

English Language in the Educational Enterprise of British India

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Abstract

English in India was and still is “the Command of Language and the Language of Command” (Cohn, 1996). During the British rule, English education was designed as a mass project to train Indians for the service of their Colonial masters. The Minute on Education (Macaulay, 1835) was a harbinger of the colonising of the minds, language and identity through institutionalised system of schooling and higher learning. In the guise of a benevolent provision, knowledge dissemination became a strategy of control. Collective mission of translating and interpreting texts of Indians into the language of the Master and vice-versa was initiated. It facilitated the effective accomplishment of English as the qualifier of the erudite and the elite. This became a goal to be pursued by the masses. English education in British India was not merely an educational enterprise but an existential exercise, which left indelible imprints on the psyche of the people.

INTRODUCTION

The debate of education in India has been convoluted with a plethora of problems identified and possible solutions suggested. From school to higher education, challenges have been encountered, diagnosed and

changes attempted. Be it classroom practice, content of curriculum, method of instruction, assessment, and parameters of promotion — in all of these aspects, the central role of language is undisputed. In India, corresponding to its diverse culture

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and geography, there are different languages and dialects, officially recognised or not. Amidst such a whirlpool of diversity, the English language is arguably used as a unifying tool via the educational enterprise. But the consistently contested issue remains whether the introduction and perhaps the enforcement of this foreign language has created a rift between the epistemic of academics and the ecologies of students. To attain a better understanding of this matter, a systematic study through the lens of history is essential. The paper is an attempt to examine the role of English language in the educational landscape during the British rule in India through its historical timeline.

THE 1835 MINUTE ON EDUCATION: INITIATING PRELUDE OR FINALISING PRECURSOR?

The Minute on Education delivered in 1835 by Macaulay is identified as a pivotal event in educational discourse in Colonial India. The expressed agenda of Macaulay was to train those who could be Indians organically in blood and colour but English in language, intellect and morals. Considering his influential position, his words were taken in their literality and finality. Satish Chandra Mukherjee (1906) described Macaulay's thought as "mechanical... forcible". Asserting the significance of the Minute was a formulaic interpretation in most works studying the history of education in India, particularly during the British

rule. Such a miniaturist analysis has a possibility of overlooking and undermining various other concurrent factors that have had equal, if not greater influence on the dissemination of English language. Scholars such as Zastoupil, Moir and Dodson contested the undue magnitude of historical importance accorded to this event by post-Colonial studies. They argued that the examination of educational policy post-1835 revealed that it was not a final 'victory for the partisans of English' (Majeed, 2009).

THE BRITISH: THE NATIONAL INSTRUCTORS OR CONSTRUCTORS OF INDIA?

Colonial pedagogy, according to Prakash (1999) has two aims: natives' knowledge organisation and legitimisation adhering to the coloniser's rubric of scientific parameters, and the application of the approved knowledge systems to generate greater gains for the Raj. Cohn (1996) wrote, "The conquest of India was a conquest of knowledge". He then presented an account of Sir Thomas Roe who went as an agent of the Company to the Mughal court in 1615 and the inconveniences he suffered due to his lack of knowledge in Persian, which was the language of the court and 'want of an interpreter' (Cohn, 1996). From 1770 to 1785, considered the formative period of the appropriation of (classical) Indian languages, the production of 'grammars, dictionaries, treatises,

textbooks and translations' was carried out. This activity led to the establishment of an epistemological space and the beginning of a new discursive tradition. What began as an instrumental mission to fill the need of employees to run their Colonial system resulted in a conflicting transformation of their own linguistic and intellectual artifacts. The years of appropriating the local language and knowledge yielded in the legitimisation of the British's system with their different 'pedagogical and scholarly apparatus' (Prakash, 1999).

