

Rethinking English in India

Abstract

Globalization and technological change have accelerated in tandem over the past two decades and have created a new global economy powered by technology, fuelled by information and driven by knowledge. The emergence of this new global Economy has serious implications for the nature and purpose of educational institutions. As the access to information continues to grow exponentially, educational institutions cannot remain mere venues for the transmission of a prescribed set of information from teacher to student over a fixed period of time. Rather, educational institutions must promote the concept of learning to learn, i.e., the acquisition of knowledge and skills that make possible continuous learning over the life time. The prediction of Alvin Toffler that the illiterate of the 21st Century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn is more than relevant nowadays.

Keywords: Globalization, Technology, Institutions, Effective Communication

Introduction

English today has acquired the status of universal lingua franca by its ubiquity and have become the most important language of India. Initially Britishers needed Indian mediators who could help them to administer India. Their only motive was to create an Indian class who should think in English, or was said "Indians in blood and colour but English in taste, in opinion and morals and intellect". Out of the thousands of languages spoken the world over English has the largest number of speakers, second only to Chinese, but the latter is confined only to China. It is flourishing unabatedly in our country. After our mothers tongue it is the most commonly spoken and read language in our country. English language and literature is mushrooming in our country and becoming an industry.

Moreover, can we think of English without thinking of the relationship between English and Indian languages and the consequent new linguistic hierarchy in the country?

The above questions pertain to the past, present and future of English, and also to literature, language and the pedagogy of English. English today is admired because of its flexibility, global reach and richness.

What did English do to us in India?

English after its origin in the 5th century has prospered with migration and resettlement of its speakers in different parts of the world. It flourished outside England as a result of establishment and expansion of the British Empire in the 19th century "with its sun never setting", its language. English emerged as a world language as a result of its subtle mix of power, politics, trade and cultural hegemony

All arts are collaborative. Literature, being an art, is certainly a collaborative art and not an isolationistic or individualistic exercise. One thinks with one's predecessors and their thinking. So all thinking or rethinking is collaborative. In this collaborative act of critical thinking as teachers and students of English, it is pertinent for us to consider the scope and future of English Language and literature in India. But the question then is "why would we think in terms of re/thinking"? or "why would we rethink about what has been re/thought?" And above all, why re/think only English in India, leaving aside all other Indian languages? But being the scholars of English we seriously feel a need to rethink English in India. The colonizers did not disturb the linguistic hierarchies, for more than five decades, and allowed Persian to continue to be the language of the court. Lord Macaulay advocated the use of English in administration and education as a medium of instruction. Indians also used English as a means of reforming the Indian society and its modernization. In 1823, one of our illustrious reformers Raja Ram Mohan Roy wrote a letter to Lord Amherst seeking replacement of Sanskrit and Arabic with English.



Sanju Choudhary

Assistant Professor,
Deptt. of English,
University of Rajasthan,
Jaipur

Remarking An Analisation

The English were waiting for an opportunity, and within a decade, Thomas Macaulay found India to be Cyprus, a symbol of lawlessness, disorder and anarchy in comparison to England as Venice, symbolizing peace and order. And Indians like Roy were more than willing to play the role of Othello. English was the means by which it was possible for the colonizers to sustain colonization and with this selfish motive they wanted to propagate English. It became a subtle means of controlling the colonized.

The uprising of 1857 provided an opportunity to the colonizers to intervene systematically in social and institutional structures. The British established Universities in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. A new generation of scholars educated in these institutes of higher education came out, as one of the most unprecedented ironies of the world history; this generation became an instrument of bringing about national consciousness that in the end resisted colonization. During this period, native Indian *Bhasha* writers experienced the dilemma of existing between their own tongue and English. They read English, but wrote in their language. They found themselves to be caught between their own language and English.

Mahatma Gandhi's views pertaining to English language, English literature and English as the medium of instruction were pertinent, as he saw them in relation to their impact on Indian psyche, family, and society. He had foreseen the consequences of the project of modernizing India through English, for it creates unbridgeable gulf between the English- equipped and English- unequipped impoverished people of the country. He stated, "We are traitors to our mother by remaining under such a system...a gulf has been created between the educated class and the uneducated masses." Seeing English as the cause of partitioning families, he remarked: "The English medium created an impassable barrier between me and the members of my family, who had not gone through English schools. My father knew nothing of what I was learning...I was fast becoming a stranger in my own home. I certainly became a superior person; even my dress began to undergo imperceptible changes". (Partha, Chatterjee, 1993:112)

Further, he did not see English as the means of liberation "Of all the superstitions that affect India, none is as great as that knowledge of the English language is necessary for imbibing ideas of liberty, and developing accuracy of thought".

