Language of Education in India

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Abstract

The article presents an overview of some languages used in education in India. It begins with Sanskrit, and then looks at Persian, English and the Modern Indian Languages (MILs). Sanskrit has been used through millennia and continents, but never by the masses. Access to Persian was relatively unrestricted, though it did not command the same prestige. English in India grew rapidly with the economic power of its users. Use of MILs in education began with the British, but is restricted in domains.

Keywords: Language policy, East India Company, language of education, modern Indian languages (MILs), methods/materials of language teaching, anti-English movement

Introduction

India has always been a multilingual country (Chaudhary, 2009), where some languages have been used only for local communication. Some others have been learning for their own sake, and to learn other subjects. Languages used for "global" communication have been highly codified. With time, their contents have changed, but slots have endured. What follows is an overview of how this pattern has endured in India through ages.

Sanskrit

Sanskrit has been in India the longest, but never as a language of the masses (Pollock, 2006). It has also been the most cultivated language. The British also established Sanskrit Colleges. There exists an unbroken tradition of Sanskrit education in India. Earlier, in the "Gurukul" system, students lived with the teacher's family as his children. Everyone shared

resources and responsibilities. Senior students also helped in teaching. Almost every village had spots and people for education in this manner (Di Bona, 1983). However, regardless of their knowledge and aptitude, usually only people from upper castes and classes had access to Sanskrit. Books were not common, oral tradition encouraged exclusiveness. All students were expected to learn some texts by rote.

At the "basic" level, memory of texts was tested. At intermediate level, students joined a senior in a discourse. The British brought in proctored and written examinations. At the intermediate level, students were expected to get the verses, basic vocabulary and their conjugations right. Few texts were used for education. Accuracy in the tiniest and trivial details was also insisted upon. All this made Sanskrit a difficult language to learn. Only a limited number of texts were used for education. In an oral tradition of education this was very important. Survival of the core of texts and success of their learners both depended upon accurate memorising. Hence, there was over-insistence upon accuracy in the tiniest and trivial details. No effort was made to modernise its curriculum, or teaching techniques, neither were the courses made relevant to the contemporary needs (see Witzel, 2022, for more detail). Yet Sanskrit remained a respected language although it was not a popular language. As a result, learning it became difficult and brought little reward.

Persian

Persian, after Sanskrit, became the language of education and formal public domains from 13th to 19th Century in India. In the early years of education in *Madarsas*, i.e. colleges, students were expected to learn the texts by rote. But as they progressed, translation, or "tarjuma", became a part of the methodology. There was emphasis upon writing and pronunciation.

In the early years, *maqtabs* and *madarsasa*, i.e. schools and colleges, teaching Persian admitted only the followers of Islam. But Sikandar Lodhi (1489-1517) opened it to all (Chaudhary, 2009). Hindu teachers made significant contributions to the education and use of Persian in India[1].

The British made provisions for teaching Persian in colleges also. In their *Madarsa*, English and Mathematics were also introduced. Qualified teachers were appointed, and made accountable for learning by their

students. The College of Fort William, Calcutta created for the education of the British officials in Indian languages and culture made a significant contribution in this respect. Even Hindu gentry until about the end of the 19th Century learnt Persian[2].

English

Portuguese, Dutch, and French also came to India, but their language soon ceased to be the languages of education. For 150 years after coming to India, English remained in its factories. And then it spread like never witnessed before for any foreign language. In the next 250 years, English transitioned from a language of nearly no one, to a language of almost everyone in India. The spread of English in India can be divided as follows.

History of English in India

a. From the Beginning to Macaulay 1603-1835

b. From Macaulay to Independence

c. Post-Independence

From the Beginning to Macaulay 1603–1835

As the British rose in India, so did their language. But they did not support the teaching of English until the 1830s. They were against doing anything that might antagonise the local population. They were here for "commerce", not for "cross". Therefore, the East India Company (EIC) permitted no evangelical activity on its territory or vessels until 1813. In fact, it encouraged its employees to learn "native" languages.

However, Indians who learnt any English could get a job or do business with the British. The glossaries the British prepared to help themselves learn Indian languages also helped Indians learn English. Many glossaries were published in the second half of the 18th Century carrying words from one or two Indian languages with their equivalents in English (Chaudhary, 2009).

Yet many Indians learnt enough English even in this period. Raja Ram Mohun Roy (1772-1833), for instance, belonged to this period and became a champion of social reforms and English education in India. Roy was the Persian *Munshi*, i.e. secretary, of the Collector of Bhagalpore. As a part of his job, he would go through letters, journals, and books in

English. With all this Roy learnt enough English to win the admiration of even well-educated Englishmen.

