

The Story of English in India

*The chief glory of every people will arise from its language.
And he who does not own his own language will not get to own anything else.*

In India, English language came with the coming of the English people. It totally dominated the educational scene for quite some time. It is indeed interesting to trace the story of English in India

The story of English in India began in 1835. Lord Macaulay, the law member of the Council of Governor General and President of the Board of Education, presented his celebrated minutes in favour of English education. He desired to produce through English education, a class of persons. Indians in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion in morals and intellect supporting Lord Macaulay's education policy of the future, Lord William Bentinck proclaimed, "that the great objective of the British Government ought to be the promotion of European Literature and science among the natives of India; and that all the funds appropriated for the purpose of education would be best employed on English education alone." Lord Harding declared in 1844 that for service in the company (East India Company) preference would be given to those who were educated in English schools teaching western literature and science.

These schools became immediately popular because of the great interest shown in English education by some leading Indian educationists and social reformers.

Thus English started gaining popularity and Indian vernaculars were pushed into the background.

As a result of the policy of the ruling class, English language assumed a privileged position. During the pre-independence days, English language enjoyed many advantages over the country's vernaculars. English was the language of the Ruling class. It was the 'Queen of Language'. It was the language of administration and of law courts. Most significantly, it was an easy means for getting government jobs. All work in every field of public interest was carried out in English. In the pre-independence educational set up, English was the medium of instruction in high schools and in universities. Significantly, experienced teachers taught English. Many of the teachers were English men or women. Indian teachers too had a good academic background. They had a very high proficiency in the subject of English. (That is one definite reason for our elders having excellent proficiency in English. It depends upon the teachers who train people in languages. Learners will learn the language of their teachers.) English occupied a place of pride in the schools and college curriculum. The importance of knowledge of English was so much that it was equated with good education and cultured social life.

Knowledge of English became a tool of socio-economic dominance. A person who had even a little knowledge of English enjoyed great social prestige. Elders would stand with their hats down when a schoolboy learning English would enter into their presence.

But this scenario rapidly changed after independence. Post-independence period witnessed sharp reaction against English and a controversy for and against in the retention of English in India erupted, making it a major issue of the era. But the first Minister of Education Abul Kalam Azad understood very well that the intimate contact of over one hundred and fifty years with the English people had made English an integral part of India's educational system and that could not be changed without injury to the education in India. Later it was laid down in our constitution that English would continue as the official language of the Union for 15 years, upto 1965. After this deadline, Hindi would replace it.

Great leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, C. Rajagopalachari, Pt. Nehru understood vital significance and relevance of English to India and her future. Rajagopalachari warned not to ignore English in anger against the British people. The Parliament Act of 1965 declared that English would continue to be used as an *associate language* of the Union. English was given a suitable place in the three-language formula. Later in 1966, the Kothari Education Commission gave English language a place of importance in their modified -three language formula.

Today the importance of English hardly needs to be mentioned.

Although a number of sincere efforts were made to settle the place of English in India once and for all, a few important issues came to the forefront. These were: Should English be the medium of education, at least, for higher studies? Should English be taught as a compulsory subject? At what stage should it be introduced? What is the main purpose of teaching English? Is it to give the student access to literature and also to western

way of life? Can English become the language of masses? More national-minded people decried the use of English as the medium of instruction at any level - school or university. Significantly, even Pt. Nehru who had himself been educated in English medium schools was not in favour of retaining English as medium of instruction. The question whether English should be taught as a Compulsory Subject too was hotly and sentimentally debated. Some believed that it is useless to make English a compulsory subject. Reasons given by them were : English is a difficult foreign language to learn. Regional languages are gaining importance and teaching of a foreign language will take time away from the study of regional languages. The child will be burdened with language load. As a compulsory subject all the students shall be required to study English. But as only few of them will require its use in their later life, teaching English to such a crowd will be useless. Conditions under which English is being taught are far from satisfactory and hence it would be better not to teach it. English is responsible for a large number of failures, so a few more foreign languages should be introduced to give the students a wider choice. English can never become the language of the masses. Thus, only those who would need to use English in their later life should be allowed to study it.

Though these arguments make good sense, the Indian Education Commission was firm in its conviction that for a successful completion of the degree course; a student must possess adequate command over English. The option given was - those who really want to study English, may do so in class V and those who want to gain elementary knowledge of this language, may start studying it in Class VIII. The Commission was realistic in their conviction that if English is to be retained as an important language; its study must be made compulsory at school stage for a certain reasonable minimum time. English still dominates our life and will dominate more and more. More and more are opting for higher education with overall empowerment of our people. The Commission realised that so long as English continued to be the language of the Government, social institutions and trade and industry, its study could not be ignored. Many concerned educationists who wanted English to be taught as a compulsory subject realised that if English was made optional at school; its standards would further fall.

We do all good things under compulsion.

