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A Brief History of the Status of English Language in India

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Abstract

English is a language that has made inroads into many cultures and communities of people all over the world. The influence and effectiveness of English language is enormous everywhere and more especially in India. Therefore, the author has made an attempt to highlight when and how did this influential global language begin to have a sway over the Indian subcontinent and how it has made a niche for itself in the this land. This is a conceptual article where the authors have made a deeper search of the history of English language in India. The study has indicated that English which was a language politically imposed by the British and unwelcomed by the Indians at the beginning continue to enjoy a homely presence in this land till today. During the freedom movement, the language which was hated by many have turned out to be the most loved language in the post independent period. The majority of the Indians today have fully accepted English and they know that knowing the language well is not only important but an asset

Key words: *English Language, History, Status.*

1. English Language in the Pre-Independent era:

1.1. Introduction:

It is an undeniable fact that English has become one of the most important languages in the world today. It has metamorphosed into a *lingua franca* of the post-modern era. The study of English language in this age of globalization has become not merely important but an indispensable asset. It gives you the power to access to the global world filled with an avalanche of avenues and opportunities. Statistics have indicated that almost half of the world's total population is *au fait* with English language. This means that out of every four people you meet, one will be familiar with English. According to **David Crystal (2003)** "Statistics suggest that nearly a quarter of the world's population is already fluent or content in English". English is a mother tongue to more than 300 million people in the world. It is a language spoken by more than 700 million people which is second only to Chinese. But English is more

advantageous because Chinese is confined only to the Chinese sub-continent whereas English is spoken everywhere (native and non-native speakers) in the world. It is the official language of international transactions in the field of politics, trade, commerce and industry. Today, in a highly globalized society, not getting *au courant* with English seems to be a difficult proposition. By observing the present status of the world and India, there is no denying fact, the significant role English has been playing particularly for the growth and development of our country and placing her at equal footing with the rest of the world. This is the reason why, Nehru has rightly pointed out that English is '*our major window to the modern world*'. India has attained an all-round development because of the contribution made by English language be it in the field of science and technology, agriculture, commerce, politics etc. **F.G French** (1963) has rightly said, "*By accidents of history and by the rapid spread of industrial development, science, technology, international trade, and by something like an explosion in the speed and ease of travel and by all the factors which have broken down frontiers and forced nations into closer inter-dependence, English has become a world language. It is the means of international communication; there is no other.*" He further said, "*A traveller who can speak English will definitely find somebody who can understand him wherever he may go; anyone who can read English can keep in touch with the whole world without leaving his own house*".

1.2. The Advent of English Language To India:

The genesis of English education can be traced back to the early 19th century with zealous missionaries who had a foothold in the subcontinent. With the discovery of the new sea route by Vasco da Gama on 11th January 1498, many European languages began to flood the subcontinent. As a result, the Portuguese and the French arrived but later the British defeated them and became the sole masters of the subcontinent.

1.3. The Arrival of The East India Company:

When all the rivals were overthrown, then, the East India Company entered the scene. With the Charter Act of 1813, the Company was given responsibility of educating the Indian natives. The objectives of the introduction of English education were: (a) *to popularise European culture and science among the Indian masses* and (b) *to consolidate the position of the British Raj in India*. In view of this, Clause 43 of the Charter Act of 1813 stated,

"It shall be lawful for the Governor General in Council to direct that out of any surplus which may remain of the rents, revenues and profits arising from the said territorial acquisitions, after defraying the expenses of the military, civil and commercial establishment and paying the interest of the debt, in manner hereinafter provided a sum of not less than one lakh of rupees in each year shall be set apart and applied to the revival and improvement of literature and the encouragement of the learned natives of India and for the introduction and promotion of knowledge of sciences among the inhabitants of the British territories in India".

This Clause 43 of the Charter Act of 1813 was found very ambiguous in nature and later caused controversy between two groups of officials of the East India Company. These two groups were termed as the *Orientalists* and the *Anglicists*. The *Orientalists* recommended that the imparting of education

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must be through the medium of Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian, while the *Anglicists* were bent on making English as the medium of instruction. But prominent Hindu leaders like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Christian missionaries like William Carey advocated Western education must be imparted through the medium of English. Raja Ram Mohan Roy strongly and seriously favoured the Western education as he wrote to Lord Amherst on 11th December 1913,

"The Sanskrit system of education would be the best calculated to keep this country in darkness if such had been the policy of the British legislator. But as the improvement of the native population is the object of the government, it will consequently promote a more liberal and enlightened system of instruction, embracing mathematics, natural philosophy, chemistry and anatomy with other useful sciences which may be accomplished by employing a few gentlemen of talent and learning educated in Europe, and providing a college furnished with necessary books, instruments and other apparatus".

