

# ENGLISH IN INDIA: AN OVERVIEW

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## **Abstract**

*This paper will discuss the role of English in India. It will trace the historical development of English in multilingual India from the British period to the present day before discussing the linguistic and political issues related to English in India. The final section of this paper will look at how the functions of English in business, media, creative writing, and education have made it the national and cultural identity of the nation.*

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## **Introduction**

This paper discusses the situation of English in multilingual India. The main sections of this paper are: the history of English in India, linguistic issues and the functions of English in formal and informal domains.

## **History**

McCrum et al. explain the birth and growth of the English language in India in the following words:

The English have had a toehold on the Indian subcontinent since 1600, when the newly formed East India Company established settlements in Madras, Calcutta and later Bombay. By the end of the eighteenth century, the Company controlled virtually all aspects of Indian administration, reinforced, culturally, by the work of English missionaries. In 1813, the East India Company was dissolved and India became the keystone of an English-speaking empire stretching throughout South-East Asia. A

flood of English-speaking administrators, army officers, educators and missionaries scattered English throughout the sub-continent, and the English of the subject Indians ('Babu' or 'Cheechee' English) became a widespread means of communication between master and servant. Almost from the first many prominent Indian leaders began to pester the East India Company with requests that its officials give instruction in English (not Sanskrit or Arabic) so that young Indians could have access to the science and technology of the West. (1988: 324)

According to Kachru (1994), the Charter of December 31, 1600 by Queen Elizabeth I granted a monopoly on trade with India to some merchants of London - the East India Company was formed. The English annexed some Portuguese territories in India, and the Mughal court, which resented the Portuguese, allowed the English to trade and to establish factories.

The English trade became more profitable than that of the Dutch, and the region gradually fell under British domination. In 1818, the British Empire became the 'British Empire of India', instead of the 'British Empire in India'. The British settlement remained in power until 1947.

Indians, who were entrenched in the caste and class divisions of the Hindu society, preferred to be ruled by outsiders than dominated by a rivaling family inside India. The British actually helped Indians to defeat invasion from local neighbours and became masters later.

## **Invasion and the English language**

Kachru (1983) identifies three phases in the introduction of English in India. The Christian missionaries initiated the first phase around 1614; this phase is also referred to as the missionary phase. The second phase started in the 18th century and it arose through local demand, as some prominent spokesmen for the English were willing to learn the English language. Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) and a few other anglophiles persuaded the officials of the East India Company to use English as the medium of instruction rather than Sanskrit or Arabic.

Roy in a letter to Lord Amherst (1773-1857) wanted European gentlemen of talent and education to instruct the natives of India in mathematics, natural philosophy, chemistry, anatomy, and the other branches of science, which the natives of Europe had carried to a degree of perfection. (cited in Kachru, 1983: 68). Roy's letter sparked off a controversy between the Orientals and the Anglophiles (in India) over which language would

be suitable for education in India. This debate continues among politicians even today. The third phase is related to a Government policy in 1765, when the East India Company had stabilized. English was used as the medium of instruction and administration.

Kachru (1986a) points out that Lord Macaulay was an important figure in the language debate over which language should be used as the medium of instruction in India. The Orientals were in favour of the classical languages such as, Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic, which were not spoken in the country. The Anglophiles, on the other hand, supported English. Neither of these groups wanted to suppress the regional languages of the people.

The Anglophiles' views were expressed in the Minutes (1835) of Macaulay (1800-1859), which is said to mark "the real beginnings of bilingualism in India" (McCrum et al., 1988: 325). The Minutes, stressed the need for "a class of persons, Indians in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals and in intellect" (Bailey, 1991: 138). Macaulay's proposal was a success and the teaching of English (British) literature and science through English began, English gradually became the language of the government, education, advancement and, "a symbol of imperial rule and of self-improvement" (McCrum et al., 1988: 325).

On 7 March 1835, the Minutes received approval from Lord Bentinck (1774-1839), and an official resolution was passed. This resolution "formed the cornerstone of the implementation of a language policy in India" (Kachru, 1983: 68)

Although Macaulay is the most influential figure in language policy, the issue is more complex than simply Macaulay arriving in India, writing the Minutes and going back to England. According to Pennycook (1994), it is important to understand that Macaulay just formalized an issue, which had been discussed for a number of years.

Pennycook argues that the Indian middle-class was demanding an English education as much as the Christian missionaries and the British educators. The Indian middle-class realized the potential of the English language to gain social and economic prestige- this is true even today.

The complementary role of English and the Indian languages has been understood by the society in general, but it has not been articulated clearly by language and education planners due to a number of social and political reasons, some of which are discussed below.

## Linguistic issues in India

It must be mentioned that from 1765 to 1947, English was firmly rooted in British India. The first universities were established in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras in 1857. English became the language of the élite, of the administration, and the press in multilingual India. English newspapers had an influential reading public. Indian literature in English was also developing (Kachru, 1983: 69).