With appropriated theoretical and practical machinery of education, and a great sense of entitlement to the knowledge resources of Indians, the British considered themselves competent to be, as C.E. Trevelyan referred, the 'national instructors of India'. The Court of Directors at London had 'the question of language learning at the top of its priorities', while the British scholars at universities in India and the Asiatic Society of Bengal were primarily interested in the construction of knowledge to be disseminated. This difference in priorities created a conflict between these authorities under the British rule. Nevertheless, the cardinal ideological purpose of Colonial education was the creation of an 'English' civil society. The idea of English politics, economics, morality, religion, art and science was sought to be shown to eventually serve the purpose of 'character formation' of the supposedly 'intellectually bankrupt' (Kumar, 2006) natives of India. At the core of a civil

administration are members, who are of fine moral and rational faculties. Instruction in the superior language of English is recognised to be essential for training these members. All of their educational expositions, experimentations and implementations were designed to cohere to the conducive construction of the ideal society. In professing to provide education, improvement of conduct was the implicit agenda. Panikkar (1920) argued that this holds true for the missionaries who endeavoured for English education and the government which supported them.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE: PURPORTED TOOL OF THE CIVILISING EDUCATION

Seth (2007) identified the British government's instruction to the Company in 1854 to impart 'European knowledge' in India as the pivotal prelude of "its current status as the obvious and almost the only mode of knowing about India". The mode of knowing encompasses the medium of language used for teaching and learning, and most notably, thinking. Scientific investigations and philosophical deliberations have examined the relationship between thought and language (Vygotsky, 2012). The common thesis of these arguments is the dialectical relationship between these two distinct entities. Besides being the exclusive natural prerogative of humans, language is the chief artifact of their society. Contained in it is an almost infinite repository of a culture's socio-

historical stories, histories, myths and all kinds of narratives. In this line of reasoning, divorce of the learners' native language from their scholastic discourse might be equivalent to alienation and discrimination. Their identity and meaning-making system are almost eradicated and excluded in the pursuit of knowledge that was to purportedly better their lives. In the British's endeavour to appropriately identify and locate solutions to 'what to teach' and 'how to teach', the two major foci of education in Colonial India and perhaps, till today, the fundamental aspect of students 'who am I' has been neglected. The expressed purpose of civilising has, however, been reduced to the recreation of English-educated Indians at the expense of dissolution or renunciation of their Indianness.

One of the earliest advocates of English education in India, the Rt. Hon'ble Charles Grant, vehemently expressed the sovereignty of their language to 'silently undermine and at length subvert the fabric of error' (Krishna, 2005). This undermining of the Indian system of knowledge and beliefs often border on ridicule. This was also echoed in many of the infamous statements made by Macaulay. But it is noteworthy that in his writings (1836, 1837) after the 1835 Minute, there was an expression of the inevitable need to educate a class of Indians who could relay European knowledge in vernacular dialects. In fulfilling the 'want of an interpreter', a widespread dissemination of western ideas by the

English-educated Indian middlemen was the targeted outcome. He opined that 'a good vernacular literature in this country' would be possible only by first reading and learning the 'noblest literature in the world', that is the European. In this manner, civilising the Indians was to be carried out. Satish Chandra Mukherjee in his reply to George Birdwood on the issue of indigenisation of Indian education rightly expressed the need for learning the lessons of English education 'in a critical spirit and in a comparative method'. He asserted the significance of understanding and appreciating the English life and civilisation by drawing a parallel reference to that of India's culture. The implementation of English language in educational discourse on the basis of arguments made by Satish Chandra Mukherjee might render possible the purported goal of civilising and 'awakening a purer and higher thought' in Indians.

Henry Whitehead, one of the pioneering champions of the deprived castes, highlighted the damage created by the substitution of English in place of vernacular languages in the educational practice 'under the spell of Lord Macaulay's rhetoric'. The lack of relatedness between academic activities at school and village life looms large across the country. In the indigenous system, the basic needs of the masses to learn read and write were met owing to their lesser needs and simpler lives as well as the family-based occupational pursuits. The prevailing equilibrium

of socio-economic undertakings and minimalistic personal endeavours was disrupted with the enforcement of a new educational regime with English language as its tool.

**ENGLISH LANGUAGE: ITS DYNAMICS
AS MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION OF THE
SUBJECT MATTER OR MODE OF
IMPRISONING THE MIND**

William D. Arnold, *Director* of Public Instruction in Punjab in 1856, noted the inconsistency between the British's 'idea of education' and that of the Indians. He reported his arguments based on the observations pertaining to language and reading, and science. The former is pertinent to the present discussion hence, the evidential and analytical aspects of language would be considered here. Two basic points Arnold noted were the inability of Indians to derive meaning from the words they read, and the inconsistency of vernacular like Urdu with the idea of erudition and learning. Reading for Indians was merely for its phonetic accuracy and was devoid of the process of meaning comprehension and implication for moral improvement. These recognised aspects of literacy, coupled with the inadequacy of vernaculars for rational scholastic discourse, were enough to convince Arnold to prioritise the pedagogical exercise exclusively centred on English language. As they justified their self-accorded supremacy in educational discourse of Indians,

the British gradually legitimised and normalised their absolute autonomy and authority of 'what is to be taught' and 'how'. The increased translation and production of textbooks in English by Christian missionaries aided by government authorities was chiefly driven by the agenda to unpack the meanings of texts that were to intellectually and morally upgrade the Indian minds to the level of the English (Christian) philosophy. The prescribed curriculum and texts, the implemented method and medium of teaching were intended to serve this purpose. However, there was resistance to English education mainly because of the suspicions that it was equivalent to Christianity.

