

English in India: Socio-Political Issues

Abstract

This paper deals with political and social aspects of English in India. During the British rule it was a fashion to master Queen's English and people felt proud to learn it. Now, a fake American accent has emerged that is learned in Call Centers and there is much difference between the English used during the British rule and the English used now. Today, it has become more Americanized and less Anglicized. There is a craze of English medium school all over India and people are learning nothing more than the 'bizarre accent' and apart from this in a desire to learn a luxurious and successful life, they imitate the dominant English educated elite. This urban population immersed in second hand English culture has no appreciable knowledge of even mother tongue and has no cultural roots in the conventional sense. A hybrid culture, thus, is being created. English in India is changing and a new variety of English is taking place like Indian English. Since independence, people are divided into two sections- One who consider English as symbolic of British raj. The others feel that English is no longer the white man's property, they have made it very much of their own.

English education transplanted in India as a part of political policy of British, now is associated with science and technology. But, still, English can not take the place of our mother tongue. The point to be kept in mind is that the study of the mother tongue and the English language should go hand in hand.

Keywords: (*English in India: Socio-Political Issues*)

1. Five phases of the History of English in India.
2. The Indianization of English.
3. Attitude towards the learning of English.
4. The past, present and future of English in India.

Introduction

English has always occupied an important place in the social and political scenario. During the British rule, English was imposed on India to produce a cheap clerical cadre, needed to run the British rule. These days, English is even used for establishing one's superiority in society, and for political ends and has become a means of social snobbery.

There are different viewpoints towards the teaching of English. One is that English has emerged as a pop-culture and other say that it has become a commodity like oil or the micro-chip. Even after the 50 years of independence we have not been able to get rid of our servile attitude to English except for the fact that English knowing Indians have replaced the Englishmen. After the British left, English knowing people became more powerful and it became 'a mask' for exploitation. It has become a monopoly of a small section of urban elites, who use it to show off and as a tool to establish their authority.

There are different attitudes regarding the English language. Some take it as a gift given by the colonial rule. People like the late Rajagopalachari have looked upon English as 'the goddess Sarswati's gift to India' (Krishnaswamy & Burde, 1998: 13). Some anti-English people consider it an insult to their culture and language and demand the 'removal of English. While the other view point expressed by V.K Gokal who writes, "The English language has linked India with the world and the world with India. We are blessed with the two-way traffic that English has afforded us with. We have paid a heavy price in the past for this privilege. But in our indignation over the price that has been paid, let us not throw the privilege that is already ours". (Kachru, 1983: 57). There is no doubt that English serves as a unifying force and people are able to communicate with the people of other communities. The English language was also used as a weapon to oust the British. But gradually Indians learned and mastered the language so well that they did remarkable achievement in the fields of science, literature and arts.

One of the attitudes in evidence around us 'forgets English'. Such people feel that continuous use of English symbolizes the

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domination of the west. It is taken as a symbol of our mental eternal slavery. English still has the immigrated status in India and has become a part of the 'Rajnostalgia'. Even after a long time, India suffered from a colonial hangover regarding the English language. The teaching of English is also affected by a colonial hangover: For example, parents prefer to send their children to the schools that have an anglicized name like 'St Stephen', 'St. Joseph', 'St Mary', 'British Co-Ed', etc. They feel proud when their kids recite poems in English. There is another section of parents who want their children to read and write English before they learn to speak their mother tongue. While pressurizing their children, they are not only doing an injustice to their own language but are unconsciously inflicting an alien culture on the innocent mind of the young children. There is no denying the fact that English has always carried a superiority tag attached to it. English has achieved a position that is higher than any other Indian language. The criteria to judge a person is his knowledge of English rather than that of his mother tongue. Those who can express themselves in an effective manner in English, feel superior to others. English enjoys a socially superior and high position. The mode of teaching and style of writing is still based on the British pattern e.g. the pattern of application 'I beg to say' shows 'slavish mentality' to colonial rule.

