
The History of English Education in India: A Brief Study

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Abstract

Since the days of the British Raj, English remained the language of domination, status and privilege in India. Indian education was ever greater anglicized as the English language became rooted in an alien linguistic, cultural, administrative and educational setting. The first universities were established in India in 1857 (in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras). There was a need to produce - by English-language higher education - " a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect." English is widely used for educational purposes in public schools and institutions providing higher education. India being a multi-lingual nation, English is often called a lingua-franca in the context of inter-state movement and communication.

Keywords: English Education in India, Status of English in India

Introduction

With the advent of the British, English language was widely exposed to our country. It is strongly believed that it made its entry when the British first came to India after the incorporation of the East India Company in 1600, and gained roots because of the educational policies of Lord Macaulay. Timothy J. Scrase explains the growth of English in India in the following words:

“Since the days of the British Raj, English remained the language of domination, status and privilege in India. The hegemonic colonial project in India was to create and maintain a class of administrative officers, clerks and compliant civil servants to carry out the task of ruling the vast and expansive subcontinent.”

The view expressed above makes it clear that English was the language of the rulers in India, and as a colonial subject we had no other choice but to learn English. In this way the language started gaining roots in India.

The historical and socio-political milieu impacted on English education in India. In 1834, Lord Macaulay, chief of the Public Instruction, decided that only a selected few could be educated and he wanted to educate a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in

opinions, in morals and in intellect (Macaulay 1835). Through filtration, education would then percolate to the masses. The education was characterized by English ideals, religious neutrality and English was the medium of instruction.

The English Education Act was a legislative Act of the Council of India in 1835 giving effect to a decision in 1835 by Lord William Bentinck, Governor-General of British India. Thomas Babington Macaulay produced his famous Memorandum on Indian Education which was scathing on the inferiority (as he saw it) of native (particularly Hindu) culture and learning. He argued that Western learning was superior, and currently could only be taught through the medium of English. There was therefore a need to produce - by English-language higher education - "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" who could in their turn develop the tools to transmit Western learning in the vernacular languages of India (English Education Act 1835).

Background Study

In the beginning English was used to teach the local people through the work of Christian missionaries. Officially there was no attempt to force the language on the masses. But, gradually English had firmly established itself as the language of administration and many educated Indians were demanding instruction in English as a means of social advancement. In 1857 the three pioneer universities of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras opened and it was these institutions which were to nurture the Indian intelligentsia who would initiate progress in all facets of Indian life, including its literature (Naik, 1992, p. 13). English was increasingly accepted as the language of government, of the social elite, and of the national press.

Though Tagore was primarily a poet in Bengali, he himself translated many of his poems into English. Gandhi himself wrote in English clearly and forcefully; and the British authorities in India recognized soon enough to their chagrin that Gandhi expressed himself well in excellent English and had a fine appreciation of the words he used.

The critic Lakshmi Holmstrom highlights the lingua franca in India before English was introduced:

Before the coming of the English, there were two kinds [of] schools in India: Sanskrit institutions, attended mainly by Brahmin boys and teaching classical law, literature and the scriptures, with their Muslim counterparts which taught Islamic classics in Arabic and Persian; and schools where non-Brahmins were taught in the regional languages (pp.1-2)

This system of education underwent drastic changes with the advent of foreigners on Indian soil. The viability of the orient as a lucrative trading partner enticed the Portuguese, Dutch and finally the British to India. According to the historian and critic, M.K. Naik, the arrival of the British in the seventeenth century rejuvenated the waning Indian spirit, and led to the birth of, inter alia, Indian English literature (Naik, 1992, p. 8).

Educational reforms under the British were opposed by the 'orientalists' who advocated the continuance of classical learning, while the 'Anglicists', in keeping with progressive trends, opted for 'a scientific and liberal education in English' (Holmstrom, p. 4)

One of the crusaders for an English education was the sage, educationist and social reformer, Raja Rammohun Roy, who is regarded as 'the father of Indian literature in English. As the call for an English education gathered momentum, the issue was resolved by Macaulay, then President of the Governor-General's council, in his 'famous Minute on Education of 2 February 1835', in which he advocated the teaching of English (Naik, p. 12). Lord William Bentinck, Governor-General at the time, supported Macaulay's recommendations and passed the 'government resolution of 7 March 1835' (Naik, pp. 12-13).

