

How English Came to India: Language Education Policies in Colonial India

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ABSTRACT

In an increasingly globalized world, English has emerged as one of the primary languages of global communication. The influence and dominance of English are evident in the realms of popular culture, media, science and technology, and commerce, to name a few. In this context, India is considered to have an English advantage over countries such as Japan, China, and even parts of Europe, as it has 125 million speakers of the English language as a first, second, or third language (Krishnaswamy & Krishnaswamy, 2006; Times News Network, 2010). How did a country which is defined by multilingualism and linguistic diversity come to speak a language that does not originate in the Indian subcontinent? This paper attempts to understand the answer to this question by conducting a historical analysis of the introduction of English language education in India during the colonial period and the language policies in the education system of India at the time.

Keywords: English in India; colonial India; English language education in India.

Introduction

Linguistic diversity and multilingualism have long been considered an identifying characteristic of India. While the 1961 Census of India reported that a total of 1,652 self-reported mother tongues are spoken in India, the Constitution of India, under the Eighth Schedule, recognises 23 of these languages as scheduled languages, enabling federal-level official administration and education to be conducted in any of these languages and obligating the Government of India to promote and preserve these languages (Mohanty, 2006; Jha, 2010; Bhatia & Ritchie, 2012). However, two of these languages, Hindi, as written in the Devanagari script, and English, have been accorded the position of official languages of India under Article 343

of the Indian Constitution (Hall, 2002; Mohanty, 2006). Over time, multilingualism in India has evolved to a point where often one of these two languages (and sometimes both) is spoken by a large section of the Indian population. The 2001 Census of India reports that there is a total of 125 million speakers of English in India who consider English as their first, second, or third language (TNN, 2010). India and Indian English are increasingly becoming the centre of the international conversation on World Englishes (Bolton, 2012). A key feature of World Englishes is that it not only focuses on English as spoken and learnt in largely monolingual speech communities or in “mother tongue varieties of the language” (Kachru, 1996, as cited in Higgins, 2003,

p. 618), but also in communities and countries where English is spoken and learnt along with other languages in a multilingual context. A crucial factor behind this phenomenon is not only the history of colonisation that most of these countries have but also the language policy in their education systems. This paper will analyse the history of language policy in the Indian education system in the colonial period, which has resulted in a sizeable anglophone population in India.

Language Policy in Education during the Colonial Era

The introduction and extensive propagation of English in India was essentially a colonial project that began after India became a British colony. The colonial history of India can be divided into two phases: 1757-1858 when colonial India was ruled by the East India Company and 1858-1947 when colonial India was ruled by the British Crown (Mukherjee, 1974).

The Orientalist Period

Unlike the widespread assumption, the East India Company (henceforth referred to as the Company) did not intend to introduce English-language education to India from the onset of the colonial rule. In fact, from the Governor-Generalship of Warren Hastings (1773-85) until the beginning of the Governor-Generalship of William Bentinck (1828-35), the Company was opposed to the introduction of English-language education. The reasoning behind this was that such an action would diffuse Western knowledge and ideas, which might wield a subversive effect on traditional Indian society and culture. Consequently, the very first occasions of British involvement in the educational

landscape of India were concerned with the promotion of Oriental learning in Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic. This concern was exemplified in the establishment of the Calcutta Madrasa (also known as the Arabic College) by Governor-General Warren Hastings in 1781 and the establishment of the Sanskrit College of Benaras by Jonathan Duncan in 1794 (Spear, 1938; Evans, 2002). Evans (2002) explains that these actions of the Company represent the prevailing policy of Orientalism, which was considered the official policy of the Company from the Governor-Generalship of Warren Hastings (1773-85) until that of William Bentinck (1828-35).

The term Orientalism, for most parts of the 18th and 19th century, was used to represent a sympathetic view of the languages, culture, laws, customs, religions, literature, art, thoughts, and society of the East, and even a desire to protect the eastern civilisations from the high-handed European notions of cultural supremacy (MacKenzie, 1995).

The beginning years of colonial rule in India were viewed as a period when British power had a fragile basis in India (Evans, 2002). Consequently, the Company believed that there was a political need to bring together Indians and the emerging British Raj. Attempts were made at building bridges between these two groups through the presence of acculturated British officials. These officials would use their knowledge of Indian laws and customs to rule India in an approach that was similar to that of traditional Indian rulers (Evans, 2002). As a result, the Company believed that its educational mission, if any, was the improvement of Oriental studies of the elite

classes of India, leading to a revival of the Indian civilisation and not its replacement. Nevertheless, the Company still believed in the superiority of the European arts and sciences, which were to be imparted through a policy of ‘engraftment’ onto traditional Indian education, for the elite learned class who would eventually become intermediaries between the British and the Indian masses (Evans, 2002).