English is considered as a killer language which has marginalized indigenous languages and has done damage to our natural and cultural identity. Today, it has become a fashion to say that all languages have fallen a prey to the victimology of English but we should remember that English has played a vital role since the day it was introduced in India i.e. it become a unifying force, source of knowledge, link language. So, we should accept and welcome it. Despite political slogans like 'Angrezi hatao' people keep flocking to English medium schools. Political leaders sway the mob by giving such catchy slogans for their personal gains. Youth is easily influenced. However, when they themselves talk about 'mother tongue', they always speak in English. They feel that it reaches a wide section of society. Even those who shout from the roof tops that region languages be given prominence, send their own children to English medium schools. The controversy about the legacy of English and its continued use has now become a past time for political leaders and the media.

Today, English has become an indispensable part of India. Over the last 50 years it has passed through many phases. Kachru (1983) talks about the four stages of development of the life cycle of a language, these four stages in the use of the English language in India is: (a) Transformation—English was transported to India, brought from England by the colonizers; (b) Nativization—English language gets the native colouring; (c) Expansion—English started spreading, a lot of people started using it; and (d) Institutionalization—English taught in schools, colleges and universities. In the past, English was used only for a specific purpose i.e. administrative and political. But, now, it is used for multiple purposes for example scientific study,

creative writing, media, and information technology or to study the culture of other communities. In India, English performs four functions: (a) instrumentation- as in education; (b) regulative function- as in legal; and administrative system where Baboo culture still dominates; (c) Interpersonal- as an intralingual device to communicate between the speakers of various languages and dialects and ethnic groups or religious communities; and (d) Innovative function- of English is used in the creative context i.e. creative writing.

Since independence, people are divided into two sections – one who stick to their old values and tradition and do not want to deviate from them. Others have their own reason and act different. They have positive attitude towards English, and feel that English is an access to world knowledge. It has made Indians access scientific and technical knowledge which helps them to be a part of modernity. There are two types of tongues. One is the 'untwisted tongue' who will not try to imitate the foreigner but will remain loyal to their own culture, language and religion. The other has 'twisted tongue' who admires the other culture, way of living and language. They try to imitate in all the spheres of life, including their accent and life style.

The English language was introduced as a part of a strategy of the British, which aimed at linguistic and cultural imperialism. Initially people imitated the British way of living, style, language and even accent. But after the British left, American emerged as a supreme power. People of India started looking towards America. The American way of living, style, language culture and accent now dominates the mind of Indians. It is considered another kind of American imperialism. Though America is not officially or politically ruling over India, it is doing so culturally.

In the modern times people do understand the need to allow the English language to co-exist with the native Indian languages. The two can play a complementary role. There is no antagonism between the two. Such people follow the middle path. They adopt the neutral position. They want to learn the language but do not want to give the importance or status of local language to English. They learn English for practical purposes and for the sake of its utility. Today, English is not learned for pleasure or a vehicle of one's culture but as a key to the job-market. It is mainly used for instrumental purposes. "English is not used with an 'integrative motivation' with native speakers of English but essentially with an 'instrument motivation' (Kachru, 2005:130).

Among the two groups, one favoured the spread of English and the other thought it risky for indigenous languages because with English language, the English culture also dominated in society. But whatever the controversies, one thing was clear that an Indian variety of English was taking shape. The institutionalization of English has promoted diversification of English. A lot of varieties of English are developing not only in India but throughout the world. All claim them as their own language. A new variety of English in India has cropped up under the label of 'Indianized'. It means, giving local flavour to English. As Kachru (1983: 132) puts it "the Indianess in Indian English is the result of the acculturation of English in the linguistically and