In 1783, English became the sole language of business at EIC's Supreme Court in Calcutta. It caused a spurt in demand for English. Indians conversant in English could write petitions, present and argue cases, copy judgements, etc. It led to the creation of English teaching institutions by enterprising Indians and sympathetic Europeans in India. The Hindoo College of Calcutta was an early product of this change.

Voluntary organisations like Calcutta School Society, and Calcutta School Book Society helped create standards of teaching and test as well as materials for learning. They were supported by liberal Europeans and Indians. The Book Society also got a grant from EIC. Table 1 shows how English was growing in popularity in India.

Table 1: Sale of Books by Calcutta School Book Society in 1834

Books in	Copies Sold	Books in	Copies Sold
English	31,640	Bengali	5,754
Sanskrit	16	Hindi	4,171
Arabic	36	Anglo-Asians	4,525
Hindustani	3,384		

Note: This table shows the preference for English Books in India. The date has been taken from a secondary source cited in Ayyar's *Educational and intellectual pursuits* (1987).

Yet the EIC kept a distance from these efforts. It did not stop its employees, Indians or Europeans, from supporting them, but the Company took no part in establishing and running these schools. By the late 18th Century, the EIC was pressured to take some responsibility for education of the "natives". The Act of 1813, while renewing the EIC's Charter for business in India, enjoined upon it to spend out of its profits there at least Rs one lakh on education of the Natives. The Charter Act did not specify the language of this education, and the issue remained unresolved until Macaulay. EIC in the meanwhile spent a part of funds thus accumulated in modernising classical education here. It created new Sanskrit Colleges and Madrasas, and introduced teaching English and Mathematics there. This policy prevented the government from granting Raja Ram Mohun Roy's public petition to start an English school in Bengal in 1825.

The Charter Act of 1813, however, made it possible for Christian missionaries to sail on EIC vessels and to work in its territory in India. Many of these missionaries also started schools giving modern European education in English. In these schools, such as in the one of Alexander Duff (1806-78), English was both a subject and the medium of education. However, principally, English was being learnt and taught through translation of texts from the mother tongue to English and vice versa, supplemented with reading, conversation, recitation, etc. with emphasis upon vocabulary, grammar, spelling and punctuation, and attention to details of writing. This brought them jobs. Public examination for these students was also developed during this period. Their comprehension of printed texts was tested. However, as the numbers grew, the manner of testing changed too. Proctored written examinations soon became an established thing. By 1830s, when T.B. Macaulay (1800-59) came to India, there was little doubt that India wanted English. Governor General William Bentinck assisted by the Law Member of his Council, T.B. Macaulay declared that EIC would support education only in European Sciences given in English.

After Macaulay

EIC had already introduced teaching of English in select institutions. Now it has even begun helping other institutions. To ensure a uniform standard of teaching and testing across the three presidencies, in 1857 the British Imperial Government created universities of Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay. These universities were mainly examining and regulating bodies, and did a commendable job of creating world class education through English.

As the British territory and its power in India was ever-expanding, the Imperial government needed an increasing number of people fluent in English to manage its business in India. This led to spurt in the growth of English teaching institutions and their output. Within a decade in Bengal alone, which included almost all of the Eastern India and today's Bangladesh, there were 17,000 students in government and aided schools, and another 30,000 in Christian mission schools (Ram, 1983).

English was taught from primary school to university, and for a longer duration than other subjects every week. Of the 29 hours of teaching a week at Mahatma Gandhi's school at Rajkot in 1887 (Upadhaya, 1965), 10

were given to English directly. All other subjects, including Sanskrit and Mathematics, were taught and tested in English. Almost all published English authors found a place in the curriculum. Some recitation was taught, but writing, as noted, was over-emphasised. Visiting school inspectors tested the knowledge of spelling and grammar. However, not all schools taught in "English medium". Some children from the Tagore family also went to Bengali medium schools (Gangopadhyay, 2001, p. 177).

Teachers were in short supply, but Bell's monitor model had proved itself in Madras[3], and was replicated virtually everywhere. All good and senior students helped others. Poems, points of grammar, word forms and their spellings, derivations and inflections, etc. were obtained by heart, and tested for accuracy. Unlike in its early years, most teachers of English in India now, as at Mahatma Gandhi's school at Rajkot, were Indians.