The notion reflecting a quote cited by Chaturvedi (1930) 'Learn English and you lose your humanity', popular during this resistant phase, was shared by a sizeable portion of people. A conflict over the issue of 'what was worth learning' arose between the Orientalists and the Anglicists. Parents and students were aware of the social and economic lucrative benefits of studying in English-medium schools. So, despite their hesitation and resistance, they succumbed to the play of colonisers. It led to increased memorisation of facts and less understanding of meaning by students. Such an instrumental approach to education was destined to have detrimental effects not only on the recipients of educational service of that time, but also for the

future generation who followed the set template of expectations.

V. S. Apte (1884) in his critique on the English models of teaching and learning discussed the restrained natural growth of Indian students. Besides limiting the educational and professional promotion, if proficiency in spoken and written English is not attained, regardless of conceptual competency in the language, the natural psycho-social domains such as their nationality, identity, and way of life, valued beliefs and practices were severely undermined. He remarked that it was as though 'the object of the university was to send forth into the world every year a lot of Anglicised graduates instead of graduated Natives!'. Realisation of the shortcoming of such an educational practice resulted in the publication of journals like *Dawn* by Satish Chandra Mukherjee in 1897. There was resurgence for the reclamation of their identities, leading to demand for the establishment of Islamic schools and *pathshalas*. These movements were supported by leaders like Gandhi, who called for an education system that incorporated the natives' faiths.

Panikkar pointed out the undue importance attached to English as a course of study and as a medium of instruction. He also highlighted the formal and stereotyped methodology as one of the defects of the educational system in India. It is one of the major remnants of Macaulay's Minute that ushered in Lord William Bentick's

Resolution of March 1835, which decided in favour of English education to the entire neglect of oriental and vernacular instruction. The likes of Munro and Elphinstone advocated the preservation of indigenous education and oriental learning. It was reflected in the concerns addressed in the Educational Dispatch of the Directors, 1854, to provide epistemological and ontological space for languages and system of knowledge, besides English, and to care 'for the educational interests of the entire community' (Seal, 1892).

Nandy (1983) precisely dissected the functional anatomy of the colonised mind and traced its genealogy from the Colonial roots to the post-Colonial practices that perpetuate it. Conceptualising colonialism as 'a view of mind and history promoted by colonialism itself', he described its impact on the personal psyche and public consciousness of both the ruler and the ruled. The deeply rooted and widespread impact of English language in India is the undisputed stamp sealed by the British. From being implemented as a medium of learning and teaching to educate a class of Indians, it has consolidated into the shared mode of thinking. The epistemic conquest has expanded into the psychological and social terrain, and economic capital. A perpetual dissonance to either glorify English in all its utility, majesty and idiosyncrasy, or to revitalise the vernacular language persists. It was neither then, nor now, merely a matter of officially recognising a language of

communication. But an assertion of one's value of human existence, inclusive of the grandeur and pride associated with its unique socio-cultural artifacts. As concurred by Sen (2005), the quest for redemption from the bondage of the colonised mind and reclaiming self-respect fuelled by an identity and autonomy of self-sufficiency and efficacy has become central to Indians' way of thinking and living. English language is the part and parcel of this struggle. Transcending it, might mean being deprived of a relationship with our past.

CONCLUSION

One of the major challenges of Indian intellectual history is to find

a scholastic balance, theoretically and methodologically robust between 'modern' and 'traditional' knowledge. English language has a pervasive role in the growth of India both during the Colonial and contemporary times. The syncretistic and dialogical tradition of India's past provides a hope for appropriately dealing with this legacy of the British, justifiably attending to its natural and civilisational significance. The paper is one such attempt. Examining the history of English language in British India reveals not only its significance in the educational enterprise but that of existential exercise.

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