

Resistance and Appropriation: English in Indian Education and Indian Drama in English

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Abstract

While the Minute on Education (Macaulay, 1835) was yet another attempt to bring cultural colonialism into effect, it nonetheless initiated the pedagogical journey of English in the Indian education curriculum. This paper traces the journey of the English language in India from its introduction by Macaulay to its problematised use in the Indian curriculum and finally to its acceptance in paving the way for the modernisation of Indian education. It considers the role of English in the performative arts and the education system of India. These perspectives are centred around a play by Sengupta, *Keats was a Tuber* (1996). The study interrogates the criticism faced by the English language in India while exploring its pedagogical aspects with reference to the play and the curriculum used in Indian classrooms. It aims to bring to light the emancipatory role of the English language, which, despite being a product of colonisation, is now used as a tool to counter cultural imperialism by bridging the gap and linking different cultures across the world and within India.

Keywords: Education, English, pedagogy, language, literature, teaching methodology, theatre

Introduction

“Have we inherited an entire civilisation, an alien sensibility that has seduced us from the culture to which we were born? Have we been enchanted so as to wander forever homeless?” (Sengupta, 1996, p. 239). English, since its reception in India and since its introduction to the

Indian educational curriculum, has been criticised for its role in enabling cultural colonialism. However, it is crucial to move past such prejudices in a globalised world. From primary education to higher education degrees and professional courses, English as a medium has been in high demand. It has become a status symbol and an aspiration of the Indian middle class who dream of climbing the social ladder by learning the English language for career opportunities. Therefore, the role that the English language plays in the highly globalised world is extremely significant. At the same time, there is an urgent need to contextualise English, particularly English literature, by situating it within the Indian context.

Stigmatisation of English: A Controversial Journey from Macaulay to Modern Education in India

The position of the English language in India has historically been scrutinised as a product of colonisation. Its use in Indian academia has raised questions over its role and the effects it has on the Indian masses. It is imperative to look at the journey of English in the Indian educational curriculum to understand the reasons behind its stigmatised position. Paranjape (2005) comments, “English was certainly an instrument of colonisation and colonial domination... English became, nearly two hundred years ago, one of the chief instruments of both imperial domination and native embourgeoisement in India” (p. ii). He highlights two key aspects central to its working mechanism as intended by the British. The first aspect was the aim of the British, which was to establish their cultural and linguistic dominance and carry forward their imperial aspirations. Another aspect was the response of Indians to the introduction of English. The idea of “native embourgeoisement” is used to trace the journey of English in India (Paranjape, 2005, p. ii). Though it was evident that the British aimed to expand imperialist prospects, the reception of English by Indians was remarkably enthusiastic. English as a language soon became a status symbol for the bourgeois middle class. Over more than two centuries, English has been established as the language of the intelligentsia in India.

To understand the role of language, it is significant to look at its cultural aspects. A language is the most fluid and powerful representation of any culture. The culture of a specific community or section of people is carried forward to the next generations and the masses through

various uses of language. From literature, manifestos and news reports to oral artistic mediums such as folklore, theatre and music, all these factors, when combined, work as driving forces that establish a culture's significance and eventually its hegemony. The introduction of English in India was not just the introduction of a language but also of a culture: the English culture, which has established a cultural primacy.

Paranjape (2005) traces the time of the English language's introduction in India and explains this further as,

our unease with English is actually a healthy sign... If India retained English after independence it was ostensibly with an aim rather different from what had informed its introduction and institutionalisation by the British more than a hundred years earlier.
(p. vi)

Paranjape describes the potential of the English language as our attempt at cultural assertion by using the language in native ways. This is best exemplified by the changing bent of undergraduate level English literature courses with the introduction of Indian literature, American literature, African literature, Canadian literature, etc., to counter the monopolised hegemony of the British literary canon. Now, with the introduction of more specialised fields such as feminist literature, Dalit literature and diasporic literature, the canon of English literature has become more inclusive and democratised.