There was a great debate as to at what stage should English be introduced. It was realised that for a long time to come, English will continue to be needed as a 'library language' in the field of higher learning. For this purpose a strong foundation in the language will have to be laid at the school stage. (As we see, those who had strong grounding in English at school stage reaped a rich harvest of opportunities later). The Commission held the view that the teaching of English may begin in Class V. Psychologists and brain specialists hold that the learning of a new language can begin before the child attains the age of 10.

The considered opinion with experts is that an adequate command over the mother tongue should be acquired before the learning of a foreign language like English is begun. Education being a state subject, different states have different arrangements for the teaching of English. For instance, Punjab and Haryana introduced English in VI class while in Gujarat in VIII class. Of course, this was not without its fallouts. It was held that the ideal time to teach language is when the child is in class V or VI.

Interestingly, the main purpose of teaching English in India was discussed. Some people believed that the main purpose of teaching English in India is to give the student access to English literature. Others believed that it is to give the student an understanding of the western way of life while other held that English should be taught for utilitarian rather than cultural purposes.

It is important to understand the main purpose of the government in teaching English to you. Today, you find yourself lacking in either fluency or accuracy (or both) in English. The roots of this problem could be traced to this issue. It was this question that decided the way English was taught to you, and is still being taught to our children. The view that English should be taught to give our students access to western literature and to give the understanding of the western way of life is a legacy from the past. The British rulers created a certain mind-set, a certain conditioning of mind in India. English was viewed important in getting access to the western literature that inspired the then youth and the Western way of life provoked their aspirations for a modern and better quality of life. That is why English is taught with help of English literature. This is one very big mistake that weakened your fluency and accuracy in English. Shakespeare's sonnets, no matter how great, sublime, and immortal they are, are of little utility in developing fluency and accuracy in English. One must understand that literature cannot be and should not be taken as the main purpose of teaching of English in India for, to aim literature is to miss the way to language. Thus, those who were taught English with help of literature were prevented from seeing what they needed to see. They failed to see that English is a means to an end. The reading of books is for amusement and for information. It is surely obvious that in order to be able to read even the simplest literary text; a child needs certain minimum linguistic equipment.

It is indeed wrong to think that the main purpose of teaching English in India is to understand the Western way of life. It was acceptable when our country was under the British rule. But we must not ignore the utility of a foreign language (for that matter, of any language) in understanding the way of life of other people all over the world. But to accept it to be main purpose of teaching is quite misleading.

As said above, the main purpose of teaching English in countries like India should be 'Utilitarian' than 'cultural'. We see that in India, we need English mainly for the 'utilitarian' point of view. As a great language of utility, English served us as the medium through which we can and could establish contact with the intellectual world abroad and thus know what is happening elsewhere.

One must understand very well that the main purpose of teaching English in India is not to give our students access to literature but to make them active users of simple, natural and living English. (Now you think of what was the purpose of the English taught to you. Was it not only as a subject like any other subject of study in school and college? A subject you must study to pass exams.

Thus, the whole approach was 'exam oriented' and never utilitarian.) English was never taught as a language of global communication.

It is important to ask the question, "Can English become the language of the masses in countries like India?"

Frankly speaking, English can never, and should never be allowed to become the language of the masses. This status must go to the country's own languages. Only less than 3 per cent of people can actually speak or manage to speak in English in India. But one must not become sentimental in answering this question. This issue is intimately linked with the individual's future and you are not an exception. Good command over English has always become a passport to higher careers. We see that lack of it makes one lose many vital, defining opportunities.

The Importance of English

The importance of English in the light of new unfolding reality must be properly understood in order to make a focused, required effort. One can give ample reasons as to why more and more Indians would learn how to communicate in English - both written and spoken. As far as our international heritage is concerned, English remains the most important life spark as a foreign language. It is fact that for its richness in thought, elegance in style and for its dignity in use, English language holds the key to cultural living. All this makes it the most popular international language. The situation available in India is unique. The rapid changes all over the world must be taken into account while understanding the importance of English and the urgent need to learn it well. As this does not require insightful discussion, as many of us are well aware (much out of our own experience) that one must have good command over English in this networked era of internet. We can briefly say that English is an international language of business, English is our major window on the world, English is our most important and suitable link language and it is our important library language.

No language, ancient or modern, can be compared with English in respect of the international status. It is interesting to note that about one half of mankind have chosen English to communicate with those who do not speak their own language. (English is the second largest language in use next to Chinese.) As per the recent survey of Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages (CIEFL), Hyderabad, not more than 5 per cent of people in India can handle text in English. Though it is said that some 13 per cent people can understand English, less than 3 per cent can talk effectively. Even then our huge English-literate population has become an asset for our country while winning more and more foreign investment.