This expression of Raja Ram Mohan Roy indicates his support for western education because this would give better access to learning and exploration of science, mathematics, philosophy etc. Without western education, Indians would be deprived of knowledge in these fields. That is what he meant by 'darkness'. As the conflict was on, Lord T.B. Macaulay was sent on a mission to solve the imbroglio.

1.4. Arrival of Lord T. B. Macaulay (1800-1859):

When Lord Macaulay arrived in India he spelled out his famous 'minutes' called "Macaulay's Minutes" which declared that the government must adopt English as the medium of instruction. This was *"to form a class of people who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect"*.

Macaulay had an entrenched belief in the superiority of the western culture over *orientalist* cultures and he was bent on eliminating the Indian culture by transplanting the English culture. He perceived the Indian culture as stagnant and fallen well behind mainstream European scientific and philosophical thought. He considered his mission as a "civilizing mission". Macaulay strongly advocated the study of English as it would be more beneficial than studying Arabic and Sanskrit because there was already effective demand for English. He also thought:

"If our plans for education are followed up, there would not be a single idolater among the respectable classes of Bengal".

Macaulay's policy on modern education through English medium was finally approved by Lord Bentinck and was published on 7th March, 1835. But the systematic teaching of English of English began with the promulgation of **Wood's Dispatch (1854)** which is known as the '*Magna Carta*' of Indian education. The **Wood's Dispatch** declared:

"The English language is to be the medium of instruction in the higher branches, and the vernacular in the lower. English is to be taught where there is demand for it, but it is not to be substituted for the vernacular languages of the country. The system of grant-in-aid is to be based on the principle of perfect religious neutrality."

This report was a landmark as it recognized the importance of vernacular language in imparting education. With this English language began to take deep roots into the Indian education system. In the year 1857 the British government built three universities at Bombay, Calcutta and Madras for pursuing higher education and later towards the end of the 19th century two more universities were established at Punjab and Allahabad. This paved way for the expansion of schools and colleges which catapulted the number of Indians mastering the English language.

1.5. Lord Napier's Convocation Address:

Lord Napier, the Governor of Madras and the viceroy of India delivered the convocation address at Madras University in 1857 and spelt out the objectives of European education in India thus: (i) *to give a new basis for natives' unity* (ii) *to give a better knowledge* (iii) *to enable self government and* (iv) *to enable participation in the general intellectual movement of the world.*

At the Shimla Conference, Lord Curzon discussed about what a university should be:

"It would be a place for disseminating of knowledge and the encouragement of learning and it further be a human smithy where character was forged in the furnace of experience and beaten out on the anvil of truth".

The words of Lord Curzon imply that educational institutions are not meant only for transmission of knowledge but it should become a place where characters are formed. So, this indicated the qualitative growth of the education system. Values have to be taught in our institutions.

As the number of educated Indians increased, they also began to assert their rights. They began to demand that mother-tongue should be the medium of instruction. As a result of their demand the Calcutta University Commission (1917) was appointed by the government under the chairmanship of Dr. M.E. Sadler, the then vice chancellor of the University of Leeds. The commission recommended the use of mother-tongue in the high schools but retained English for higher classes. Great leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Gokhale were against English education. Gandhi said,

"The existing system of education is defective, apart from its association with an utterly unjust government in three most important matters : i) It is based upon foreign culture; ii) it ignores the culture of heart and the hand and confines itself simply to the head; and iii) real education is impossible through a foreign medium".

Gandhi was not totally against English education. He showed his displeasure as the language was used as a measuring yard for high status, authority and dominance over the ignorant. He appreciated not only English but also other foreign languages as he says,

"I would have our young men and women with literary tastes to learn as much English and other languages as they like and expect them to give the benefits of their learning to India and to the world".