The Indian English Stage and Pedagogical Approaches in *Keats was a Tuber*

This section of the paper focuses on the issues faced by the teaching methodology of English language and literature in contemporary times by analysing the critically acclaimed play, *Keats was a Tuber* (1996), originally written in English by Sengupta. The play is intentional because the playwright intended to write with the aim of "vanquishing that old demon—of being Indian and choosing to write in English" (p. 235). The playwright situates the play against the backdrop of a provincial college in a small town and interrogates the relationship between students and lecturers with English literature and language. Sengupta explains that "The methodology of teaching English is integral to our knowledge and appreciation of the language" (p. 235). Moreover, the play's concern with pedagogical approaches and practices is given prime significance.

Set in the English department staff room of a local college in a town in southern India, the play's focal point is the relationship that the teachers and the students share with the English language and literature. The lecturers include senior professor Mr. Iyer, who exemplifies a strict orthodox approach to literature, and even when he feels the need to make necessary changes to the syllabus, he does not go out of his comfort zone to fight for it. Mrs. Nathan is another senior faculty with a demeanour similar to Mr. Iyer. She is the head of the department who brings her young nephew, Mr. Raghu, to the department as a substitute teacher. Mr. Raghu comes like a breath of fresh air to the department, bringing necessary changes to the syllabus, which had been delayed for so long. Mr. Raghu represents new ways of teaching English literature, which do not solely depend on old-fashioned ways of mugging up or memorising information but rather focus on the experience and relevance of literature, which is integral to learning literature and language. There are other significant characters in the play, such as the young professor Ms. Sarala, who remarkably represents the constant dilemma with the English language and literature and its distance from one's own mother tongue. Ms. Sarala mentions, "It is so funny. I only remember poetry quotations in my language, not in English. So many years I have learnt English literature and now, even though I teach also, I still can't remember" (Sengupta, 1996, p. 311). Sarala's dilemma represents a sense of alienation and distance when expressing deepest emotions and circumstances that cannot be accurately articulated in English. This highlights the wide gap between the Indian experience and the English language. The two create a contradiction at times when English as a language is not adequate to express the Indian experience. The play constantly brings forth such complications and uses them to portray a conflicting relationship between Indians and the English language and literature as an academic discipline.

The play opens with the name board of the department being knocked down on the floor. Since the beginning, the play carries such subtle hints that the English department faces a sense of othering and marginalisation within the college. As discussed above, the play's central theme is the methodology of teaching English language and literature. The heart of the problem with teaching methodology in English language and literature is situating the teaching material and the syllabi in the English milieu. It distances the students from the language when they find no

relevance to it with their own lived experience. The students question the relevance of studying something so distant to them. This dilemma is represented by the senior student Damini,

Why should I study something written by some Englishman who is talking about some bridge in London that I have never seen? If I write a poem 'Upon Howrah Bridge', will it be included in the English syllabus? (Sengupta, 1996, p. 265).

On this Mr. Iyer gently replies, "you have opted for a study of English literature, so you have to read the work that English minds have produced" (Sengupta, 1996, p. 265). This discussion between the professor and student highlights a crucial question: what does English literature consist of?

This question highlights the relevance of the teaching methodology of English courses at both the school and university levels. It contends that English literature does not need to be restricted to the literature written by the English or by authors born in England. In today's globalised world, a language is constantly evolving. It travels and becomes an essential everyday part of various places it travels from, taking a new shape, imbued with the dialects and syntax of the land it passes through. This idea of language travelling focuses on how literature written in English by non-native writers, as well as the literature translated into English, all fall within the huge ambit of what we define as 'English Literature' today. There is a need for language courses to be more inclusive and include texts written by writers from various cultural and geographical backgrounds.

Trivedi (1993) points out the need to make space for translated texts of literature written in other languages in the universities as his third element out of his formula of the *panchdhatu* (5 elements) for teaching literature in India in the Indian context: "We may include as our third element literature not originally written in English but made available in English translation from various languages of the world, whether European, African or Asian, including notably Indian" (p. 242). This model by Trivedi rightfully defines the "methodology of teaching translation in classroom spaces in order to turn them increasingly multilingual, both in terms of pedagogy and syllabi" (Ashwinkumar, 2024, p. 159).

