

The Official Status of English in India

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines two issues: the ineffectiveness of Hindi as a national language and the status of English in India. This article seeks to answer the questions: why Hindi could not become a national language of India, and the historical, political, and educational issues, responsible for adopting English as an official language in India. This short paper discusses these two issues briefly.

Keywords: *National language; official status; multilingual; English; Hindi.*

India, a Multilingual Nation

India is a multilingual country. The Union Education Ministry of the Government of India has formulated a formula in consultation with the states that provides that children are to be taught Hindi/Urdu, English and one of the regional languages. Therefore, educated Indians seem to be multilingual in four skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening), and all twenty-eight states and seven union territories in India promote multilingualism. The constitution of India has not given any language, a status of national language but English and Hindi enjoys the status of official language in the country. The University Education Commission observed in its Report that English is a language which is rich in literature- humanistic, scientific, and technical, and if we give up English, we would cut ourselves off from knowledge, and our standards of scholarship would fast

deteriorate and our participation in the world movement of thought would become negligible (Ministry of Education Government of India 1963, 243). English had been perceived a valuable asset sixty-four years ago by the University Education Commission (UEC) for a good life and a tool for employment skills. However, according to a recent survey of 54 countries, India ranked 14th for the English proficiency index with a third level of “moderate proficiency”; countries ranking above India exhibited “high” and “very high proficiency” levels (EF EPI, 2013). Interestingly, India with its 600 universities and 35,000 colleges (the third largest education system in the world) is producing a low proficiency of English speakers. English is a working official language in India. The word ‘official’ has been used in two senses, firstly, a language that is used in offices for administration, and secondly a language related to the position of importance as

English shares the status of only mutually intelligible language among multilingual Indians.

Historical and Political Issues for English

English had been used in India for official purposes years before India got independence from the British in 1947. Post-independence, the leaders of the Congress Party (the largest and most popular party then) sought to establish a single regional Indian language as a national language to unite and integrate the citizens of this newly independent country. At the same time, the vital significance and relevance of English for Indians was also taken into account by the prominent Congress Party leaders, such as Mahatma Gandhi, C. Rajagopalachari, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, and Dr. Abul Kalam Azad. But English was not the language of the masses. It was functioning as a medium of communication among the elite class, a language commonly shared between colonizer and colonized, and a lingua franca of the leaders of the political party in different federal and states. The need for a common regional language was considered important for unifying the country, mobilizing the masses, and developing national literature.

Considering this, M. K. Gandhi realized the necessity of a lingua franca to strengthen the Central Government of the country (Baldrige, August 1996) and he enumerated the following requirements for any language to be accepted as the national language:

(i) Language should serve effectively as a

medium of religious, economic, and political intercourse throughout India.

(ii) Language can be learned easily by the people.

(iii) Language is spoken by the majority of the people.

(iv) Language should not be selected on personal and biased opinions (Gupta, 1970, p.109).

Many Congress party leaders had wished to replace English with Hindi after independence. Agitations started when the bill passed off in favor of Hindi, and the Congress leaders from the South India such as N. G. Ranga, N. Gopalaswamy Ayyangar, T. T. Krishnamachary, and P. Subbarayan, and Jana Sangh Party founder Syama Prasad Mookerjee thwarted the attempts to make Hindi as a national language.

Facing rampant opposition for making Hindi as a national language, the Article 343 of the Indian Constitution designated Hindi as the official language of the Union, and Union decided to continue the use of English language for all official purposes for a period of fifteen years in 1950 initially. But, after nine years, the Official Language Commission of India extended the use of English. Parliament enacted a law in 1963, bowing to the sentiments of people from the South (Venkatesan, 2009). In 1965, India decided not to make Hindi a sole official language, and English came to know as an associate English language. Granville Austin's in "Language and the Constitution: The Half-Hearted Compromise" (1966) calls

the Constituent Assembly's decision a "tactful euphemism" in order to avoid calling one of the regional languages a "national language" (Venkatesan, 2009).

Three-Language Formula: Hindi, English, and Regional Languages

The Central Advisory Board on Education (CABE) planned the 'three-language formula' (TLF) in its 23rd meeting in 1956, and the idea was to protect the linguistic interests of each state in the Indian Language Policy where the speakers were encouraged to study three languages. In TLF, the first is the regional language as the mother tongue of the residents of each state and union territories and it is to be taught at the primary level, then English and Hindi (non-Hindi speaking States switch to Sanskrit, Persian, or Arabic for Hindi) for higher primary level.