By the 1920s English had become the language of political discourse, administration, law, and the language of liberal thinkers. English continues to maintain its power over Indian languages.

English eventually became the language of nationalism and political awakening. Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) and other nationalists used the English language to voice their freedom rights to the British. The issue is in a sense is analogous to Caliban's situation in *The Tempest*. Caliban despised the language of his master Prospero, but he was equally desperate to possess that language to be able to extricate himself from his servitude and use it as a weapon of revenge against his master.

You taught me language; and my profit on't  
Is, I know how to curse.  
(*The Tempest*, Act 1, Sc.2)

Kachru (1994) claims that India was left with the English language, as the language of the Government when the British left in 1947. It was thought that the end of the British regime would mean the slow death of the English language in India. This, of course, has not happened till today.

According to Fasold (1984), the nationalists demanded an Indian language to be adopted as the official language after independence. Hindi seemed the most suitable for that, since it had more native speakers than any other Indian language and was already used for intranational communication. Furthermore, Spolsky (1978) claims that Hindi was chosen as the official language as it had the potential to represent India's diversity and culture.

Although Hindi was chosen as the official language in India, there were violent protests in Tamil Nadu (South India) in May 1963, against the imposition of Hindi. Firstly, Hindi is not evenly distributed in the country. For instance, only a fraction of the population knows Hindi in the South, whereas in the northern states over 95 per cent of the people know the language. Secondly, the non-Hindi communities felt they would be

professionally, politically, and socially disadvantaged if Hindi was the official language. Thirdly, Hindi did not have an enriched vocabulary to be used as an administrative language. In spite of these problems, Hindi was chosen as the national language in the constitution, and English was to be replaced by Hindi in 15 years' time. However, due to the opposition in the South, this replacement was not politically possible. According to Fasold (1984), in 1967 a law was passed which allowed the use of Hindi and English for all official purposes. As a result, English continues to be a link language and a symbol of power in India. The following section will examine the functions of English in formal and informal domains such as, business, media, creative writing, and education.

## Functions of English

It is estimated that there are more than 333 million people who use English in India, which is more than the total population of the USA and the UK together. (Kachru, 2005). English is virtually the first language for many educated Indians. Most of the Indians who use English in India use it as a link language for intranational communication. It is worth noting that only a fraction of the English using population in India has regular interaction with native speakers of English. According to Kachru's (1986a) survey (from English departments in universities and colleges), only 5 per cent claimed to have daily interaction with native speakers of English.

As mentioned earlier, English is widely used in the media, literature, education, and administration. According to Kandiah (1991: 273), English is used in both public and personal domains and its functions "extend far beyond those normally associated with an outside language". Although English is not one of the 18 national languages of India, it is an associate official language, with Hindi as the official language. It is recognized as the official language in four states (Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Tripura) and in eight union territories.

Various political and nationalistic pressures continue to push for the choice of Hindi as a national language. However, it is hard to remove English from its place as a language of wider communication. Nissim Ezekiel (Indian writer in English) makes the following remark against the anti-English group:

Linguistic patriots in India [the anti-English group]...[who] conduct virtually their entire social and personal lives in English, while championing the mother tongue. (Cited in Kachru, 1986b: 141)

English plays a dominant role in the media; it has been used as a medium for inter-state communication, before and after independence. The impact of English is on the rise. For instance, many American and European companies since the late 1990s have outsourced their operations to South Indian cities like Bangalore and Madras where there is a large group of English-speaking population. The executives in the BPOs (Business Process Outsourcing) or ITOs (Information Technology Outsourcing) handle queries related to business and information technology of overseas clients. According to Graddol (2006), BPOs and ITOs in India require graduates, but the KPOs (Knowledge Process Outsourcing) require PhDs in the areas of finance or research and development. The emergence of new business opportunities reflects the demand for well-educated English speaking personnel in India.

A report published in the Christian Science Monitor (cited in Graddol, 2006) suggests that well-educated Indians provide one-to-one tutorial help in mathematics, science and English grammar to school pupils in California. It is estimated that over 20,000 pupils in the USA receive e-tutoring support from India. Teachers in India provide e-tutoring to school pupils in other countries as well.

## Media

The number of publications in English is on the increase. Since a vast majority of Indians understand English, the print media uses English to a high degree. The number of English language publications in the print media has increased from 5,000 in 1991 (Sriraman, 1993) to 7,600 in 2001. An estimate in 2001 suggests that there are about 7,600 English newspapers and magazines published in India, with over 8 million readers.

Mention must be made that there are a number of Indian films in English such as *Mrs. and Mr. Iyer*, *Bend it like Beckham*, and *Hollywood Bollywood*. The films usually address political cultural and ethnic issues related to India or the Indian Diaspora.

## Creative writing in English

India is one of the largest English book-producing countries in the world, and the largest number of books is published in English. Even though only five per cent of the population uses English, the country sees a record sale of books every year. According to a television report (dated 5.1.2008)

in Singapore's Channel News Asia, "India is seeing a revival of interest in [children's] literature – besides reprints of books by established authors, new titles are flying off the shelves in bookstores across the country."