culturally pluralistic context" (Kachru, 1983:224). The cross cultural acculturation of English has developed into various varieties. Two very popular tendencies in India are Englishization and Indianization. English has been transplanted in India and learned as a second language and influenced by the speaker's mother tongue. The social context in which it has resulted in new phrases and words which is called Englishization, for example 'Mene telephone per baat kee' Indianization- when the English language is coloured by one's own culture, religion, language and thinking e.g. 'don't think you are a maharaja.' It is true that users of English belong to different religions, cultures and ethnic backgrounds and their language systems are different. Their own culture and tongue is reflected in English. They use English in a slightly different manner so that they can best communicate through Indianized English. To convey their view points and concepts they deviate from Queen's English and modify English according to their own requirement. Through Indian English they not only depict their own culture in the best way but at the same time nurture their own roots. This new localized variety is different from the native variety of English because the native variety is confined only to the class room situation and the only exposure is the text books written by English authors. While the new Indian English is everywhere, all around us in news papers, TV, radio etc. Indian English is used to convey the desired meanings and it is mixed with Indian words. When a language comes into contact with another language, it gets influenced by it. Some vocabulary is adopted from English in Indian languages with a slightly changed meaning and usage. This hybrid variety, code mixing, code switching is used in our day to day life, in an effort to appease the need to get rid of the colonial mind set up and imperial attitude. Newspapers, electronic media promote such variety without any hesitation. Use of mixing can be seen in newspaper captions like 'Pan Masala', caused rare disease (The Hindustan Times, New Delhi 5 May 1981: 3). Ads on TV like 'No fun without desipan'. These days, for face to face conversation, code- switching or code mixing is getting in fashion. A few use it at home also. But mostly, the mother tongue dominates in friendship or typical Indian situations.

During the post independence era there was pressure to follow an 'imitated model' of English but today English is spoken freely and in a relaxed way, so much so that people handle it the way they like. There is no pressure of the native speakers' standard. They have adopted English according to their requirement. Now English is de Anglo-Americanized (Kachru, 2005) English has developed into an international and global language because no standards are imposed by America on the users of English. America has not adopted a normative approach. However, the world today follows America rather than England as a role model.

English is no longer the white man's property. Our attitude towards English is changing drastically as earlier it was a colonial language but now we have started decolonizing it. Filipino poet Geminio Abad once said, "The English is now ours we have colonized it too" (Honna, 2004:161). It is like

caliban acquiring a new tongue. Explaining decolonization, Salman Rushdie once said "what seems to me to be happening is that those people who were colonized by language are now rapidly remaking it domestically, becoming more and more relaxed about the way they use... assisted by the English language's enormous flexibility and size, they are carving out large territories for themselves with its frontiers" (Malhotra, 2004: 206). English is a vehicle of thought and expression. Raja Rao once rightly said "I used the word 'alien' yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up like Sanskrit and Persian was before but not emotional make-up" (Kachru, 2005:139).

The world of Marginal literature has seen the rise of a large number of Indo-Anglian writers. English learned as a second language in India, differs in stylistic features from the native variety of western English. Literature written in Indian English, coloured by Indian ethos, no doubt satisfies one's urge to get attached to one's roots and secondly also helps one in establishing one's own group identity Indian English sells in India. The market potential of Indo-Anglian literature is on the rise. The Indian writers writing in English are fascinated with the English language. These writers, in order to present culture bound content of India, employ Indian words as part of their English. This process helps them to establish their own identity. The 'material' is Indian and is blended with English because it is flexible and adopts itself to all Indian concepts, tradition and ways. They can handle it properly use is freely according to their own needs. It has become a tool to cross all the cultural, ethnic and social boundaries. Earlier also the Indian writing in English was a part of world literature but now a dialectical, national, identity tag is attached to it. Innovative words and phrases like cousin sister, caste-mark, dining-leaf, police walla seems to be unintelligible to the other variety of English. But such deviation from the norm sometimes is necessary, in the culture context in which a language operates. Unfortunately, some writers are exploiting their knowledge of English by presenting a negative picture of India in writing just because it 'sells' A lot of money is involved in the creative field these days.

Giving an explanation of Indianism, Dustoor says (Kachru, 2005) that the gravitational pull, the use of the social and cultural factors in India necessitate the use of new words and phrases that he calls Indianness. But, he further says that Indian English should not be taught and consciously English should not be indianized because bad teaching leads to wrong usage" (Kachru, 2005:203). In order to impress, we deviate but deviation from the norm should be purpose bound. So deviation is tolerable but mistakes are not acceptable even to the Indian English system.