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K. S. Ramamurti is another critic who highlights Rammohun Roy's achievements, and also acknowledges the role played by Indian journalists in promoting English prose. He asserts that:

... Indian prose in English owed its development in this country very much to the pioneers of Indian journalism. Newspapers like The Hindu, The statesman and The Times of India, not only built up excellent standards in English writing but also cultivated a public taste for good English by the popularity they enjoyed among the educated classes (pp. 29-35).

Newspapers such as The Times of India, The Sunday Observer, The Hindu and others continue to play a significant role in promoting the English language and literature.

English after Independence 1947

India, after becoming independent in 1947, was left with a colonial language, in this case English, as the language of government. It was thought that the end of the British Raj would mean the slow but sure demise of the English language in South Asia. This, of course, has not happened. The penetration of English in these societies is greater than it has ever been (Kachru 1994: 542).

The Official Languages Commission stated in 1953:

“English is one of the foremost languages in the world today. In international bodies and conferences, English has in the last ten years shot ahead of other languages... English is unquestionably the foremost medium of international communication. We in India happen to have already a considerable measure of linguistic competence in the English language developed over the period of a couple of centuries of British rule, and it would be wantonly foolish to throw away this language.”

After Independence, the Indian government had to decide its policy towards English. They decided to make Hindi the official language. Regional languages were given the status of national languages. Certain states insisted to make English the associate official language. Universities and schools were increasing rapidly in India. Some of the people from the neglected society also came forward to learn English. English was not limited to a few elite schools and colleges. But there were complaints about the standards of English. The government appointed many commissions to improve the standard of English in schools and colleges. Education in the English language had been introduced both to provide recruits for the subordinate services and to teach Indians the rudiments of a culture which was commended as superior to their own.

The Status and Importance of English in India

English is considered associate official language in India and it is also the medium of instruction in the Indian education system. According to the constitution of India, English is a second

language. India is one of the former British colonies and it is a multi-lingual country so that English is still used for communication among people having different mother tongues.

English is widely used for educational purposes in public schools and institutions providing higher education, at conferences, meetings, private offices and big hotels. In advertisements, English is generally used and most of the magazines published in English. Most people do not have any difficulty in understanding English. The layman can understand English and answer occasionally but not fluently.

In India the people's attitude towards English is very positive. Even the people from rural areas send their children to English medium schools by paying heavy fees. They feel that the English school has a good status in society.

English as a Lingua Franca

English has been considered a global language of intercultural communication among the worldwide people who do not share a common native language. So, it is called the *lingua franca* of the modern world. It is a fact that two speakers of different languages meet each other trying to communicate using English language.

In India, English is used as a medium of instruction for higher order communication in the day-to-day social interaction. Indeed it is a language which is commonly used in India for communication in a multi-lingual setting. For this very reason, it becomes necessary that English can be learned as a second language to be competent users of English.

The students entering college for higher education are expected to possess enough skills of English language to be able to cope with the demands arising from having to handle it as a medium of higher learning. They will be required to listen to lectures delivered in English and to take notes; they will need to read and comprehend subject matter from books that either prescribed for study or recommended for reading, and to make notes. Besides, they have to write all their assignments and examinations in English; they will also be required to speak on given topics.

India being a multi-lingual nation, English is often called a lingua-franca in the context of inter-state movement and communication. Students may have to visit another state for higher or collegiate education; they may need to visit other parts of the country for educational or occupational purposes. They are usually required to take examinations, on competitive basis, for admitting into a specialist field of study or a job; often an interview part of such an examination, and so the students are called upon to use conversational as well as other forms of spoken English to some extent, besides being able to produce written discourse in English of a high level of competence.

Conclusion

In the following years, English was established firmly as the medium of instruction and administration by the British Raj (1765-1947). Indian education was ever greater anglicized as the English language became rooted in an alien linguistic, cultural, administrative and educational setting. The first universities were established in India in 1857 (in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras). English became accepted as the language of the élite, of the administration, and of the pan-Indian press. English newspapers had an influential reading public. Indian literature in English was also developing (Kachru 1983: 69).

Thus, English is widely used for educational purposes in public schools and institutions providing higher education, at conferences, meetings, private offices. India being a multi-lingual nation, English is often called a lingua-franca in the context of inter-state movement and communication.

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