According to Iyengar (cited in Kachru, 1994: 528-529), there seems to be an acceptance of Indian English literature as "one of the voices in which India speaks...it is a new voice, no doubt, but it is as much Indian as the others". Raja Rao claims that English is a part of Indian culture. According to him English is:

The language of our intellectual make-up –like Sanskrit or Persian was before.... We are instinctively bilingual many of us are writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians.

Kamala Das presents her feelings about writing in English in the poem below:

**I am an Indian very brown, in**  
 Malabar, I speak three languages, write in  
 Two, dream in one. Don't write in English they said,  
 English is not your mother- tongue. Why not leave  
 Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,  
 Everyone of You? Why not let me speak in  
 Any language I like? The language I speak  
 Becomes mine, its distortions, its queerness  
 All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half  
 Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,  
 It is as human as I am human, don't  
 You see? It voices my joys, my longings, my  
 Hopes, and it is as useful to me as cawing  
 Is it to crows or roaring to the lions, it  
 Is human speech, the speech of the mind that is  
 Here and not there, a mind that sees and hears and  
 Is aware...

(Cited in Kachru, 1986b: 141)

Stylistic influence from the local languages seems to be a particular feature of much Indian writing in English; the local language structure is reflected as e.g. the literal translation of local idioms (Platt et al., 1984: 181). According to Kachru (1994: 530), Indian writers have not only nativized the

language in terms of stylistic features; they have also acculturated English in terms of the local context.

Kachru (1994: 535-536) points out that English has functioned "as the main agent for releasing the South Asian languages from the rigorous constraints of the classical literary traditions". English has created new experimentation in the field of Indian writing and the linguistic centre of English has shifted. This means that English no longer only represents the Christian traditions and Western concepts of literary creativity. The ranges of English have expanded, as the varieties within a variety have been formed (Kachru, 1986a).

## Education

The English language plays an important role in the education system of India due to the economic prestige associated with it and the resistance to Hindi as the official medium of instruction in non-Hindi states. As mentioned earlier, the anti-Hindi activists in the 1960s in South India were against the use of Hindi in formal domains including education.

Consequently, the Three-language-formula was developed to promote national integration, and to provide wider language choice in the school curriculum (Srivastava, 1990: 43). According to the Formula, people from non-Hindi areas learn their regional language, Hindi, and English. Hindi speakers, on the other hand, learn Hindi, English and another Indian language.

The Three-language-formula seeks to accommodate the interests of group identity, national pride, unity, administrative efficiency, and technological progress, but it has proved to be a failure, as it has not been implemented in most of the states.

Although English is used at all levels of education in India, the distribution of English is not even in the country. The learners' proficiency varies according to rural and urban areas, their medium of instruction in schools, and their socio-cultural background. Aggarwal (1984) classifies the students as the 'elites', the 'aspirants' and the 'victims' based on their proficiency in English and other factors.

**The elites:** The elites represent three per cent of the bilingual population and they are exposed to the English language from pre-school stage. Although the 'elites' may be proficient in their mother tongue, they think, read and write in the English language. Most of the bureaucrats, educators, journalists and literary writers in the country belong to this group.

**The aspirants:** The middle-class Indians who aspire to be a part of the elite group are referred to as the 'aspirants'. Although most of the 'aspirants' do not have the economic means to attend prestigious private schools, they achieve an acceptable degree of competence in the language after English-medium education.

**The victims:** The Indian government continues to establish schools, which cater for first-generation learners to promote literacy in the country. English teaching begins only in Class VI (after the first six years in school) with poorly trained teachers of English. However, the learners in this group are expected to compete with the 'élites and the 'aspirants' at the university level. Hence the learners in this group are victims of a system, which fails to provide equal opportunities in education.

As a result of the differences, the 'élites and the 'victims' represent the extremes of a cline and the 'aspirants' fall somewhere in the middle of the cline. Tully (1997: 161-162) points out that the elitist status of English in India ignores the masses. He argues that the solution for the situation would be that English in India should be encouraged to become a "genuine link language of the country, not just, as it is at present, the link language of the elite".

## Conclusion

Indian English is often referred to as a new variety, but it is almost as old as the native varieties of the inner circle countries. It must be stressed that English is an advantage to India and its role in education, administration, media, literature, culture, and business goes beyond the role of a second or foreign language. The role of English changes according to local and global market needs and the demand for English is on the rise. In short, the English language can be compared to the 'holy cow' in India. Both the cow and the English language are held in reverence, though for different reasons. The worship of cows is believed to bring the wealth of the 'other (unseen) world' to the devotees in future and the worship (learning) of English promises the devotees (learners) the riches of the material world - in the form of a lucrative career and very often a well-educated spouse! (Sriraman, 1993).

Although the English language exerts a considerable influence in the knowledge-based Indian economy, it is also the most widely used language to express and preserve the cultural, aesthetic, and spiritual identity of the nation.

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