The Occidental Period

The early nineteenth century witnessed the decline of Orientalism and the rise of Occidentalism. The younger generation of Company officials believed in Occidental ideas of the supremacy of British power, religion, and culture. This generation held the opinion that the mission for Britain was the transformation of Indian society and culture through English language and Christianity, as these would provide the Indian masses with “direct access to the superior arts, philosophy, and faith of Britain” (Evans, 2002, p.264). Additionally, the Occidental group advocated that introducing English as the language of governance and education would assimilate the conquered group with the conquerors – a departure from the hitherto Orientalist argument of having Company officials assimilate with the Indian masses (Evans, 2002).

This move towards Occidentalism was represented by the appointment of William Bentinck as the Governor-General in 1833. One of the primary responsibilities entrusted to Bentinck was to cut the administrative costs (Spear, 1938; Evans, 2002). To this end, Bentinck proposed replacing British expatriates in the judicial and administrative branches of the government with Indians. This provision was included in the Charter

Act of 1833, which was followed by Bentinck’s Resolution of March 7, 1835, that made some crucial declarations. Firstly, the goal of the British government was the promotion of Western (European) literature and science. Secondly, all funds were to be devoted to English education alone because the classical languages (Sanskrit, Arabic, and Persian) were considered too distant from the masses. At the same time, the vernaculars were considered too crude to be appropriate vehicles of knowledge. Thirdly, Persian was replaced with English as the official language of administration and courts of law. Fourthly, the “principle of percolation of knowledge from above to the masses was adopted” (Spear, 1938, p. 95). Consequently, educational funding was concentrated on encouraging higher education and English education, instead of elementary education (Spear, 1938). Following the resolution, in 1844, an official policy of giving preferential treatment to English-educated Indian applicants for public-sector jobs was introduced, and this was successful in making the educated Indian population desire English education and view such education as beneficial to them (Evans, 2002).

At the same time, support for English-language education was growing within pockets of the Indian elite classes as reflected in the establishment of the Hindu College in Calcutta in 1816 and the rise of private English tutorial schools in Madras (Evans, 2002). This small but influential group was led by Ram Mohan Roy, who advocated the revival of Indian culture while eradicating the social evils through not only the teaching of the English language, but more importantly, the content of English education (Spear,

1938).

The policy change in favour of English-education in India led to the growth of an English-speaking secretarial and professional class who eagerly learned the English political principles and became the core of the Indian National Independence Movement. The legal, medical, and secretarial classes that emerged as a result of these changes continued to exist (Spear, 1938).

Wood's Dispatch: The Most Important Policy

The most critical educational policy for colonial India came in the form of a dispatch by Charles Wood, the President of the Board of Control of the Company, to Lord Dalhousie, the Governor-General of India in 1854. Wood's dispatch became the foundation of British educational policy in India and entailed the following points. Firstly, he restated that the primary goal of British policy in India was the propagation of European knowledge. Secondly, he clarified that the aim of British policy was not to substitute the vernaculars with English. Thirdly, he recommended that a balance be struck between English education and education in the vernacular languages by using English as the medium of instruction at secondary and tertiary levels, while using vernacular languages at the primary level (Evans, 2002).

The dual-language system of Wood's dispatch was endorsed by the Indian Education Commission's landmark report in 1883. Over time, there was an increase in English-medium schools by state-assisted missionary societies and a strong demand for English-medium education, especially in

urban areas (Evans, 2002). The primary reason behind this popularity was the awareness that even a mild proficiency in the English language could open avenues for employment with the government and other European organisations.

Impact of Colonial Education Policies on the Current Indian Educational Landscape

The impact of Wood's Dispatch can be seen in what is known as the Three Language Formula (TLF) – the single-most important policy regarding language education in India. The TLF was recommended in 1956 by the All India Council for Education and underwent many modifications. These modifications eventually led to its final form in 1968 when it was codified in the National Policy on Education.

The TLF recommends that the mother tongue or regional language should be the first language of instruction and this should be followed by the teaching of Hindi or a regional language and English (Mohanty, Panda, Pal, Menken & Garcia, 2010). The TLF provides that "all school-going children will have first, second, and third languages by the time they complete secondary school" (Vaish, 2008, p. 14). Laitin (1989) refers to India's language education policy as the *de facto* 3 + 1 language policy, which refers to the fact that although the TLF espouses to impart three languages to the students, depending on the similarity or dissimilarity between their mother tongue and the regional language or Hindi, some speakers might learn two languages while others may have to learn four languages. The TLF not only highlights the bilingual education policy of the school system in India, but also

reflects the state's agenda of encouraging multilingualism while equipping Indians with English – the language of globalisation (Vaish, 2008).

More than two centuries after the beginning of British rule in India, English has transformed from being just the language of colonial power to being an integral aspect of the linguistic landscape of India. As a result of those policies, today, India is a country with not only one of the largest English-speaking populations, but also with English-speakers who are becoming essential cogs in the machinery of a globalised economy and education system.

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