

English Language Education in India

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While English is not the official language of India, it has become the language of the ruling elite. Fluency in English is extremely sought after and brings with it the potential for social mobility to the underprivileged sections of society. But is an English-medium education the solution?

The United Nations celebrates English Language Day on 23 April, the date traditionally observed as both the birthday and date of death of William Shakespeare. Celebrating “language days” for each of its six official languages, the organisation’s stated purpose in doing so is to “celebrate multilingualism and cultural diversity.”

In the Indian context, the English language had been recognised for official purposes in the Constitution for a period of 15 years and continues to enjoy such recognition under the Official Languages Act, 1963. While the “national language” issue was contentious during the Constituent Assembly debates and continues to remain unsettled even today, the use of English remains prevalent, not just for official purposes but also in education and public discourse. An estimated 10% of India’s population can speak the language.

But in a country with 22 scheduled languages (those that are listed in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution) and 99 other non-scheduled languages (as per the 2011 Census), what role does English play? Why is English becoming increasingly sought after as a medium of instruction? And what impact does the English medium have on education in the country?

This reading list explores the contours of multilingualism in India in the context of English language education.

English as the Language of the Ruling Elite

English is often understood in India as the language of colonial British rule, but does its use in postcolonial India bear the legacy of colonialism?

Tejaswini Niranjana (1990) wrote:

The introduction of English education in India is inextricable from the process of subjection/subjectification under colonialism. The colonial "subject"; constructed through practices or technologies of power/knowledge, participates willingly ... in his/her insertion into the dominant order. As the historian Ranajit Guha suggests, English did not owe its importance as "an emblem of power" within the education system to official sponsorship alone. English becomes a mark of status through a complex production of the colonial subject within multiple discourses and on multiple sites.

This association of the English language with power and status has continued in postcolonial India. Gyanendra Pandey (2016) observed:

In the South Asian subcontinent ... the English language has an unusual aura and power, simply as a medium of speech and writing—since it was, and to a great extent continues to be, the language of the rulers.

David Faust and Richa Nagar (2001) explained this concentration of power in the hands of English speakers:

A class divided system of education has played a central role in moulding the processes and patterns of uneven development and dis/enfranchisement in postcolonial India. In much of urban India, there prevail two systems of education—English-medium and vernacular-medium. On an individual level, English-medium education has been a ticket to vertical mobility in Indian society. At the societal level, English-medium education has played a critical role in producing what Kothari (1993) calls a modernised techno managerial elite that continues to have disproportionate influence in shaping the discursive terrain of development, and thereby policies and programmes that affect the social fabric of the country. Less visibly, English-medium education widens social fractures in Indian society by creating and reinforcing a social, cultural, economic, and discursive divide between the English-educated and the majority.

Further, there is resistance to the mainstreaming of English language education by the ruling Brahmanical elite in the country in the name of protection of regional languages. Yet, the hypocrisy in such resistance is self-evident. Placing the onus of protecting the mother tongue on the marginalised groups is another tool of marginalisation in the hands of the dominant groups. Citing the example of the introduction of English as the medium of instruction in government schools from Class 1 to Class 6 by the Y. S. Jagan Mohan Reddy-led

Yuvajana Sramika Rythu Congress Party government in Andhra Pradesh, Subroto Dey (2019) explained:

After ascending to power, Reddy is, in fact, honouring his poll promise of English-medium schools despite mounting criticism from the opposition and a section of the society which fears the loss of identity and culture due to this move. Countering their criticism, he asked his critics to introspect as to whether they send their children and grandchildren to English- or Telugu medium schools (Indian Express 2019). Most of the critics are from privileged backgrounds, and send their children to English-medium private schools. Their argument is that the introduction of English-medium schools will prove to be an onslaught on Telugu language and culture. However, it is surprising that they expect only the marginalised to take the responsibility of protecting culture and tradition while the rich continue to enjoy the fruits of modernity riding on quality education in English.

Peggy Mohan (2014) also wrote:

What we have created is an India where the elite have decamped to English, leaving it to the poor to keep our languages “warm” for us in our absence. It is not surprising, then, that the poor have taken note of our success and decided to follow us up the food chain into the privileged world of English. While they may know that they are abandoning their heritage by putting their children early into English-medium private schools, they are sanguine about this, choosing to survive in the present milieu than being reluctant custodians of local languages that have given them precious little in terms of livelihood.