Rather it was a sign of slavery for him: "Is it not painful thing that, if I go to a court of justice, I must employ the English as a medium; that, when I became a Barrister, I may not speak my mother-tongue and that someone else should have to translate to me from my own language? Is not this absolutely absurd? Is it not a sign of slavery (1993: 113)

Gandhi was very serious on the crucial issue of language. It was necessary for him to react against English and reject it in his own way in that particular moment. But what was this man doing all through with English? His response was pragmatic. He criticized and rejected English for the attitude it brings with it.

On the other hand, he edited *Young India* and *Hari Jan* in English because he wanted to communicate and share his ideas with his own people. The rejection and acceptance of English was a consequence of his pragmatic response to English. He accepted it for the utilitarian purposes but it did not persuade him to sell himself to English language or literature.

In hindi, Bhartendu Harishchandra (1850-85) could read and write in English, yet he pleaded with his people to think and work in their own language. In his lecture "*Hindi Ki Unnati par Vyakhyaana*" (Lecture on the progress of Hindi) and "*Bharatvarshonnati Kaise ho Sakti Hai?*" (How Can India Progress?):

Nij bhasha unnati ahai sab unnati komul

Bin nij bhasha gyan ke mite na hiya ko shool...

In his Essay, "*Bhartvarshonnati Kaise Ho Sakti Hai?*" Bhartendu wanted his countrymen to progress in their own languages for the progress of their Country. He remarked: "Bhaio, ab to nind se chaunko, apne desh ki sab prakar se unnati karo. Jismen tumari bhalai ho vaisi hi kitaben padho, vaisi hi khel khelo, vaisi hi bathchit karo. Pardshi vastu aur pardeshi bhasha ka bharosa mat rakho. Apne desh mein apni bhasha mein unnati karo." (Now arise from your sleep, and make your progress of all kinds. Read only those books that would ensure your welfare, play only such games and talk only about such things. Do not rely on anything foreign-foreign goods or -foreign language. Make progress in your Country in your language.) (Gupta Abhinav, 1998)

After having discussed the views of some of the 19th century Indian thinkers and creative writers, let us compare our situation with what was happening to English language and literature in England around this time. By 1858, M.A. in English was not introduced there, though English was introduced as a subject in the newly established University College in London in 1826. It was however, different English, for it was primarily concerned with the study of using literature as a source of linguistic examples. English literature as such was first taught at Kings College, London in 1831. The academia in England discussed the issue of introducing English in the curriculum very seriously. However, Oxford and Cambridge resisted English for long. The last quarter of the 19th century witnessed sustained discussion and campaigned for a chair in English at Oxford. The proposal failed because of the convocation speech by Edward Freeman, Professor of History in 1887 in which he stated that the literature "cultivates the taste, educates the sympathies and enlarges the mind." According to him, these were all excellent things but "we cannot examine tastes and sympathies. Examiners must have technical and positive information to examine". All these questions remained unresolved in the coming decades and Oxford and Cambridge introduced English in 1894 and 1911 respectively.

But in our country, English was introduced in the universities established in 1858. The British being the masters did not care for opinions of the natives. Indians, being colonized had no choice regarding teaching of English language and literature, for the defeated do not have choices ever. We were inveigled

upon or compelled to swallow English without being given a chance to think about the issue, though the drama of various commissions were enacted less to know about the opinions of the people and more to use the occasions to divide the society on linguistic lines.

Undeniably, the colonial experience is one of the layers of our cumulative experience. But today English has become a global language. However, English does not merely belong to the English, but also to us in a good measure, for it has been with us for more than two hundred years, and Indian English as a variant of English and Indian English writing as a means of creativity have corned a niche for themselves. English today is considered as a blueprint of opportunity in a democratic society like India. Today English has occupied a unique place in our society. After Hindi, this is the most commonly spoken or used language in India, particularly in legal, financial, educational, business and communication system. English represents the scientific knowledge, modernization and development.

