

Colonial Legacy of English as Medium of Instruction in India

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Abstract

The politics of language in India is a complex issue due to the country's rich and vast linguistic diversity, which has also affected the language used as the Medium of Instruction (MOI) in Indian schools. Hindi, English, and state languages dominate the school MOI undermining the enormous Language and Mother Tongue diversity in India. In this article, we trace the history of the MOI in indigenous schools of the 19th century, highlighting how their flexibility and adaptability were well-suited to local conditions. It will also provide a comparison of the role of Missionaries, the East India Company, and Indians in the expansion of Western education with English as the MOI. We argue that the current political dominance of English in India largely stems from the widespread use of English as medium of instruction in schools during the Victorian era, contrary to the original goals of the Education Despatch of 1854.

Keywords: Language policy, medium of instruction, colonial India, mother tongue, English education

Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that India is facing a foundational learning level crisis. According to the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, once children fall behind on foundational literacy and numeracy, their learning curves will be flat for years and they will perpetually be unable to catch up. There is widespread consensus among educationalists, linguists, early childhood education experts, and cognitive psychologists that

instruction in the Mother Tongue (MT) of the child is the most suitable medium for cognition and comprehension in the early years (Bühmann & Trudel, 2008; Khaitan, 2020).

The Indian Constitution and many National and state education policies formulated thereafter have recognised the importance of MT instruction in elementary education. The Three-Language Formula (TLF) in 1957 proposed the use of a MT/regional language, Hindi, and/or English at different levels of education. The TLF was endorsed in the National Education Policy of 1968 and the National Education Policy 1986 has emphasised that the MOI at the elementary level should be in the MT of the child, and directed states to implement it in state-run schools (Mohanty, 2008). The recent National Education Policy of India broadens the definition of MOI to include local and regional language at least till grade 5, preferably till grade 8 (MHRD, 2020).

Among the languages spoken and used in official and commercial contexts, there is a hierarchy of dominance, with English and Hindi occupying the top, followed by major languages of the states. At the bottom are the marginalised indigenous and minority languages often listed as the non-scheduled languages in the Census (Mohanty, 2008). The number of languages used in schools as either MOI or as a subject has declined from 81 in 1970 to 41 in 1998 (Mohanty et. al, 2010). Analysis of the UDISE 2017-18 data reveals that only 23 languages are used as the main medium of instruction (MOI-1), with Hindi and English medium being among the top two, followed by regional languages such as Bengali and Marathi used by the Indian states (UDISE+, 2017–2018).

English is used widely in higher education institutions and government documents and has attained the *de facto* status as lingua franca in all commerce and industry in India. The demand for English education continues to dominate, in spite of various attempts such as the TLF to promote and incorporate vernacular languages in Indian education. There has been a drastic increase in the number of English medium schools in both urban and rural areas. About 154 thousand schools (11.2 per cent) use English as the main medium of instruction (UDISE+, 2017-18). Some states like Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, and Jammu and Kashmir have adopted English as the main MOI in nearly all schools.

Dominance of English stemmed from its use as the official language and

MOI in schools during the colonial era. English education was soon seen as an instrument of upward mobility in India and has continued to be viewed as superior even after gaining Independence. India has witnessed the creation of an English-speaking elite, who now dominate and drive the narrative of Indian development and policy. In this article, we focus on the MOI development and controversies during 19th Century India, and the consequent dominance of English in Indian Education in the Victorian era.