Frustrated with only English writings in the syllabus, which cater to the

method of rote learning for studying literature by restricting students to only canonical texts, Raghu, the newly recruited young faculty in the department, comes up with the idea of making the English courses more inclusive and student-friendly. He suggests:

We put together small prose pieces which allow our students to learn language skills that they can use in their immediate environment... And we simulate real life situations in the classroom where they have to weave together their knowledge of English vocabulary, sentence structure, the question form and so on. (Sengupta, 1996, pp. 280-281)

The major plot of the play calls for the category of English literature to be more inclusive by using literature in translated forms as well. There is a need to teach literature in new, inclusive ways to include more translated texts.

Reclaiming the Power: English—The Indian Trojan Horse?

This section brings to the fore the use of the English language as a means of cultural assertion in India. Sengupta (1996), in her brief introduction to the play, poses an open-ended question while looking at the English language as a legacy of colonisers, “for independent India, is that legacy a Trojan horse?” (p. 236). The subplot of the play seems to provide an answer to this question. Through the play, Sengupta has attempted to answer the question of being an Indian and writing in English. This question reflects the prejudiced position English as a language has faced in India. This prejudice against English is one of the major reasons behind the marginalisation of Indian drama in English. Banerjee (2009) touches upon this issue and emphasises the power of English when he says, “English is effectively India’s only link language” (p. 55). He adds, although it lacks reach, “what English theatre can achieve, language theatre cannot” (p. 55). Banerjee provides a solution to it, as what English theatre lacks due to the lack of audience can be substantiated by using themes that are relevant to Indians. Banerjee gives the example of Mumbai English theatre’s production of *Macbeth*, infused with Indian elements such as tantra and witches becoming tantric pujaris. He states, “if the English theatre wants to be an integral part of the scene and reflect the vitality of the language theatre, it must pay heed to the best of Indian language plays” (Banerjee, 2009, p. 56). And this is precisely one of the key points of this paper. Indian languages and translation of

the literature written in Indian languages can play a crucial cultural role in propagating regional literatures in English.

The subplot of Sengupta's play has an unnamed woman who talks about the emancipatory role of the English language. The woman begins her speech with an introduction to English. She states that it is not her mother tongue but a language that became hers when she went to a convent school. She mentions,

English is now the language of my thoughts, it is the language of my reason, the language I use for loving. My perceptions are finer, my judgments more subtle, the range and depth of my emotions seem to be much greater in this language than in any other. (Sengupta, 1996, p. 239)

It brings the point of the revolutionary role of the English language. It is significant to understand that along with English came democracy, modernity and various liberating social forces that enabled the journey towards a more united and constantly developing nation for India. This idea was reflected in the shift in theatre as well. Nagpal (2021) mentions that "it can be observed that by the late 1990s, writers were able to evolve English as a language that expressed the 'immediate concern' (Nagpal, 2021, p. 17). The immediate concerns Nagpal talks about are the issues that were neglected in the society, such as gendered violence against women, as it was also the time when the women's movement in India was gaining firm ground. This explains that English did not enter India just as a means to establish cultural and linguistic dominance of the colonisers. It also carried crucial social changes as it was an attempt towards modernisation. It would not be wrong to say that India, as a nation with an immensely rich and diverse culture, needed a way to harmonise and unify its various representations. English as a language became a way to it as it worked as a linking device within India, as well as represented the unified nation on a world scale. To establish our cultural hegemony, it is imperative to introduce our culture to the vast majority of people at the global level.