The teaching of English in India begins in the first year of schooling or in some cases in fifth or sixth year. A study in 2002 shows that nearly 91 percent of schools followed the three-language formula at the upper primary stage and almost 85 percent did so at the secondary stage, and 10 percent in upper primary stage and 13 percent in secondary stage were studying English as a first language (Meghanathan, 2011).

The English-medium schools are commonly known as convent schools or public schools in India, and it is considered a sign of 'good schooling' to get an education in such schools. The importance education in English medium schools is so much that it is equated with a cultured social life.

Education Issues: Why English is important?

The Department of Higher Education (DHE) and the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) in All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) defined higher education as "the education, which is obtained after completing 12 years of schooling or equivalent and is of the duration of at least nine months (full time) or after completing 10 years of schooling & and is of the duration of at least 3 years" (All India Survey on Higher Education 2011). The AISHE has divided all the institutions of higher learning in the country in 3 categories: University & University Level Institutions, Colleges/ Institutions affiliated to University, and Institutions which are not affiliated to University also defined as Stand-Alone Institutions.

Higher education in English provides good opportunities to Indians. The success in IT sector could be attributed to government job-oriented education and training, and the employees having English language skills. According to World Bank (2004), the human capital with quality educational institutions and large English speaking population in India have brought a cumulative average growth rate (CAGR) of 35.3 percent over the financial year FY-2000/05 amounting to US\$ 17.9 billion in FY2004-05 (Agarwal, 2006). In last five years around 120 MNCs have set up R&D facilities in India, and pharmaceutical and automotive sectors are doing well. The reason for this development is low cost man-power and English speakers in the country. A study on the returns to

English-language skills in India suggested, “wages are 34% higher for men who speak fluent English and 13% higher for men who speak a little English relative to men who speak no English (Azam, Chin, and Prakash, 2010).

Today the foreign origin of English is almost forgotten, and everyone “believes in the transformative power of English” and wants it at the initial stage of schooling (Graddol, 2010). Now it has acquired a new status of efficient or employment language from its old and traditional one of the library language or the language of higher education. English remains a compulsory subject in every college for both technical and non-technical streams. The institutes and colleges of higher learning have internal faculties and sometimes visiting and guest faculty lectures for teaching the courses such as business communication, communication skills, spoken-skill and soft-skills, alike. The colleges and schools are employing English teaching not only for imparting a good education but also for bridging the gap caused by the different mediums of learning and the rural-urban divide. They want to enhance the employability potential of their students but the students’ very casual approach hinders the path and becomes the biggest challenge to make them understand the importance of English in their future careers. Sometimes the students’ reluctant attitude for learning only one skill i.e. speaking and ignoring the other three: reading, writing, and listening skills becomes an obstacle in English education.

The standards set by Education Commissions are ideal and high but the worrying factor is the relatively low quality of education with a chasm between academic teaching and employability requirement. David Graddol says that Indian universities fall far short of rival countries in the quality of teaching and research, and “poor English is one of the causes (2010).” Indian government has not laid down the clear and regulatory guidelines for setting up an ELT centre in India. In absence of regulations regarding minimum quality standards in terms of teaching faculty, content, infrastructure, and fee structure India has been producing mixed graduates of good and poor English which enter into the institutes of higher education in due course. Until recently, the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) has started a scheme named Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan translated as ‘National Higher Education Mission’ (RUSA) for reforming state higher education system with an objective to improve the overall quality of existing state higher educational institutions by ensuring conformity to prescribed norms and standards and adoption of accreditation as a mandatory quality assurance framework. This objective is based on pragmatics of enhancing quality rather than any ideological policies.

The Potential of English in India

Language policy in India has been flexible and adaptable since 1947, and the agitations over the issue of the national language have been permanently resolved now. English, an

associate official language, will remain in India and it will enjoy the status of the language efficiency and employment. The linguistic jingoism has been replaced by a subtle pragmatism. Though English has helped India to overcome the tense situation over the issue of national language yet it seems that Hindi has lost its battle for the status of national language and for the language of empowerment. The regional and indigenous languages are flourishing side by side adopting the functional use of English.

English literature is still being the primary criterion of the selection committees in recruiting new candidates for the job of teachers in higher education, and linguistic skills in English are being considered secondary or optional, and this results in a dearth of proficient instructors in higher education. The scarcity of contextualized material and meaningful text is generating a disinterest in the students from technical background for English, and unfortunately they are devising their own methods of learning English through internet chatting, watching English movies, and reading pulp fictions. This is resulting in an imbalance in the learning of four skills and consequently producing a mediocre proficiency in English. The learner is confused too over a lecture on Shakespeare and Milton in a class of communication skills. Equipping good English language teachers would produce proficient English learners. A better learning environment could be provided when English language is taught as a subject rather than equating English language with English literature.

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