

## The Trajectory of English in India: From Colonial Roots to Contemporary Significance

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### **The Genesis of English in India: Historical Context and Methodology**

The inability to converse in English often engenders feelings of humiliation, with some individuals potentially being perceived as intellectually deficient (Scrase & Scrase, 2009). This perception is a consequence of the language's centuries-long diffusion and persistent propagation throughout British colonial territories, transcending diverse linguistic and cultural landscapes. In the contemporary era, English has attained the status of an international language, boasting a global speaker population exceeding 1.5 billion.

In the Indian context, English has been elevated to the position of a second language and is deemed an indispensable medium of modern communication. As with numerous other global regions, the introduction of English to India was a byproduct of colonization. British presence in India commenced in the early 17th century, initially in the capacity of traders and merchants (Riddick, 2006). The East India Company initially established its presence along the coastal regions of Surat and Goa. Subsequently, the company's influence extended to numerous other urban centers.

Progressively, the company expanded its purview, becoming involved in India's political and administrative affairs. By 1765, the East India Company had achieved such extensive control that it governed the majority of the country, marking the inception of British colonial rule in India, which persisted until 1947. This colonial dominion facilitated the familiarization of Indian citizens with the English language. Prior to British

occupation, India lacked a standardized educational framework (Thomas, 1891). Education was considered a personal matter for citizens, not falling under state jurisdiction (Dash, 2003).

The introduction of English in India was not merely a linguistic phenomenon but also a cultural and political one. As Viswanathan (1989) argues, the teaching of English literature in India was part of a larger colonial project aimed at moral and cultural reform. This perspective adds depth to our understanding of the complex role English played in shaping Indian society during the colonial period.

### **Catalysts for the Advent of English in India**

In the nascent stages of colonial rule, the British were disinclined to expose Indians to European education. They apprehended that such exposure might empower Indians to challenge foreign dominion, as had transpired in America. However, the promotion of Western education in India eventually became a political imperative.

As previously noted, the British deemed indigenous education inadequate for producing an erudite workforce. Consequently, a pressing need arose to acquaint Indians with the English language. The primary objectives for introducing English in India can be summarized as follows:

- **Education of military offspring:** Schools were established in Tanjore and Marwar by the Christian missionary Reverend Swartz.
- **Cultivation of an elite workforce:** English was employed to develop an anglophone labor force for the British government. To ensure smooth administration, the Company required Indian clerical staff.
- **Dissemination of Western knowledge:** The British believed that Western education would civilize and modernize Indians, facilitating their advancement. Lord Macaulay (1835) articulated the goal of creating "...a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (Chand, 2007).

English, being the language of the ruling class, was imposed upon the subjects. Subsequently, the combined efforts of missionaries, natives, and the government further reinforced the position of English in India.

The introduction of English education in India was not without its critics. Some Indian intellectuals, such as Raja Rammohan Roy, advocated for English education as a means of accessing Western scientific knowledge and modernizing Indian society (Kopf, 1969). This internal support for English education adds complexity to the narrative of linguistic imperialism often associated with the spread of English in colonial contexts.

## **The Battle of tongues on Medium and Content of Education**

It is crucial to elaborate on the internal divisions among the colonizers regarding educational policy. Dakin posits that the introduction of a novel educational system necessitated addressing two fundamental questions concerning "...the choice of medium and eventually the content of education as well" (1968:07). This led to the emergence of two factions - Anglicists and Orientalists. The Anglicists advocated for Western language and science over indigenous alternatives. Lord Macaulay maintained that the English language was "best worth knowing" and would be "most useful to our native subjects." He attributed "intrinsic superiority" to Western literature (Nururllah & Naik, 1943).

Macaulay asserted, "I have never found one amongst them (Orientalists) who would deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia." Conversely, the Orientalists, led by H. T. Prinsep, considered Macaulay's minutes "hasty and indiscreet." They favored the utilization of established languages such as Sanskrit, Arabic, and Persian. Notably, many English-educated Indians also advocated for mother tongue instruction (Vijayalakshmi & Babu, 2014).