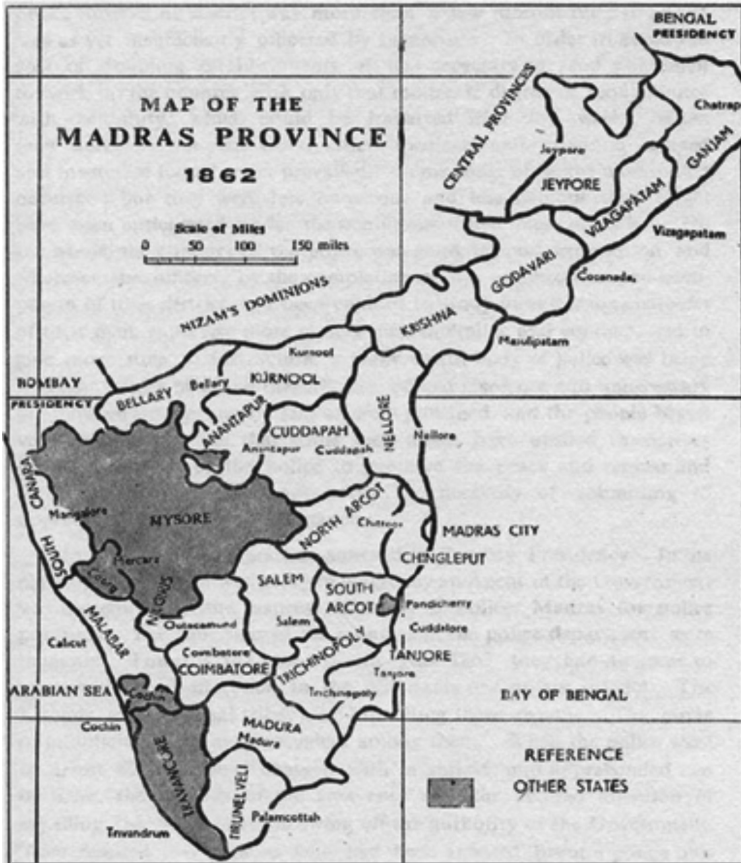
Power and Dominance of Languages in India

Medium of Instruction in Indigenous Schools at the Beginning of the 19th Century

In mediaeval India, the indigenous system of education in villages and towns was conducted through a system of *pathshalas* (schools) and *gurukul* (residential schools/college) for Hindus, and *maktabs* (schools) and *Madrassa* (higher education) for Muslims. They functioned primarily through the support of the local community without much state patronage (Khubchandani, 2008). During the early consolidation of power by the East India Company in the early 19th Century, surveys were conducted to map the form, content, and spread of indigenous education in India. The reports of Madras Presidency (1822-26), Bombay (1823-29), and a few districts of Bengal (1835-38) noted the widespread prevalence of informal indigenous schools throughout India (Naik & Nurullah, 1974, pp. 3-4).

Sir Thomas Munro, Governor of Madras Presidency (see the map below), in his minute on June 25, 1822, noted that the Madras Presidency had 12,498 schools with 188,650 scholars (184,110 males and 4,540 female) for a 12.8 million population, amounting to one school (informal) to every 1,000 of the population (Arbuthnot, 1855). Homeschooling was noted to be much more prevalent than regular schools. An analysis of the Munro report in 1823, presented in Table 1, shows that one presidency had a mix of all dominant south Indian languages and Oriya. District collectors, such as those from Bellary, also noted that many languages were used even in one single district.

Figure 1: Map of Madras Province in 1859



(Image source: *The history of Madras police: Centenary 1859-1959*, Inspector General of Police-Madras, 1959 (Publication before 1978. Not covered under US copyright law)

Reports from the district collectors show that English schools were relatively rare in the mid-1820s in the Carnatic region (Dharmapal, 1983). The district of North Arcot had seven English, 40 Persian, 201 Telugu, and 365 Tamil schools. The District of Bellary had an equal number of schools teaching Telugu and Kannada, and some Marathi schools. Similarly, in Bengal, Adams report (1838) showed the presence of Bengali, Sanskrit, Hindi Persian, Arabic, and Hindi Medium schools in Bengal Presidency.