The Indian subcontinent, in terms of people speaking English, ranks third in the world after the U.S.A. and the U.K. English functions in the Indian social context to perform social roles relevant and appropriate to the social, educational and administrative network. It is recognized as the official language in the states of Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Tripura. India is the third largest English book producing Country after the United States and the U.K. in the world and the largest number of books published in India is in English. Indian English writing has been now accepted as a part of Indian literary tradition, as Iyengar called it "one of the voices that India speaks ..." We are the second largest English speaking nation in the world. He also stated a few contextual facts such as: There are about 300 universities, excluding deemed universities, in our country, and over 20,000 colleges and more than lacs high schools where English is being taught either in the form of English medium or English as a major component where language English is taught.(Iyengar,K.P.S,1962)

In his novel *English August: An Indian Story*, Upamanyu Chateerjee asks the question: 'What is English doing in India'? The novel critiques in its fictional terms the question of English language, literature and Indian writing in English from different perspectives of different characters students from India and abroad, bureaucrats, and family elders in the latter half of the 20th Century. Though these perspectives have their limitations, for they come from certain middle and upper middle class mindset, they provide insights into problems and considerations from various parts of India.

The above posed crucial question is responded by, a Hindi writer Anamika, who happens to be associated with the teaching of English, in the form of an equally perspicuous and penetrating poem:

The English sends
Bombarding aircrafts.
Shakespeare had not wanted this
So sensitive were John Donne, Milton,

and William Blake-
Had they known this-
They would have been feverishly
disturbed.
Removing his glasses
Wordsworth would have crossed the
Tintern Abbey, and said
"What is all this happening?
What is English doing?
Is it sending bombarding aircrafts?"

But the crucial question is that even after more than five decades of independence it still occupies an epicentral place in our education system. English, "an an unavoidable leftover" is the "language of blood-sucking imperialists, they made our hearts weep and crippled us from appreciating our glorious heritage" says Dhruvo, the Yale returned friend of Agastya the protagonist of the novel.(Charterjee, Upmanyu, 1990). Language became the most subtle form of colonization. Language acts as the primary medium of communication for all links in all fields. Linguistic Imperialism permeates all the other types of imperialisms.

English is a language of power, success and prestige, as R. Philipson observed in *Globalizing English: Are Linguistic Human Rights on Alternative to Linguistic Imperialism?*

The global language can be seen to open doors, which fuels a 'demand' for English. This demand reflects contemporary power balances and hopes that mastery of English will lead to the prosperity and glamorous hedonism that the privileged in this world have access to and that is projected in Hollywood films, MTV videos, and adds for transnational corporations (Philipson, R. 1992)

Moreover, English has played its role in globalization that began in the 20th century, affecting not only socio-economic but also political and cultural processes. English is a link language between different states, economies, technology and mass communication. It has emerged as a language that helps the process of neo-colonization and linguistic hegemony.

Aim of the Study

This paper is an attempt to think and rethink the status of English in the past and the present. It also explores under what circumstances it was introduced in India and how it has become an inseparable part of our day today life. English was never so much in demand as today because of the MNC's hankering for India as its destination. The importance of having a good command over the language cannot be under estimated. The lack of effective communication skill has a negative impact on the personal as well as professional life of a person. The introduction of English was a part of colonial strategy of establishing its supremacy and thereafter legitimising it. English is flourishing unabatedly in our country.

Conclusion

Ours is a linguistically rich Country in which mono-lingualism has been a curse. It has always

been a multilingual Country. In the past, there were prakrats, and later Apabhramsha with Sanskrit as the language of the educated people and of composition of learned discourses. English is considered as a springboard for success in all fields of life and as a remedy of all ills for its effectiveness, and supremacy. It is used as an antibiotic. English can also be treated like a coat worn at the offices, Institutions for formal official and social occasions but taken off at home. Its need is over the moment the occasion is over. Once we enter our house, we remove it and hang it in its place and put on our won traditional clothes. As Galtung a famous linguist writes in his *Imperialism Theory* "English can serve benign or pernicious purposes. In a world of increasing globalization, militarization, and vast gaps between haves and have –nots within countries in North and South, and between rich and poor countries, it is vital to assess what proposes the increased use of english" (Galtung, Johan1998). So English today has become the basic need for survival in the modern globalized world.

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