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Editor : Saikat Banerjee

Editor: Dr. Saikat Banerjee
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
St. Theresa International College, Thailand.



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English in Post-independence India

Rizwana Nazir Khan

Research Scholar

Department of English

BGSBU Rajouri J&K India.

Rezwananazir22@gmail.com

Abstract: Why do Indians need English in independent India? What are Indian learners going to do with English and English education in post-independence India? Learners of English in India know that English is not the only language for shaping one's character, for developing aesthetic sense, for cultivating creative and critical thinking, or for getting 'civilized'! All these functions can be more effectively performed by our own languages used in India. Indian languages and their literature have a very much humanizing tradition. English is necessary for mobility, social and economic purposes, for job opportunities; English is the language that opens the doors of a global market. As an international language, English has a lot of 'surrender value' throughout the world and learners of English can cash in on that. That is why there is a great demand for courses on spoken English, effective writing, business English, management English, English for information technology, technical writing, medical transcription etc. The present paper attempts to highlight the role of English in post-colonial period.

Keywords: Colonialism, Commissions, English, India, Language and Post-colonialism.

The colonial education planted by Charles Grant, William Bentinck and Thomas Macaulay, however, produced some unexpected reversals as anticipated by some among the rulers. Bentinck, for example, saw danger in the spread among the rulers. Bentinck, for example, saw danger in the spread of knowledge in India; he was desirous of Anglicizing Indians or rather preventing them from forming a homogeneous nation. Sir John Malcolm, the biographer of Robert Clive, told the Lord's Committee that 'our Indian subjects might derive from the general diffusion and eventual abolition of castes, a consciousness of which would naturally incline them to throw off the yoke of a foreign power.' He argued that 'our power rests upon the general division of the great



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communities under the Government... while they continue divided in this manner, no insurrection likely to shake the stability of our power' (Parliamentary Papers, Vol.1, 1832). They perceived the extension of knowledge to be a new source of danger but, at the same time, they wanted to produce cheap clerks and useful subordinates to run the State. It was from considerations of 'enlightened selfishness' that the British imparted some sort of education to the 'swarthy heathens' of India.

The inevitable happened. The tools of enlightenment that were put into the hands of the 'slaves' by the 'benevolent masters' were effectively used by the natives for purposes other than those for which English education was introduced. The 'heathens of India' questioned the colonial authority and, eventually, subverted it though it was not the intention of the rulers. The hostility against colonialism not only brought different regions together but also various religious, linguistic, and ethnic groups, which in a way the colonial machine 'assembled' into a State called India- an administrative unit for purposes of ruling convenience. An emotional India that emerged as a 'nation' was, in fact, brought about by anti-colonialism and English education.

During the struggle for independence, the 'enlightened' natives made use of English education and their command of English to subvert the British Empire; English and English education ultimately endangered the position of the rulers! This is one of the dramatic and unexpected reversals in the history of English education in India! We have to draw some important lessons from this phase of English education in India so that we may reshape the educational pattern in post-independence India. The Indian educational system which should form the foundation for nation-building, and the inculcation of values and morals has become so weak and commercialized that it is only churning out literate people who are actually uneducated; as someone remarked it is the illiteracy of the so-called educated, who are vulgar and criminalized, that is so much more disturbing than the illiteracy of the undereducated.

India is a multi-lingual country; it has 18 officially recognized languages- Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi (with various dialects), Kannada, Kashmiri, Malayalam, Marathi, Oriya, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu, Nepali, Konkani, and Manipuri (the last three were added to the list in 1992).

India never had a common language since it was not a politically unified country (like it is



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today) before the British colonial rule. Sanskrit was a common language of the subcontinent but it was the language of the learned class and not of the common people. English today, like Sanskrit in the past, has become a *lingua franca* or a sort of **link language**, but again restricted to the English-educated urban class and not of the rural masses. Some people say that English is a link language but it does not link the rural people; at best it gives all language groups in India a common disadvantage! It has become the 'official, associate, additional' language. India has always had the problem of a common language.

Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru 'declared' that it was government's policy to shake India free of English within a generation; but he declared again:... for an indefinite period – I do not know how long – I should have, I would have English as an associate, additional language which can be used, not because of facilities and all that, but because I do not wish the people of non-Hindi areas to feel that certain doors of advance are closed to them because they are forced to correspond – the government, I mean – in the Hindi language. They can correspond in English. So, I would have it as an alternative language as long as people require it and the decision for that, I would leave not to Hindi-knowing people, but to non-Hindi knowing people. (Speech delivered on August 7, 1959)

Not only English continues as the language of administration and judiciary but only the colonial pattern of education and English education; English continues to be the medium of instruction in our universities and colleges and the craze for learning English is growing day by day.

