

From Colonial Tool to Link Language: A Retrospection on the English Language in India

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The English language began spreading in India with the arrival of the British. This historical development raises a fundamental question: What should be the primary language of communication in a country as linguistically diverse as India? This inquiry serves as the focal point for this evaluation. Historically, the English language served as a vital tool for figures such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi, and Gopal Krishna Gokhale to articulate their protests against colonial rule. In today's globalized world, English has emerged as a common language necessary for international communication. Within the Indian context, where numerous regional languages coexist, English has become one of the most accessible and functional languages for national discourse.

English, often viewed by many Indians as a "catch-all" phrase, is a legacy of British colonialism. The colonial period, which spanned over two hundred years, established English as the language of the educated and the privileged, effectively creating a metric to measure an individual's social and cultural standing.

To understand the role of English in India, one must first define the function of language itself. Anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski defined language through the concept of "phatic communion," describing it as "a type of speech in which ties of union are created by the mere exchange of words" (296-336). The essential question, however, is what kind of words are exchanged. Speech acts as a medium of communication that allows individuals to express thoughts to a listener; without this, one cannot claim to be part of a civilized world. As Ben Jonson famously remarked, "Speech is the instrument of society" (qtd. in Knapp 577-94).

Tracing the history of English in India, it is evident that immediately following Independence, there was considerable national debate regarding the status of the language. There were conflicting views among leaders and academicians. Mahatma Gandhi, for instance, viewed English education as a symbol of slavery and degradation, describing it as "the blighting imposition of a foreign medium upon the youth of the country" (Gandhi, *Teachings* 185). He argued that the language of the oppressors symbolized tyranny and hindered the development of national self-respect, transforming Indians into mere "imitators." Gandhi famously asserted, "No country can become a nation by producing a race of imitators" (Gandhi, *India of My Dreams* 146).

Gandhi correlated qualities such as courage, perseverance, and fearlessness with original research, which he believed could only flourish when conducted in one's vernacular language. However, other leaders, such as Maulana Azad and C. Rajagopalachari, advocated for the retention of English, citing the international recognition it provided. They argued that English had become a major world language, and Indians could neglect its study only at the risk of national disadvantage.

Eventually, it became clear that English no longer belonged solely to the British but to all those who utilized it as a first or second language. Those who advocated for the total replacement of English with Hindi were often blamed for the resulting setbacks in education and administration following Independence. Jawaharlal Nehru was among the first to express his concern, noting that English served as a vital window to the outside world; he warned that closing that window would spell peril for the future.

Ultimately, the future of English in India proved to be robust. In the absence of a common language across culturally distinct states, English functioned as a *lingua franca*. It helped bind people together, not only in their thought processes but also by facilitating the forces that eventually dismantled colonial rule. The reformist and liberal ideas disseminated through English education helped solidify the desire for freedom. Paradoxically, what was once perceived as a tool of oppression became a beacon of light for freedom fighters. Many leaders—Nehru, Gokhale, Gandhi, and Raja Rammohan Roy—not only utilized English in their writings and speeches but used it strategically in the fight against colonialism, enabling them to collectively discuss and organize their resistance.

Decades later, English remains an important official language in India and continues to function as a marker of privilege. It enjoys global status because it has permeated education, jurisprudence, economics, and cultural life. No country can afford to ignore the fact that to be understood in a rapidly liberalizing economic world, one must be exposed to English, as it is a language of development in which contemporary knowledge is readily available. To engage with the latest trends in technology, medicine, engineering, agriculture, and

economics, the ability to exchange views is essential; this is a function best served by English, which effectively acts as a "link language."

Today, English serves as the medium of instruction in most Indian public schools and professional institutes. It has proven remarkably adaptable, functioning like a sponge—ready to absorb necessary elements from other varieties. Its current linguistic dominance "lies very simply in the fact that English is more responsive than any other language to the growing knowledge base that is the hallmark of these postmodern times" (Abercrombie 107). This ability to be eclectically open to new thoughts and concepts has predisposed English to be the major medium of modern communication.

English is no longer the property of a few nations; it is used globally, creating a sense of international uniformity. We now observe the rise of various distinct forms, such as Indian English, American English, and African English. According to David Crystal, "a language achieves a genuinely global status when it develops a special role that is recognized in every country," a status that English has undoubtedly acquired (qtd. in Tonkin 5-9).

While recognizing the utility of English for individual progress is acceptable, attaching a notion of inherent superiority to the language is tantamount to harboring a colonial psyche, which should be avoided. Heeding Gandhi's warnings regarding the "blighting imposition" of a foreign medium, we must ensure that the role of the mother tongue is not undermined. A person who becomes divorced from their culture or looks down upon their own language risks severing their roots. One must first understand their own culture, which is best achieved through literature written in the mother tongue. As Gayatri Spivak observes, "The teaching of English literature can become critical only if it is intimately yoked to the teaching of the literary or cultural production in the mother tongue."

All languages possess similar potential, and any language grows depending upon its use. The growth of English can be attributed to its transparency, which has made it a secure and powerful global medium. As a culturally and linguistically diverse nation, India cannot afford to disown English as both a national and international asset. In fact, it continues to serve as an "associate official language."

However, we must exercise discretion regarding the extent to which we allow English to influence our psyche and society. Its perceived superiority should not dwarf the aspects of Indianness we are proud of—our value system and our culture. Our literary heritage, which includes epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, the wisdom of poets like Kabir and Rahim, and the works of Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo, remains vital. These figures wrote with passion in their vernacular, and their words continue to touch our lives. The need of the hour is to use English wisely—not at the cost of one's own language, but as a cosmopolitan tool for democratization and for fulfilling our dream of becoming a globally acknowledged nation.

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