

Teaching of English in British India

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“Once Britain ruled the waves, now it is English which rules them. The British empire had given way to the empire of English” (Phillipson 2009: 1).

Abstract

In Indian Sub-Continent English was first introduced by the East India Company just as a mere medium of communication between some errand Indian boys and the East India Company. Then English missionaries taught English to the natives to enable them to read the Christian scripts. To meet the administrative requirements the British government established English schools, madrasahs, colleges and universities in different parts of India to spread English among the natives for creating an English knowing class. The Indian natives became eager to pick up English to gain economic affluence and high social status both from the natives and the British government. Thus the seeds of English were sown in British India and it has flourished like anything and has become so deep rooted that there is no possibility of getting rid of it soon. The present article is an attempt to explore all the social, economical, educational, political, and administrative factors that have contributed to the status which English had acquired during the British period.

Keywords: British India, English, British administrators, missionaries, Christianity, administrative purpose, economic gain, social status, and job

It is the story of 1498. Vasco de Gama, imbued with the indomitable renaissance spirit braved the fury of the sea and discovered the sea-route to India which was lying ‘politically divided’, ‘torn by jealousy and mutual distrust’. It is also said that Thomas Stephens was the first Englishman to visit India in 1579 and perhaps it is he who encouraged the merchants of London to come to India which was then reputed throughout the world for her fabulous wealth. Soon the East India Company arrived in India in search of fortune. At that time Portuguese was the lingua-franca for all commercial purposes as well as for any contact with the Indians.

English was introduced much later in India and the errand boys who acted as interpreters between the Indians and the English traders were the first learners of English in India. The East India Company also had to teach English to the militia engaged for the safety of their goods and life.

Like other European communities, the East India Company also started schools to introduce the Protestant teaching to their native subordinates through English in Trichinopoly. Haider Ali, the Raja of Tanjor and the Nawab of Arcot helped the missionaries set up schools to teach English (Wadia as cited in Agnihotri and Khanna 1995: 15). Later on such schools were also set up at Madras, Bombay and Calcutta. The twin objectives of these schools were to educate boys and girls for employment in company and to convert them into Christianity (Sinha 1978: 15).

There were some Englishmen who wanted to introduce European knowledge in India through English to convert the natives into Christians, expand Company’s business and to bring the natives nearer to the rulers. They thought “the teaching of gospel would ensure that they remained loyal” (Ram 1991: 31)

After the Battle of Plassey (1757) the East India Company virtually became the Master of India and English started its triumphant journey without any hindrance. Besides missionary schools, there also came up many other English teaching schools which charged exorbitant fees to meet the pecuniary needs of the founders.

Grant, who was in favour of English, argued that since Persian was accepted by the Indians there would be no problem on their part in accepting English too. As to the question of education in India the British rulers were divided into two schools- Orientalists and Anglicists. Warren Hastings, William Jones, Edmund Burke, William Robertson, Craford, Horace Wilson and a host of others belonged to the first school and William Bentinck, Grant, Alexander Duff, Traveyan, Macaulay and others to the second school. The Orientalist view was that Indians should be educated through Indian languages to cultivate Indian values, morale and classical languages e.g. Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian and European knowledge through translation because “the Indian people had a way of life that was valid for them, however different it might be from the Western civilization” (Embree as cited in Rahman 1997: 29).

The Anglicist view was that Indians should be educated through English to cultivate European knowledge and science because according to them there was no education in India and the natives were deep in superstitions and darkness. The Oriental-Anglicist controversy continued till 1835.

Sir Stephen Lastington and Randle Jackson pointed out that education (English education) would give

modern ideas – the ideas of the French Revolution to Indians and that would be the end of the empire in India, as it had been in America (S.N. Mukherjee as cited in Sinha 1978: 28). So in Orientalist line, Calcutta Madrasha for Muslims and Banaras Sanskrit College for Hindus were established to win over the Indians. Soon Calcutta Madrasha was taken over by the Court of Directors for its powerful impact on Muslims.

The establishment of the Fort William College in 1800 was a milestone in the history of Indian education as it set a pattern for English books, comparative grammars, and dissertations on European and Indian laws, history, geography, natural sciences and text-books for modern Indian languages.