Table 1: Languages Used in Indigenous Schools in Madras Presidency in 1820s

Language	No. of Schools	Students in Schools	Total Population (estimates 1823)
Oriya	255	2977	3,32,015
Telugu	3,454	38,801	10,94,460
Kannada	551	7,268	9,59,469
Malayalam	759	14,153	9,07,575
Tamil	6,556	93,996	66,22,474
Total	11,575	1,57,195	99,09,993

Note: This data has been compiled from Munro's Report (as cited in Dharampal, 1983).

The high number of speakers, scholars and students being taught in vernacular languages across all Presidencies, indicates that the indigenous schools adapted to the local language and culture of the communities. Being free of any kind of central authority, indigenous education meted out higher levels of education compared to educational institutions in the West. Although indigenous education was not accessible to women and the lower rungs of society, the absence of any kind of imposition of language as a MOI from a central authority allowed basic education to be relatively widespread.

Western Education and English as Language and Medium of Instruction in India

Missionaries: Duality of English and Vernacular Education

Missionaries arrived in India along with the colonisers in the 17th and 18th Century, initially to serve the East India Company Officials and the education of orphan children of British soldiers and Indian mothers. While the company wanted non-interference in India's religious and educational affairs, the missionaries wanted proselytising the Indian masses through the medium of English. Charles Grant (1792), Scottish evangelist and politician, opined that European knowledge would throw light on and 'cure' the 'Hindoo darkness of ignorance and superstition', and this would best be done through the medium of English as opposed to Indian vernacular languages (Naik & Nurullah, 1974).

After the Charter Act of 1813, educating native Indians became one of the responsibilities of the East India Company. A controversy called the *Anglo-Oriental* Controversy arose in Bengal primarily regarding the objectives of education policy and the medium of instruction. The commencement of the Oriental language debate marked the beginning of what eventually culminated into three prominent language debates over the medium of instruction in education, which shadowed the sphere of language politics in India. Aware of the material prosperity that the knowledge of English brought, the Indian population longed to learn the language much before Macaulay's arrival to India. The more conservative officers of the Company, however, did not allow the widespread learning of English, which forced Indian natives to "quench their thirst [for English] in missionary schools" (Naik & Nurullah, 1974, p. 75).

Anglo-Vernacular Controversy

Both the Orientalist and Anglicist parties neglected the mother tongue as a medium of Instruction. Decades before Macaulay's infamous Minutes, in the Bombay Presidency there was debate between imposing English versus Indian vernacular languages as the medium of instruction in education. Bombay Governor Mountstuart Elphinstone pushed the Bombay Native Education Society (BNES) to take the lead in education policy. BNES was of the view that learning English was of secondary importance and the ideas of Western literature and science "will be most easily rendered comprehensible to them [Indian natives] by means of mother-tongue of each scholar" (Parulekar & Bakshi, 1955, p. 92). Meanwhile, in Northwest Provinces, Lieutenant-Governor James Thomason proposed (1846-48) a scheme to set up a school in every considerable village, and a model school in every *tehsil* or revenue district with a Vernacular medium of Instruction. Lord Dalhousie endorsed the Thomason scheme of Vernacular education to be expanded to Bengal and Punjab (Ghosh, 2013), which later became part of the Education Dispatch.

Firm Rooting of English in the Victorian Era (1854-1902)

The Victorian Era was a period that saw the most rapid expansion of Westernisation in education. The Education Dispatch (Wood's Despatch) of 1854, often referred to as the "Magna Carta of English Education in India" (Richey, 1922) laid emphasis on the expansion of mass education

as a means to educating a larger proportion of the Indian population. While it recommended that vernacular languages be the medium of instruction in primary schools, it promoted the use of English at higher levels of education (Richey, 1922).

In the early phase of the Victorian era (1858-82), Indians became increasingly grateful for the British and there was naturally a more favorable attitude towards Western education, science and English literature. Missionary schools witnessed a drastic decline during this period as the Queen's Proclamation of 1858 demanded religious neutrality in education as a measure to assure the Indian population that there was no further threat of proselytisation. Westernisation of the character of Indian Education was brought to completion during the Victorian Era.