Emancipatory Potential of English

While the reliance of the ruling elite classes on English is not in question, its “official status” is tenuous. It does not find a place in the scheduled languages list. Instead, Hindi is recognised as the official language of the nation and Article 343 of the Constitution, and Sanskrit is given primacy when it comes to providing the vocabulary for Hindi. The mention of English in this constitutional scheme is characterised by its temporary nature since Article 343 provides for its continuance in use for only 15 years.

Placing English outside what he termed the “Chaturvarna (four-tier order) of languages” in India (with Sanskrit, Hindi, the scheduled, and the non-scheduled languages occupying various rungs of the ladder), Hany Babu M T (2017) wrote:

While officially, English is treated as an invisible or untouchable language, it continues to dominate the public sphere and having no access to good English is often the determinants of social mobility, wherefore the underprivileged find it impossible to catch up as the state has no obligation to provide education in English for them.

But it is in this placement of English outside the “official” language system of the state that Babu also situated its emancipatory potential for the marginalised.

However good, however important, English may be, we cannot tolerate that there should be an English-knowing elite and a large mass of our people not knowing English. Therefore, we must have our own language. But

English—whether you call it official or whatever you please, it does not matter whether you mention it in the legislation or not—but English must continue to be a most important language in India which large numbers of people learn and perhaps learn compulsorily. Why? Well, English today is far more important in the world than it was when the British came here. It is undoubtedly today the nearest approach to an international language.

S Anand (1999) explained the unique position of English in Indian society, as compared to a language like Sanskrit, which has been historically inaccessible to Dalits.

Unlike Sanskrit, there are no scriptural injunctions against the learning of English: English is theoretically as accessible to Dalits and women as it is to the 'Dwijas'. However, the Brahmanical classes have monopolised the use of English (as also other symbols of western modernity) and have justified the denial of the same to the Dalits. Education in Hindi or a scheduled language is also fraught with Sanskritization and does not hold the same emancipatory potential as English. According to Anand,

The point here is not whether Dalit Bahujan's all over the country are using English to assert their position today. They are of course doing this in languages they are comfortable in. But this again does not mean that a Dalit from Andhra Pradesh is comfortable articulating his problems in 'standardised' Telugu—a Sanskritic Telugu that is prescribed by textbooks. Kancha Ilaiah, a Dalit Bahujan thinker from Andhra Pradesh, theorises, in English of the purposelessness of Dalit children being forced to acquire a culture that is alien to them through a language which is far removed from their social world—Brahmanical bookish Telugu having nothing to do with the production-based materiality of the Dalits' Telugu.

So, when we look at the interstices between Sanskrit, English and Sanskritised 'regional' languages (the Prakrit) and what these spaces mean in the everyday discourse of our civil society, we see that the 'quota' candidates tend to look upon English (in which 'upper caste' students seem to 'excel') and a command over it, as a tool that would help them overcome their perceived inadequacies, and, in fact, look at the brahmanesses 'bhasha', which they are forced to identify as their mother tongue, with contempt. This realisation of the importance of being articulate in English is particularly felt at the college/university level where the Bahujan encounters the 'posh, convent-educated urban types.

Similarly, Babu wrote:

Busting the common myth of the education in vernacular being socially empowering, Dash (2009) argues, "whether education is in English or in the vernacular, it cultivates elitism and elitism in India has caste as one of its major constituents."

... Orsini (1995) rightly puts it: "Hindi cannot be considered a 'popular national language' versus the 'elite national language' English. Rather, they represent two different elites."

Socio-economic Benefits and English Learning Aspiration

Historically, English has been the preserve of the elite and privileged in India.

It is a well-known fact that the first people to benefit from English education in India were the privileged and elites, who could send their children to English medium schools and accumulate cultural capital over time. One needs to note that it is not only English as a language of instruction but the way it is spoken (accent) that creates a hierarchy in the society and allows the privileged to garner immense cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) to be used for social mobility.

—observed Dey (2019).

The cultural capital of English translates into social and economic benefits due to the predominance of “networks” in accessing career opportunities in India. The same has also been true in a global set-up since the advent of liberalisation in the 1990s. Faust and Nagar (2001) explained:

[T]his social, cultural, economic and political fragmentation leads to increasingly unequal access to resources and power in a period of growing transnational networks among the elite. Under the liberalising trade regime, the elite see their futures as tied to the global economy and increasingly detached from the future of the common people. In fact, some of the people we interviewed in 1995-96 linked a steadily increasing dominance of English with the restructuring of the global and national economies, and the globalisation of culture in which the English speaking national elite benefit from transnational capitalism while the ordinary people are left out. This sentiment resonates with GPD’s (1996) view of elites as a cultural comprador who speak English to do business with multinationals and speak the vernacular to mesmerise the unsuspecting masses.