Another turning point in the history of Indian education was the Act of 1813 which initiated the state system of education in India and the East India Company was compelled to accept the responsibility of education in India (Aggarwal 1983:1).

In 1823 the General Committee of Public Instruction was set up to look after education in India. It was pro-Orientalist. Some Orientalist colleges were established. As the Company government required some native assistants for administration, the general Committee was under heavy pressure to attach English classes to these colleges. And also plans were drawn to set up in Calcutta a separate English College for teaching English. The Madrasahs were also encouraged to teach English and a special allowance was given to them as incentive. In 1833 English schools were set up at Delhi, Banaras and Allahabad. The main objective of teaching English was to enable the learners to write and speak correct English and make them conversant with English literature. So at school level grammar was taught and at college and university levels literature was taught.

In the mean time the Calcutta Book Society and the Calcutta School Society were founded. They worked very hard for the spread and improvement of English education in Bengal by publishing textbooks and making them available at the reduced prices to the needy.

In the field of English education in India a new glorious chapter opened with the establishment of Hindu College at Calcutta on 20 January 1817. “No institution is comparable to it in the process of modernizing the Indian” (Sinha 1978: 36). The noted Historian R.C. Majumdar (1960) says “it was Hindu College which created modern Bengal one might say modern India”. It became essentially an ideal centre for teaching English and European accomplishments.

The period from 1823 to 1834 was characterized by the controversy between Orientalists and the Anglicists on the aims, objectives and medium of instruction. “Das Gupta (1970:40-45) has summarized the language controversy at this critical point in the history of India. There were three options available as to the medium of instruction: classical oriental languages (Sanskrit and Arabic), Indian vernacular languages (Bengali, Tamil, Hindi etc) and English” (Agnihotri and Khanna 1995: 17). Nurullah and Naik (1971) also take cognizance of the development of these three schools of options.

“For Indians, the greatest inducement for obtaining a western education appears to have been upward social and economic mobility which came through employment with the new rulers” (Rahman 1997: 30). Therefore there was a great demand for English from the Indians. Raja Ram Mohan also built-up public opinion in favour of English. He declared “the Sanskrit system of education would be best calculated to keep the country in darkness” (Sharp as cited in Sareen 1992:8).

With the passage of time the support for English (Anglicists) grew stronger and the Directors of the Company grew more and more impatient with the Orientalist policies in India. Under such pressure the Court of Directors, therefore, became almost bound to act in favour of the English education. They also suggested that English educated Indians should be given high posts in administration and judiciary and be held in high esteem by the government.

Montuart Elphinstone, the governor of the Bombay Presidency did much for English education by setting up Poona Sanskrit College in 1821 and many English schools in district headquarters. But the condition of education in Madras Presidency was not like that in Bengal and Bombay. Taking note of it the Court of Directors sent a Dispatch to Madras on 29 September 1830 seeking improvement in education on the model of Bengal and Bombay.

In the 20s and 30s of the nineteenth century the controversy between the Orientalists and the Anglicists reached its climax because of various interpretations of the section 43 of the Charter Act of 1813. In this crucial hour Lord T.B. Macaulay came to India and as head of the Committee of Public Instruction he had to give his decision about the contention. He refuted the arguments of the Orientalists and sided with the Anglicists. Not only this he also made some derogatory statements about the classical literature. In his Minutes he says that “a single shelf of good European library was worth the whole of native literature of India and Arabia” (Aggarwal 1983: 6). He felt the necessity of the introduction of English in India as “Indian people cannot at present be educated by means of their mother tongues. He felt that Indian languages and literature were of little intrinsic value and Indian history, astronomy, medicine etc. were full of errors and falsehood” (Agnihotry and Khanna 1995: 16). Since it was not possible to educate all he declared:

We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons – Indian in blood and colour but English in taste, in

opinions, in morals and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine vernacular dialects with terms of science borrowed from the western nomenclature and to render them by degree fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of population (Aggarwal1983: 11).

According to Horace Wilson, s great Sanskrit scholar, the hidden ‘aims and objectives’ of Macaulay’s policy were to subvert Indian literature and religion and glorify English.