Lachman Khubchandani notes three patterns in the MOI in the schools which emerged from the British rule in India (Khubchandani, 2008):

- Rural areas with primary education in vernacular languages
- A two-tier system with vernacular at primary level and English at higher stages in towns.
- The educated urban elites, English medium even at the primary stage

The gradual disappearance of indigenous schools over this period further added to the neglect of local languages in favor of English. Interestingly, most of the English medium high schools and universities were led by Indian managers, as the private Indian enterprise experienced rapid growth between 1854-1902. In 1881-82, about 55,000 primary schools were run by Indian managers, compared to 1,842 run by non-Indians, mostly by missionaries (See Table 4). By 1921-22, India had 1.66 lakh schools with 74 lakh students in schools and colleges of Western education. Unrecognised indigenous schools had reduced to 16,000 with just 4 lakh students studying in it (Nurullah & Naik, 1943, p. 214). Only in higher education did the missionaries have a lead. Owing to the greater opportunities that English education was thought to give its students, several of the provisions pertaining to the medium of instruction in vernacular languages in the Woods Despatch were not followed.

Table 2: Educational Institutions Run by Indian Managers in 1881-82

<i>Educational Institutions in 1881-82</i>	<i>Conducted by Indian Managers</i>	<i>Conducted by other than Indian Managers</i>
Primary Schools	54,662	1,842
Secondary Schools	1,341	757
Arts Colleges	5	18
Professional Colleges and Schools	10	18
TOTAL	56,018	2,635

Note: This data has been taken from the *Indian education commission report 1882*, reprinted in Naik & Nurullah, 1974.

At the secondary education level, the Education Despatch called for MT instruction alongside education in English, however, in practice, education in the vernacular languages was completely neglected. It was observed that as of 1882, students were taught English even before they had a proper grasp of their own MT. There were only four high schools teaching in the MT as opposed to the 181 in English, fueled by the excessive demand for education in English (Naik & Nurullah, 1974, p. 199). In many provinces (except in Bombay) even in early grades, English as a language was taught when the students were not properly grounded in his/her own mother tongue. Except in Punjab, the highest education that could be obtained through the mother-tongue was limited to the middle stage (Nurullah & Naik, 1943, pp. 298-300). Moreover, even the Indian Education Commission's attempt to remedy this situation did not seem to give too much importance to mother tongue education but favored the continuation of English medium education instead.

The neglect of modern Indian languages at the secondary education level, therefore, led to a wider gap between Anglo and Vernacular languages and was also a significant factor for the continuation of English as a MOI at both Junior College and university level. The missionaries, and then the British set the ball rolling for English education as language and MOI in India. It was the wholehearted adoption by Indians in the Victorian era, by setting up grant-in-aid schools and colleges that heralded massive anglicisation of Indian education.

After the partition of Bengal in 1905, the swadeshi movement picked

up pace and triggered a movement to build a more self-reliant system of education. The National Education movement was spearheaded by leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Lala Lajpat Rai, and Annie Besant. The vision of the National Education included removal of the dominance of English and usage of MT/modern Indian languages as MOI. Annie Besant advocated for developing a solid foundation through MT instruction at the primary and secondary level of education, and English to be taught as a second language at the secondary level (Besant, 1932). Later Gandhi strongly advocated the same in his scheme of Basic Education.

The importance of instruction in the MT/home language has been recognised in the Constitution and iterated in the national policies post-Independence, the MOI in schools continues to be languages of political and economic clout like English, Hindi, and the dominant languages of the state. The perceived superiority of English and its utility for social and economic mobility has created a boom in budget private schools teaching in English. Detailed assessment of the MOI developments in the post-colonial era is beyond the scope of this article. However, the root of dominance of English in Indian schools as MOI can be traced back to the language politics from the colonial era.

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