This dichotomy exacerbated the disparity between primary and secondary education. Primary education in vernacular languages

emerged as a consequence of Mahatma Gandhi's influence, which challenged the scope, content, and medium of British education. Gandhi's views found support in opposition to Macaulay's Minutes.

The language debate was not confined to policy-makers alone. Indian intellectuals like Rabindranath Tagore advocated for a balance between English education and the preservation of Indian languages and culture. Tagore's educational experiments at Santiniketan sought to create a synthesis between Eastern and Western educational traditions (O'Connell, 2002). This nuanced approach to language and education policy highlights the complexity of the linguistic landscape in colonial and post-colonial India.

### **English in Post-Colonial India**

India ranks as the third-largest English-speaking nation globally, following the UK and the USA. In India, English enjoys second language status and is designated as the 'Associate Official Language' by the Constitution. Kachru observes, "after World War I, there was a significant increase in educational institutions, and schools and colleges spread to the interior of India. This naturally helped in spreading bilingualism in India further among the middle and lower classes of Indian society" (Kachru, 1983:23).

Contemporary India views English proficiency as a marker of elevated social status and sophistication. It serves as a primary motivator for education and is perceived as a vehicle for social and professional advancement (Sekhar, 2012). Broadly speaking, English facilitates administrative uniformity within the country and functions as a medium for wider communication.

The post-colonial period has seen the emergence of Indian English as a distinct variety with its own linguistic features and cultural connotations. Scholars like Pingali (2009) have documented the unique phonological, lexical, and syntactic features of Indian English, contributing to the growing field of World English. This development underscores the dynamic nature of English in India, which continues to evolve in response to local linguistic and cultural influences.

Given India's linguistic and cultural diversity, the status of English is subject to distinct political, cultural, and social paradigms. Three primary concerns emerge from this discourse: the role of English in education, the interplay between Hindi and English as regional languages, and the uniformity and efficacy of the English prototype presented to Indian learners. The initial two concerns of language planning fall under the purview of the Indian government at both state and national levels, although these issues remain inadequately addressed (Kachru, 1986b, as cited in Vijayalakshmi & Babu, 2014).

The goal of teaching and learning English, in India is seen as a way to get ahead in a country with many different languages. It can open doors to better jobs and social opportunities. But some people worry that this focus on English might leave behind students who didn't learn English at home. Ramanathan (2005) points out that emphasizing English in college could be unfair to students from non-English backgrounds, which raises questions about whether everyone has an equal chance in the Indian education system."

## **Challenges and Opportunities for English in India**

The trajectory of English in India has not been without challenges. The teaching and learning of English, as well as its incorporation as a medium of instruction in curricula, present numerous obstacles. Educational institutions in rural India often lack exposure to English as a language of instruction, enough English teachers, good textbooks, or technology to help students learn effectively. Additionally, many educational institutes in India struggle to provide quality education overall.

To fix these problems and make sure everyone has a fair chance to learn English, we need to improve English teaching and learning across the whole country i.e at both regional and national levels. Some experts suggest highlighted innovative approaches to addressing these challenges. For instance, Graddol (2010) suggests that teaching English along with local languages could be a great way to help people learn English without forgetting their own language. This could be a big help in meeting the need for English skills while also keeping India's many different languages alive.

Moreover, the internet has also opened up new possibilities for learning English in India. Online classes and apps can make English education more accessible to more people, which could help everyone have a better chance to learn English (Kern, 2014). But there's still a big gap between people who live in cities and those who live in villages, so we need to make sure that everyone has access to these new tools.

## Conclusion

Since its introduction to the Indian subcontinent, English has experienced rapid growth. While its arrival was a consequence of colonization, its widespread adoption can be attributed to various internal and external factors. English was initially introduced as a tool for education but evolved into a means of securing employment opportunities during the British Raj and a gateway to Western knowledge. As Khan (2009) notes, "The expansion of English language was not wholly a forced phenomenon. Rather it was the need of the hour..."

The journey of English in India reflects the complex interplay of colonial history, linguistic diversity, and socio-economic factors. As India continues to navigate its role in the global economy, the importance of English as a link language both within the country and internationally is likely to persist. However, the challenge lies in balancing this with the preservation and promotion of India's rich linguistic heritage.

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