As the demand for mother tongue to be the medium of instruction increased, the government introduced that mother tongue as the medium of instruction up to high schools in 1937. But this led to the

deterioration of the teaching standard. The British wanted that education should continue with English as the medium of instruction through the Wood Abbot Report (1936-37) but there was a growing estrangement with English as the struggle for freedom was gaining momentum. The Government of India Act-1935 which can be seen as a harbinger of the *Dominion status* for India. When the ministers assumed office in 1937, they immediately paid attention to the educational schemes and as a result, vernaculars became media of instruction but English remained the same at the secondary and university levels. Pre-independent days were dominated by English language. All opportunities for success, avenues to better life, all ventures and adventures could be unlocked only with the keys of English.

1.6. English Language Slowly Became Part And Parcel of Indian Education:

It was during the British period, English language was held in high esteem and was considered as the most important and useful language of the time. The language was used in every walk of life - educational, social, economic and business processes. It is worth mentioning that the medium of instruction at school, colleges and university was English. English language enjoyed a very high status. The English language study was made mandatory for children who studied in schools where the Englishmen used to teach. As a result, the students were influenced by the English culture and they developed a taste for English language as it became the language of the street and official purposes. The Indians began to know the benefits of learning English language, as it became an effective tool for interacting with the outside world and also for getting clerical works in the government and other jobs. One of the purposes for which English language was introduced to the natives was fulfilled.

2. English Language in Post-Independent India:

Since Independence, English language continued to be taught in some schools and colleges and gradually, gaining importance. Of course, there was a debate on the relevance and continuity of the English language. In fact, the English language became a bone of contention as to whether it should be retained or removed from the curriculum. Yet, English language continued to stand its ground. It is pertinent to quote Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the Nation, in the context of the status of English language in the post- independent period in India. He said,

"It is my considered opinion that English education in the manner it has been given has emasculated the English educated Indians. It has put a severe strain upon the Indian students and made us imitators". He further said, *"all the superstitions that India has, none is so great as that, Knowledge of the English language is necessary for imbibing ideas of the liberty and developing accuracy of thought".*

Similarly, in the year 1948, Maulana Azad said,

"The position that English is occupying today in our educational and official life cannot be sustained in future. It is but essential that Indian languages should be given their legitimate position".

There were also some other personalities who clearly and strongly espoused the retaining of the English language in the post independent era in India. One such was C. Rajagopalacharya who said,

"English should be retained in the country. We in our anger and the hatred against the British people should not throw away the baby with the bath water". He had given a clear message that by driving the British away from the Indian soil, the Indians need not throw away the English language. People like him favoured the continuance of English language. According to him, English language was like *"Goddess Saraswati's gift to India, as a blessing which Indians were privileged to receive"*. Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru said,

"One hundred and fifty years of intimate contact has made English an integral part of our educational system and this cannot be changed without injury to the course of Education in India. In addition, English has today become one of the major languages of the world and Indians can neglect its study only at the risk of loss to themselves. I am convinced that in the future as well, the standard of teaching English should be maintained at as high a level as possible".

2.1. University Grants Commission (1948):

Many of the great leaders of the country strongly expressed their support for the English language. After having argued convincingly, the **University Grants Commission** (1948) under the chairmanship of Dr. S. Radhakrishnan made the recommendations that English should continue to be studied in high schools and universities. The commission observed,

"English is a language which is rich in literature-humanistic, scientific and technical fields. If under sentimental urges we should give up English, we would cut ourselves off from the living stream of ever growing knowledge".

2.2. Conference of Professors of English of all the Indian Universities (1953):

In the year 1953, there was a Conference of Professors of English of all the Indian Universities. All the participants of the conference took the following resolutions:

- (i) English must be essential part of our secondary school curriculum,
- (ii) The aim is to attain a good working knowledge of English by pupils by the end of secondary school stage,
- (iii) The English course must comprise of the detailed study of texts of simple modern English prose within a vocabulary of 2500 words and non detailed study of books in prose and verse, with a larger vocabulary for rapid reading,
- (iv) In order to raise the present low standard of teaching, English should be taught as a compulsory subject for a period of six years at the secondary school stage.

