of underprivileged learners' learning English are (i) the underprivileged learners fear of the language, (ii) inappropriate textbooks, methods of teaching and testing (iii) the underprivileged learners' load of learning languages, and (iv) lack of suitable training of teachers.