In post-independence India, there has been no clarity regarding the goals of education or educational planning, in general, and English education and English teaching, in particular. Education has been placed on the 'Concurrent List', making it the responsibility of both the Central and State governments. The educational system has been meddled with so many times that it is almost out of shape now. We are not clear about many of the basic issues in language education; the same old issues are talked about again and again.

- a) What should be the medium of instruction at various stages- primary, secondary, tertiary, and higher levels?



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- b) What is English to be introduced? Should it be compulsory or optional?
- c) What other languages are to be taught, for what purpose, for how long, and what is the level of achievement to be expected in each language?
- d) What kind of teaching and testing materials are to be used and who will produce such materials?
- e) Elementary education for the masses or higher education for the upper class- which one should be given priority?
- f) What kind of infrastructure is to be built up for language education?
- g) Indian or Western knowledge- which is to be emphasized?

Committees and Commissions have produced 'loud reports' with hardly any results! There are no clear-cut directions or coordination among the agencies that are to implement the policies- even the major recommendations of specialist bodies. The **University Education Commission** (1950) says that English has 'become so much a part of our national habit' but, in the same breath, points out that the use of English has 'divided the people into two nations, the few who govern and the many who are governed, the one unable to talk the language of the other, and mutually uncomprehending, which is a negation of democracy'. It is interesting to note that after political independence, the University Education Commission (popularly known as the Radhakrishnan Committee on Primary Education only in 1951, and the Secondary Education Commission in 1952.

It is interesting to note that most of the recommendations found in the reports of the committees written after 1947 are found in the reports of the committees written before 1947! The Indian Education Commission (1882-83), also called the Hunter Commission, made recommendations for the improvement of primary and secondary education; the Calcutta University Commission (1919) recommended that (a) Intermediate classes be separated from universities and a curriculum spreading over three years be prescribed for the degree of B.A. (i.e. the present day 2 +3 formula!); (b) the mother tongue be used as the medium of instruction in Intermediate Colleges and systematic efforts be made to promote the serious study of vernaculars in secondary schools, intermediate colleges and in universities.



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The **Sargent Committee** (1944) recommended that ‘a system of universal, compulsory, and free education for all boys and girls between the ages of six and fourteen be implemented, and that *‘the medium of instruction be the mother tongue of the pupils’*. The committee also recommended the need for training teachers and recommended the starting of new training colleges; it also suggested refresher courses for all teachers, particularly for those in remote rural areas.

More or less the same or similar recommendations are found in the reports submitted by the committees and commissions in ‘free’ India.

The **University Education Commission** headed by Dr. Radhakrishnan conceived of the role of university education in broad, universalist terms (emphasizing goals like the awakening of the innate ability of men and women ‘to live the life of the soul by developing wisdom’, training for self-development and the development of values like ‘fearlessness of mind, strength of conscience and integrity of purpose’) rather than specifying the goals in relation to the immediate socio-political, economic and linguistic context in post-independence India. The commission did not go into details, contenting itself with general, often vague, formulations.

The **Secondary Education Commission**, also known as the Mudaliar Commission, dealt with methods of teaching and with evaluation and the examination system. The commission’s recommendations, though they deal with the evaluation of all subjects, have particular relevance for the study of English too.

The **Kothari Commission** (the sixth commission to submit recommendation on education in free India) reiterated the three language formula recommended by the Conference of Chief Ministers held in 1961. This meant:

- a) The regional language, or the mother tongue where it is different from the regional language,
- b) Hindi or any other Indian language in Hindi-speaking areas, and
- c) English or any other European language.

The main intention of the three-language formula was to make the load of language learning equal in all parts of the country and to achieve national integration. The Kothari Commission



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said that English should continue as a library language and as a channel of international communication and that a reasonable degree of proficiency in English was to be stipulated as essential for the award of a degree. The commission made two important points: (a) English should be the medium of instruction in all major universities and (b) special units should be to set up for teaching English as a language skill. This evidently was in view of emphasis on English as a library language and as a vehicle of international communication.

The first **English Language Teaching Institute (ELTI)** was established in Allahabad in 1954 with the collaboration of British Council. The British Council encouraged and supported such moves to strengthen the teaching of English in India.

Learners of English in India have realized that English is necessary to talk about their own identity, their language and literatures, their cultures and values and their land and contributions so that the world outside may know who these are.

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