2.3. The Kunzru Committee (1955):

The Kunzru Committee had also emphasized the importance of special methods in ELT (English Language Teaching) and the study of linguistics as the essential prerequisite for ensuring adequate proficiency in English at the university level. But in the year 1961, the then Prime Minister of

India Pt Jawaharlal Nehru introduced in the parliament and with that English language was considered an associate official language of the country for an indefinite period. The **Kunzru Committee** (1959) was commissioned by the University Grants Commission to study and prepare a report on the matter of English as a medium of instruction and also the teaching of English. The **Kunzru Committee** made a study and brought out a report recommending the retention of English language which should be a properly studied second language in universities though Indian language may be used as the medium of instruction. The **All India Chief Ministers' Conference** (1961) discussed and recommended that the medium of instruction at school stage must be mother tongue but they could not arrive at consensus for the university level.

Article 343 (2) of the Indian Constitution contains a provision for the use of English for all official purpose for a period of 15 years. During this time, the Union Government also tried its best to promote and develop Hindi as the medium of expression. But this ignited a very serious language controversy all over the country. As a result, this led to the passing of the Official Language Bill in May 1963 allowing English to continue for an indefinite period. The Constitution also provides that English will be the language of the High Courts, Supreme Court, Acts of Parliament etc.

2.4. The Kothari Commission (1964-1966):

The Kothari Commission recommended the use of English must be continued. The Commission also recommended establishment of research in learning and teacher education in English and other foreign languages. It also said that no student is to be considered qualified for a degree unless he/she has acquired a reasonable proficiency in English. The purpose for learning English was twofold: (i) all teachers in higher education should be essentially bilingual. They should be able to teach in regional language as well as in English, (ii) all students participating at post graduate level should be able to understand the lecture and use reading materials in the regional language as well as in English. The **Kothari Commission** also endorsed the three language formula, while recommending Hindi and English as link language and English as a library language and a medium of international communication.

From time to time many commissions and agencies have reviewed the position of English in Indian education system and all the reports indicate the great impact the English has on the Indian psyche and acknowledge the indispensable role it plays in the development of the country. The newly emerging approaches must be used for effective teaching and learning of English, so that the new generation is able to access better opportunities for themselves and their country.

3. Conclusion:

In the pre-independent era, English language was politically imposed. It was used as an instrument of exploitation and imposition of a dominant culture over a weaker culture and the Indians could not do anything about it. But gradually, English was taking deep roots in the Indian education system and slowly transforming the minds of the Indians. With the implementation of different policies

by the British government one can see that gradually English language was making a homely presence in the Indian psyche. Slowly, many Indian realized that learning and mastering the language was not completely a bane. It could produce many educated Indians who would become social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy etc. In the post independent period, a wave of patriotic fervour swept over the country. Politicians strongly felt that the best way to demonstrate their patriotism was to demand regional languages as the medium of instruction. While some states retained English as one of the subjects in their curriculum, other states had gone berserk to the extreme measure of totally rescinding English from the curriculum.

Paradoxically, a completely unforeseen turn of event is taking place today and a new situation is emerging. While politicians are advocating education system with regional language as the medium of instruction, the public have resorted to a zealous patronization of English medium schools. Working-class parents send their children to English medium schools in spite of the heavy financial impedimenta. We have not been able to do away with English. Our leaders recognized the need for sustaining this language. The subsequent commissions and agencies in the post independent period admitted the need for studying and mastering the language. And it follows that English should be made mandatory in schools and colleges. Today, knowing English is not just an advantage but an asset. If any Indian wants to venture out in any field or any undertaking, he/she needs the help of English language. English is a major window to the world. Without this window, you have no access to the world. Indians need English more than any others as it is a uniting factor. As India is a melting-pot of cultural and linguistic plurality, numerous languages are spoken in different states and within the states of India and hence English becomes a link language for all the people of this country. The different regions and states of India have their own linguistic identity and they staunchly hold on to their own languages and as such they find difficult to communicate with each other. At this juncture, English language acts as a common platform and helping them to share their thoughts and create understanding amongst them. English language also paves way for creating national integration among the citizens belonging to different and diverse languages and cultures. India has attained an all-round development because of the contribution made by English language be it in the field of science and technology, agriculture, commerce, politics etc. English language therefore, needs to be encouraged, taught and learned properly. It will continue to be an important key to unlock opportunities for the coming generations too.

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