During the colonial days derogatory terms like Babu English and Butler English were used to refer to the English of Indians. The native speakers of English consider it 'low' and 'substandard' and do not accept it. Some students prefer the native variety but others proudly display the label of Indian English in their speech. By giving a local flavour to their English they want to establish their own separate identity,

different from Englishmen and Americans. They want to be recognized as 'the Indian'. An educated Indian speaker does reveal some regional characteristics in his English such regional characteristics are also found in American and British English also. Sometimes a few feel ashamed to admit that they speak Indian English but others also feel proud enough to say that an Indian variety of English is theirs. The fact is that the native-like users of English are socially the privileged class. But, in India English is learnt as a second language. The impact of the users own language, religion, culture and the social context in which it is used, can be seen on his learning the second language. Nowadays, no stigma is attached to it and it should be recognized and accepted. Most willingly, Indians are emphasizing their Indianness.

The burning issue is that what model should be introduced in Indian Education system. People like Kachru (2005) who do not hesitate to suggest an 'indigenous model' for Indian because the 'foreign model' is unfit and unrealistic in the Indian context, while others are of the view that we cannot master the language in the manner of a native speaker. But it does not mean that we should be bad at English. So, English should be learnt with the native variety as a 'model' in the formal set up.

The picture about the role of English in India is quite confusing. The boom in electronic media, information technology and access to international market has brought new pressure on India. English is being linked with modernity and advancement and in order to keep pace with the western technology and to catch up with the west, English is being re-introduced as an international language. In the present context, English means power, money, status symbol, better job opportunities, which no Indian language can provide. There is no doubt, a small section of people know the English language and use it very well. But, this English knowing intelligentsia does not represent India as a whole. Kachru says that in India, English has blended itself with the cultural and social complex of the country and has become as Raja Roy says 'the language of intellectual make-up of India' (Kachru, 1983:217). It is the language of a minority elite, which is most privileged and an influential section of the society. This elite intellectual minority of India does not symbolize the entire Indian population. The fact is that only a small section of the urban Indian society uses English while the vast majority of people can neither use nor speak English. They mix their local language with a few English words and feel they speak English. The gap is widening in the socio-economic arena. There are different levels of English knowing Indian, good, mediocre and ugly. The first category includes the educationists, media-persons, writers and bureaucrats who have native like command over English. The second level is constituted of the administration cadre where Baboo culture still dominates and the third category is of the waiters, drivers and shopkeepers. Kachru (1983:129) suggests three scales of measuring the proficiency of English: (i) zero point marks a minimal bilingual in English e.g. driver, conductor and postman; (ii) central point takes within its ambit Baboo English; and (iii) the

upper end of the scale refers to people who have knowledge of standard English and are able to communicate with the native speakers of English and has a command on both languages.

Some believe that English knowledge is something superior, they have a snobbish attitude. The power of English depicts the position of the west. Through the power of the English language America has the position, power and capacity to control the 'Rest' i.e. through language it is imposing its culture, value and thoughts on others. American is dictating to the 'others' the ways to live. People, who are politically free, are still under the vicarious rule of America. Some anti-English people are so against English that they go to the extent of opposing the classics of English saying that reading them is an indirect form of slavery to the west. A handful of people through their knowledge of English dominate the socio-political areas of governance. Innocent people are being exploited in the name of English medium schools. These 'teaching shops' are run by rich businessmen and pretend to be English schools where children learn only to say 'daddy/mummy'. Not all the people receive the same quality of education. The fact is that actually good public or convent schools are beyond the reach of common people. Now English education is associated with money. The upper class can afford to get the best knowledge by spending money and the weaker section goes to these 'teaching shops'. There is a lot of discrimination in society which has nothing to do with one's ability intellectual attainment.