The almost paradoxical role of English in India is succinctly summarised in Pennycook's assertion,

It [English] is both the language of modernity and the language of decadence, the 'first language' (the medium of education) but not the 'mother tongue' (the racially assigned language), a neutral medium

of communication yet the bearer of Western values, the language of equality and yet the distributor of inequality. (Pennycook, 1994, p. 255)

English as a language has always been subject to various criticisms over its role in being a contributor/facilitator of cultural colonialism. This criticism has been constant since its introduction in India. But over time, English has played a significant role in the development of our nation. The fact cannot be denied that the introduction of English in India allowed colonisers to expand their colonial power by establishing cultural and linguistic dominance over the natives. But what Indians have done with the English language is an answer to Britain's call to make India culturally subordinate to Britain. The words of the unnamed woman in the play echo a triumphant reclamation over the language:

I have taken from the Englishman what was his. I have smoothed it and dented it, given it shape, polished it, fashioned it the way I want. And I know I possess it now... I realise the inadequacy is my victory too, the wealth that sustains me. Do you hear me, Macaulay, I have my revenge after all. Across land and water, over hills and desert, language is a travelling. It can never arrive. (Sengupta, 1996, p. 338)

Languages are organic and dynamic, never static but always in flux. India as a nation is one of the finest examples of this. Owing to its diverse cultural heritage, multiple languages, literatures, architectures and art forms, India has the ability to adapt to new changes and make it suitable for its growth. The unnamed voice in *Keats was a Tuber* who sums up the argument of the paper and answers Sengupta's question that the English language can be seen as a Trojan horse for India. Sengupta uses the metaphor of the Trojan horse, which in Greek mythology was depicted as a wooden horse sent by the Greeks to the Trojans. The Trojans assumed this wooden horse to be a trophy for their victory in which Greek soldiers were hiding eventually leading to the destruction of Troy. This symbol is applied to the intention of Britain to establish their triumphant victory by implanting their language as a means to expand their empire and culture. But instead, the introduction of the English language in India has turned out to be a means for India to expand its culture worldwide, with the rest of the world being able to access it through the very language meant to sideline it. What Macaulay had given to India has become a bridge for it to enlarge its cultural

assertion by using it to express the Indian context and literature written in regional languages. English as a language, under the garb of being the legacy of colonisers, brought with it a force to assert our culture and to move towards modernity, leading it to reclaim the language as a tool to expand Indian culture and its dominance.

Indian reality is multifaceted and based explicitly on language, culture and identity. With a vast range of different cultures, religions, castes, and socio-economic backgrounds, the realities of India carry a different narrative for each one of its natives. So, the idea of reclaiming the English language itself becomes contested and problematised. Hence, it is important to acknowledge the presence of multiple counter narratives that represent the ground reality of the conflicted relationship with English, constructed by different social, cultural and economic factors. The idea of English as a link language within India and a way to bridge cultural gaps on a more global level by making Indian culture accessible to the masses across the world sounds appealing. But it is imperative to understand that the successful implementation of this idea requires a great deal of consistent effort. According to a report published in *The Times of India*, “only 20 per cent of the Indian population can speak in English, and only 4 per cent would be considered fluent” (Nagarajan, 2014, para 5). Such a database presents a more realistic picture of the ground reality in India. Education in general and English education in particular are still considered to be a privilege for the large number of underprivileged masses in India. In the play, the character of Ramanan represents the thousands of Indians who dream of climbing the social and economic ladder by learning English. Ramanan is mute, and he works as a peon at the college. He is a minor but significant character in the play as he stands out for his zeal and dedication to learn English. He is often seen “writing laboriously on a slate” (Sengupta, 1996, p. 269). The portrayal of Ramanan and his constant endeavours to learn English embodies the spirit of the Indian masses. As the language is a marker of status, it has paved the way for better career opportunities. Here, the idea of reclaiming English as our language comes into conflict with the reality of India, where the actual English-educated population consists only of the privileged sections. The playwright Sengupta (1996) herself raises a crucial question on this contested idea:

Today, when English suffuses the world of technology and international commerce, the voiceless Ramanan epitomises the

aspirations of many Indians who believe that the knowledge of English would help them transform their lives. And yet, is it possible to convey our Indian sensibility through the imperial language of the British? (p. 236).

The answer to this question might not be immediate, but certainly this hopeful possibility is no longer just a dream. It requires us to focus on the representation of thousands of Indians for whom knowing the English language still seems to be a far-fetched dream. India's ability to convey its Indian sensibilities lies in the collective formed by the masses across different social and economic backgrounds.

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