English is an unending source of better international relations. It helps integration of ideas on all aspects of human life-political, social, educational, cultural and economic. The international status of English is justified on another ground. It is one of the few languages of the world, which record everything of importance and interest that take place in any field of human activity and in any part of the world. The English press puts across the world all inventions of science and technology and the growing literature in all the branches of knowledge. Its literature covers practically all aspects of life. It is for this reason that the study of English is becoming more and more desirable than ever before in both developed and developing countries. It records everything of importance and interest. The spread of Internet technology has networked the world and our world is like a global village. The accessibility to knowledge has increased. Technology is the leveller but only those who understand English (the medium) can actually take benefit of this information revolution. In this context, the importance of English as recorder of knowledge of humanity is of indisputable importance.

English is language of international trade and industry. Commercial correspondence among different countries of the world is carried out in this language. This helps in creating new trade links among countries.

English has become the language of cultural give and take. It has facilitated exchange of educational opportunities. Our students could study in America, Britain and Australia because of their knowledge of English. Thus, knowledge of English is very vital in exploring and exploiting opportunities in other countries. One can definitely say that English has conquered all fields of human activity. Being a language of diplomacy, elegance, culture, art and refinement, English is a language of international importance par excellence.

Pt. Nehru was very right when he said, "English is our major window on the modern world." It is only through this language that we have "distilled essence of modern knowledge in all fields of human activity."

The University Education Commission observed in its Report of 1949: "It (English) is a language which is rich in literature- humanistic scientific and technical. If under sentimental urges we give up English, we would cut ourselves off from the living stream of ever-growing knowledge. Unable to have access to this knowledge, our standards of scholarship would fast deteriorate and our participation in the world movement of thought would become negligible."

No one can deny that English language reports world's important events soon after they take place. English language knows no distance and this language flies on the wings of time. As long as this gateway to modern world is kept open, the whole world keeps alive to all that happens here and there.

Imagine the plight of our world if every nation decided to report everything of world interest in its own language and if this major window on the modern world were closed forever. Every nation would become an isolated isle in the vast ocean of the world. F.G. French has rightly observed that "Anyone who can read English can keep in touch with the whole world without leaving his own house." It fact, English is the only window through which we can see the day to day progress being made by experts in the scientific, technological, agricultural, cultural and literary fields.

English has come to stay as a link language in the national life of the country. Although different states have declared the use of the official language of the state for administrative work, the use of English still continues at certain levels of the state machinery and social set-up in the country. It is a common social and cultural link among various states of India. It is the only language for inter-state relationship and communication. Being the associate language of the Union, different states cannot do without English for communications with the centre. In a way, it remains the prime mover of inter-state mechanism in India.

English is beautifully woven in the texture of the social life of India's teeming millions. It is playing a predominant role in a healthy social give and take among different sates. For his breakfast in Bengal in English and a gentleman from Gujarat can best ask for his dinner in Punjab in this very language. In a way, English is a unifying force, a unifying link, a unifying factor in the social life of the country.

Apart from being a binding force within the country, English is our link with the outside world. This is the only language through which we can voice our opinion in the affairs of the world. Prof. R.S. Trivedi has aptly pointed out : "India's connection with the Commonwealth, the U.N.O and its agencies, her needs of foreign trade and economic aid from different countries and her role in the affairs of the world, all conjointly enjoin upon the framers of her educational policy to give due weight to English so that her interests do not suffer and she does not detract from her rightful place in the world polity.

English is major trade-link with the outside world. English is the only language through which Indian manufacturers are trying to create fresh trade-links. All commercial business with the outside world is conducted through this language. Much of our technical know-how depends upon this language. No wonder, without the knowledge of English language, Indian industry would remain a poor national undertaking.

"Whatever the future of English may be in India, one thing is certain. In India, as in other countries, English will maintain - quite probably increase--its immense usefulness as a library language". In this capacity, it is to serve as a key to the storehouse of knowledge not yet available in the Indian languages. The continued use of English language is desirable as it is the only language "through which maximum knowledge can be imparted to students."

Much of world's richest literature (50% according to the latest United Nations publication) in all branches of knowledge is found in this language. Most original publications are in English while others are translations of important publications in other languages. It is the English press that reports all events of national and

international sooner than before. This language has enriched even our own vernaculars. Prof. Gokak has rightly observed that “It was in the English class-room that the Indian literary renaissance was born.”

It is, henceforth desirable for our people to have sufficient command over English. To quote from the report of Kothari Education Commission: “In fact, English, as an important ‘library language’ would play a vital role in higher education. No student should be considered as qualified for a degree, in particular, a Master’s degree, unless he has acquired a reasonable proficiency in English.”

Referring to the great deal of confusion and emotional thinking Prof. Ish Kumar has pointed out: “So long as it is necessary not only to understand and speak, but also to read and write correct English to get a job, nothing can be done in schools and colleges. English will remain supreme. And the pity of it is that the job is just selling postage stamps or drafting an ordinary letter, which can be better done in our own language.”

We all realise the urgent need to give the rightful place to English in his life. One’s rightful place in the global village of today much depends on it.

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