By annihilating native literature, by sweeping away all sources of pride and pleasure in their own mental efforts, by rendering a whole people dependent upon a remote and unknown country for all their idea and for the very words in which to clothe them, we should degrade their character, depress their energies and render them incapable of aspiring to any intellectual distinction (Horace Wilson as cited in Krishnaswamy and Sriraman 1994: 13).

Lord William Bentinck accepted Macaulay’s Minute on Indian Education in March 1835. Thus the Western System of Education was adopted for educating the Indians.

It was from that time, a century and a half ago, that the government started setting up schools and colleges to convert Indians, the South Asians of today, into Brown Englishmen by imparting Western knowledge to them, a tradition their surrogates have faithfully followed this day (Ali 1993:7).

After the departure of Bentinck, Auckland, the next governor general, took a middle course following both Macaulay’s recommendations and the Orientalist view. In the meantime English and modern Indian languages succeeded in replacing the classical languages both in education and administration by 1837.

Hardinge made English more acceptable to the natives by making government jobs available only to English knowing people. And a vast horizon of jobs opened before the Indians with the introduction of railways, telephones and plenty of other scientific fields of development during the time of Dalhousie. The people were caught by the storm of learning English to get government jobs.

Sir Charles Wood’s Despatch (1854) known as the Magna Charta of Indian Education recommended vernacular for the lower level and English for the higher stage of education and establishment of three universities at the capitals of three presidencies. Accordingly the universities were founded in 1857. His system aimed at mass education instead of class education.

During the First War of Independence in 1857 no English educated Indians took part in it, rather stood as mute spectators having the least sympathy with it. At this the government became determined to spread English education as the Indian nationals stood divided internally and intrinsically because of English education. So, many schools were set up in different parts of the country both at government and private initiatives. The universities also started functioning. And as there was great demand for more universities, the Punjab University and Allahabad University were set up in 1882 and 1887 respectively.

English became so popular that in some cases it was taught before a child stated to read and write their own vernacular. In Bengal English was the medium of instruction in high schools. In Madras it was taught from class 3 at Primary level.

Lord Curzon called a meeting of all the Directors of the Public Instruction at Simla in 1901. There he put great emphasis on the expansion and improvement of Primary education but strongly disapproved of teaching a foreign language at Primary stage. At the same time he supported the use of English at High schools (Sareen1993:15).

In the second Simla Conference (August 1917) it was reported that teachers liked giving instructions not in vernacular but in English as a matter of pride. It was also reported that there was a great demand for teaching English.

As a consequence of Jallianwalabagh killing in 1919 Gandhi at Nagpur Congress in 1920 gave a clarion call to students to boycott English schools and colleges and appealed to the country men to establish national colleges and schools. In response innumerable national institutions came up in different parts of the country and thousands of students left their schools and colleges. As a result English education suffered a setback. But with the cooling down of the national movement there was again a heavy rush for admission into the government institutions.

Though at the university level high quality dissertations as outputs of scholastic efforts of Indian students were coming out, the overall standard of English teaching-learning was coming down alarmingly. This happened because the commercial motives could not always be a right incentive for ‘high or good education’.

After the passing of the Government of India Act 1935, Vernacular was made the medium of instruction for basic and adult education. English remained the medium of instruction for Secondary, Higher Secondary and University stages.

With the outbreak of the World War II the education system at many places in India suffered seriously as the educational institutions closed down for months together. In 1945 the War came to an end. After two years the British government bade farewell to India leaving behind a very powerful weapon called English which now “had become the source and token of prestige , power, success and social superiority” (Gupta and Kapoor 1999:

17) for a very small section of people called 'elite' who like their past masters, colonize the rest of their nation in all the three countries of the subcontinent e.g. India, Pakistan and Bangladesh and who have little common spirit with their fellow beings.

From the above discussion it has become clear that English which was introduced in this sub-continent around 300 years ago just to enable some errand native boys to communicate with members of the East India Company is now firmly rooted in our sub-continent as an essential language of trade, higher education, laws and communication. It has become possible for English to acquire this present important status because of religious, social, economic and above all political reasons as discussed above. The British missionaries and administrators, and a large group of educated natives played a very significant positive role in enabling English to acquire this status.

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