They added:

As English increasingly becomes “the language of social advantage and exciting economic opportunities,” those educated in state-run vernacular schools face “a chronically unfair compulsion to participate in the mainstream market economy from a weak position” (Kumar 1996:71).

The unfair social and economic disadvantage faced by non-English speakers is the reason for the widespread appeal of the language among the public. This was exacerbated due to the emerging opportunities presented by a globalised economy.

Tanuka Endow (2021) traced the growing demand for English language education and especially English-medium education to the boom in the services sector.

English as a medium of instruction gained importance in India as economic benefits of education through this medium became evident (Daswani 2001).

India’s service-led growth has benefited from the export of high-skilled services aided by well-educated, English-speaking professionals who have been instrumental in India’s emergence in software and information and communications technology (ICT)-enabled services (Dahlman 2010). While these professionals were helped by tertiary education, even jobs with lower levels of educational requirement these days often need some knowledge of English. Being fluent in English (compared to not speaking any English) was found to increase hourly wages of men by 34% (Azam et al 2013).

An EPW editorial (2003) made a similar observation regarding the renewed demand for English language education among sections of the Indian public due to the proliferation of jobs in the business process outsourcing (BPO) and information technology-enabled services (ITeS) sector in the early 2000s.

[T]he Indian middle class and those who aspired to middle class status embraced English medium education as the only kind of education worth having. There can be little doubt that knowledge of English is a prerequisite for obtaining a skilled job in the globalising economy. Thanks to US dominance of the global economy, English has become the language of world business. People around the world are learning English, in China, in Russia, in Korea and in Latin America besides in the nations that were colonised by the British. There can be no quarrel with the desirability of learning English. The BPO boom lays stress on not just learning English in the traditional manner but on mastering English speech and the different idioms of the language. This explains the mushrooming of 'Spoken English' courses and institutes offering such courses around the country's towns.

This is not to say that there is any underlying reason for English and high-paying jobs to necessarily go hand in hand. Peggy Mohan (2014) noted:

It is not that good jobs intrinsically require English. It is just that English serves the purpose of a gatekeeper, as it were. It is a convenient job requirement that ensures that the best jobs in the country stay with the children of the elite.

While the middle class have benefited from exposure to English over the years, many marginalised sections of the public continued to be cut off from education in the language and the mobility it presents. Noting the extent of aspiration for an English language education in India, Dey wrote: Anyone interacting with the people at the grassroots level knows that the marginalised communities want their children to learn English so as to have a level playing field in the contemporary competitive world. The 2017 Bollywood movie Hindi Medium sheds light on the aspirations and struggles of families in admitting their children into elite English-medium schools under the Right to Education Act, 2009, which mandates 25% reservation for weaker sections and economically disadvantaged groups (EWS) in private unaided primary schools. A large number of poor aspiring families is unable to admit their children private English-medium schools through reservation and also cannot afford quality English education due to the lack of financial resources.

The government's stated education policies also acknowledge the English learning aspiration among the public but fall short of addressing them. Endow highlighted:

The draft National Education Policy, 2019 put emphasis on the "functionality and fluency" for teaching English language in schools (MHRD 2019). The need to address common people's aspirations to use English fluently in their daily communication while teaching English has been emphasised in earlier policy documents (NCERT 2006). However, the ground situation presents a contrast. A study conducted in government schools at the primary level in seven Indian states found that Classes 1 and 2 textbooks focus less on listening and speaking skills, and more on developing reading and writing skills (NCERT 2012).

Even in the new National Education Policy, 2020, the home language/mother tongue/local language/regional language has been prescribed as the medium of instruction until at least Class 5.

Sanskrit is being offered at all levels of school and higher education as an important option. Commenting on this language policy, Yemuna Sunny (2021) wrote:

The likely outcomes of the language policy are the exclusions of the marginalised sections from English that continues to be significant for jobs in the globalised times, Sanskrit as an opportunity for privileged caste employment, and the learning of English enclaved in the privileged class.

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