Lord Curzon's reforms in 1904 restored mother tongues as medium of instruction in primary schools. It also replaced over-emphasis upon literary studies with learning English for functional purposes. But there was no significant change in the method of teaching. Grammar and translation supported by required and desired reading still remained the preferred method of teaching and learning English until after independence. As the number of students grew, teaching-speaking was ignored, except informally.

English in Independent India

Since independence, India has had an ambivalent attitude to English. It needs English, yet political leaders have been pushing it out of the curriculum. Those that could afford have gone to the non-government English medium "public" schools (Patnaik, 2018). As a result, English became a huge divide in India—English knowing versus others. The latter are said to be "unemployable".

Part of the problem in teaching English in India lies with the irrelevant curriculum. There is an over emphasis on teaching and testing sentence grammar and elements of writing without first creating enough vocabulary and content to write with. Three-hour long proctored tests are conducted religiously, even when required teaching is not.

Teacher education curriculum is equally unreflective of reality. It is what

the British designed ages ago for those that knew English to teach those that were exposed to English. Teachers are inadequately trained, classes are crowded. India needs nearly three million new teachers of English but produces less than 30,000 trained teachers every year. Few of these teachers know how to use computers and multi-media material for teaching an English language class. The recent pandemic has exposed the weaknesses of teacher education in India. Even during the pandemic and lock down, they taught as they used to teach in their classrooms. India can do better.

Modern Indian Languages (MIL)

MILs became the languages of education only after the British Rule in India. The College of Fort William was created mainly to teach MILs to the officials of the EIC. It taught at least half a dozen languages, namely, Hindustani, Bengali, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu. Plus, other subjects were taught in these languages as well. It was a mixed group. At Thomason College of Engineering Roorkee, learning Urdu was compulsory. Courses in surveying and masonry were given through this language (Mittal, 1986, pp. 50-94).

However, MILs gained importance in the education policy only 15 years after independence in the wake of protests against alleged perpetuation of English. The Constitution of India had provided that English would be the official language of India for the first 15 years; afterwards it would be replaced by Hindi. When the time came, and English was sought to be replaced, there were widespread protests against Hindi in Bengal and Southern States, and against English in the rest of the states. Education commissions recommended that schools in India may teach three languages, namely mother tongue, a regional tongue, and English. All the three languages were not taught with equal enthusiasm everywhere, but MILs became the languages of education all over India.

Many states did not implement one or another clause related to the teaching of English, just as no Northern state taught any Southern, Eastern, or Western language. Teaching of mother tongue remained neglected as usual, unless one spoke one of the 22 "official" languages of India. Even there, minimal attention was given. All energy and focus was directed towards teaching English. Thus, teaching of many "Tribal" languages did not happen even in Jharkhand, just as many

Pahari languages are not taught even in Himachal Pradesh, in spite of the numbers and the existence of literature there. Migrant students had no chance to learn their mother tongue. Thus, a Bengali speaking child growing up in Chennai or in Bengaluru could not learn Bengali, just as a Tamil or Kannada speaking child in Bengal could not[4].

Teaching of MILs has been as unimaginative as teaching of English. Obsolete rules of grammar were given greater importance than creation of vocabulary and introduction of great literature written in them. Though institutes for teaching and research in MILs were created, they made no effort to devise methods and materials to help learners from different backgrounds to learn these languages quickly and easily. Once again, all these initiatives, well-meant though, remained mired in bureaucracy and political expediency.

Conclusion

Language is universally acknowledged to be the distinguishing feature of human beings. Unnecessary legislation can only constrain learning. Unofficial efforts at teaching Hindi in South India under the aegis of *Dakshin Bharat Hindi Prachar Sabha* had been a success. Methods and materials were created to promote teaching of Hindi in the South. They produced learning methods and materials and tests to recognise and reward learning of Hindi in the South. However, these initiatives were lost in political chauvinism. Today a village cannot decide if its primary school needs to be upgraded to a middle school and which languages it can teach its children.

Great good in this respect has been done by the mass media in MILs. Now cell phones, Internet and social media are pushing the boundaries of these languages and domains of their use further and farther. Curriculum designers can rethink.

Notes

1. Munshi Tekchand Bahar wrote the first dictionary of Persian, *Bahar-i Azam*, on historical principles in 1739.
2. My grandfather, Sulochan Chaudhary (1878-1950), had been educated in Persian by Muslim tutors.
3. For Andrew Bell (1774-1833), see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrew_Bell_(educationalist).

4. For a discussion of the problems unaddressed by "3-language formula", see Patnaik, 2018.

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