During the British rule it was a fashion to master Queen's English and people felt proud to learn it. Now a fake American accent has emerged that is learned in 'call centre' and there is a shade of difference between the English used during the British rule and the English that is used now. Today it has become more Americanized than Anglo. In the hey days of the Raj 'it was a loyal subjects' aspiration to master Queen's English and now fake American accents emerge because new willing subjects succumb to a new American Pop imperialism. People are learning nothing more than this 'bizarre accent' and apart from this in a desire to lead a luxurious and successful life; they imitate the dominant English educated elite (Krisnaswamy & Burde, 1988). This urban population, immersed in second hand English culture, has no appreciable knowledge of even their mother tongue and has no cultural roots in the conventional sense; they speak English but a flawed one. A hybrid culture thus, is being created. A language has its own grace that is missing. In India, some sensible people like Sagarika Ghosh, a journalist, wonder "what is this new language the Indian youth are speaking. And as its answer 'It has been described as 'the Call Centre drawl'. Call centres... new giants telephone exchanges where thousands of young girls and boys are taught to speak with an American accent so that they may answer telephone calls from American credit card holders pretending they are 'jack' and 'Jill' instead of Thomas Kutty or Harminder Kaur" (Kachru, 2005:242). It is said that this Indian westernization is producing a generation of 'cultural orphans'. Students have now

switched over to American accent rather than British. They prefer to migrate to America instead of Britain as now the USA is the ultimate source of knowledge and is teaching the world the lesson of 'techno-industrial nationalism' (Dasgupta, 1993: 279). English only symbolizes the technical, technology and technicality. It is not just a human language but a technical tongue as well.

There are a variety of attitudes towards the English language. For instance, Kachru (2005) refers to it as 'other tongue'. Dasgupta calls it 'Auntie Language'. As natives of India we accept English as a part of the Indian set-up. Dasgupta (1993) has explained in typically Indian terminology that just as we address elders even outside the family circle as Auntie and uncle to express a kind of extended kinship, in the same way English is included among the languages used in India as a kind of 'Auntie' language. We conclude that English is not 'one of us' but an important presence that one must be polite to and 'Auntie' is one way to express our current social conjuncture so the term 'Auntie' best expresses what English is to its users in India (Dasgupta, 1993:201).

It is true that English in India is used for formal rather than informal purposes. That is why it has not entered our religious, rituals and ceremonies like marriages etc. Most often, of it is the mother tongue that dominates in friendships or at home. In other words, English is the language of formality and snobbery and the mother tongue of information. We should not feel shy of our mother tongue as it is a language of our emotions. Even Gandhiji realized the importance of English but he was of the view that one should feel proud of one's mother tongue. Gandhi wanted India to learn as much of English and other languages as possible. He said, "I do not want my house to be walled on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the culture of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any. I want to have our young men and women with literary tastes to learn as much of English and other world languages as they like and then expect them to give the benefits of their learning to India, and to the world... But I would not have a single Indian to forget, neglect or be ashamed of his mother tongue, or to feel that he or she cannot think or express the best thoughts in his or her own

vernacular" (Kachru, 2005:183).

There are two distinct views about the place of English. One view is that English played a role in transforming the Indian mind and imagination. Even the anti-British nationalism was nurtured by English. It is an access to western ideas and thoughts. But, the second view reflects the agony of an Indian educationist. R.C. Gupta, who asks the ethnic question, 'How and by what logic should we continue to impose English language on our young learners'? And "how much damage are we doing to the Indian languages and to the self-esteem of their speakers by our continued insistence on the teaching of English as an integral, nay essential part of our curriculum" (Kachru, 2005).

The topic has been dogged by controversies, the fact remains that the powers that be have realized that we cannot do away with English in India. They are of the view than in present scenario advocating one's own language is alright but an equal focus is required on the English language.

English education, transplanted in India as a part of political policy of the British, now is associated with science and technology. But, still, English cannot take the place of our mother tongue. The point to be kept in mind is that the study of the mother tongue and the English language should go hand in hand.

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