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## Linguistic Anxieties: Impact of English on Politics, Mother Tongue and Creative Writing in India

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### Abstract

The perception of English as the key to economic success creates an ideological ambivalence that makes itself felt in all spheres, whether political or social. The paper analyses the political, social and cultural dimensions of the conflict between regional languages and English in India. It is increasingly clear that the English language is here to stay in spite of the periodic trumpet calls issued against the spread and use of English in the name of patriotism. The continuing dominance of English in independent India is a matter of concern for many who see in it a fundamental contradiction. However, others believe in rejecting the political and cultural hegemony of the west without rejecting the language of the colonial powers. The paper shows how pragmatic compulsions tilt political and educational policies of the country in favour of the English language, bringing together seemingly incompatible postulates. This however raises fears that the mother tongue will soon be confined to the domestic sphere, placing at risk the rich linguistic diversity of India. The paper concludes by exploring the indigenization of English and the exponential growth of creative writing in English by Indian authors which posits the proposition that for many in India, English has become an Indian language.

**Key words:** politics, educational policies, mother tongue, creative writing

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## **Introduction**

The paper seeks to analyse the political, social and cultural dimensions of the continued dominance of the English language in India at a time when there is renewed vehement opposition to the English language by politicians and intelligentsia. The paper looks objectively at the basis of this opposition, some of the very real fears that give rise to linguistic cold wars, as well as why this opposition has so far failed to make any real head way. The perception of English as creating an elite group with a colonial hangover and as the instrument of monocultural domination is juxtaposed against pragmatic considerations of economic advancement especially for disfranchised groups as well as an emotional appropriation of a hitherto foreign language. This study is of special interest at a time when India is flexing its muscle in the global arena and thus in the process of simultaneously constructing and dismantling national and cultural differences. The question then is why, when India has so many indigenous languages, each with its distinct vocabulary, grammar, script and literature, there is a need to appropriate the colonizers discursive forms.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first section looks at the political actions and compulsions that shape the debate on language in India. The next section looks at the conflict between regional languages and English, as well as the pragmatic considerations that overcome the emotional umbilical cord of the mother tongue. The final section studies the implications of the exponential growth of creative writing in English by Indian writers.

## **Political and ideological ambivalence**

The India that we know of today is the result of long drawn out emotionally charged linguistic battles. In 1937, Jawaharlal Nehru wrote, “our great provincial languages are no dialects or vernaculars, as the ignorant sometimes call them. They are ancient languages with a rich inheritance, each spoken by many millions of people, each tied up inextricably with the life and culture and ideas of the masses as well as the upper classes. It is axiomatic that the masses can grow only educationally and culturally through the medium of their own language” (Lall, p.128). The first salvo was fired at the very beginning when controversy erupted over what language the constitution should be written in. The native intellectual in India had followed Fanon’s path, moving from assimilation to resistance to rejection (p. 176,177). At the verge of winning independence, the leaders of the freedom struggle strongly felt that the language of administration must be an Indian language. Similarly, national pride demanded that the constitution be written in an Indian script. The problem was which language. Most parts of northern India spoke Hindustani, a mixture of Hindi and Urdu. Both Gandhi and Nehru felt that Hindustani with its shared cultural heritage could bring together the Hindi speaking Hindu and the Urdu speaking Muslim. However neither Hindustani, nor its parent languages Hindi and Urdu was spoken in eastern and southern India. The southern languages like Tamil and

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Malayalam, the eastern languages like Bengali and Assamese brought with them a rich literary heritage and to tell the speakers of these languages to eschew their mother tongue for another “national” language was a red flag. The temporary compromise was that though the official language would be Hindi in the Devanagiri script, for the first fifteen years the English language would continue to be used for all official purposes. This compromise satisfied no one but brought the beleaguered leaders of the nation some breathing time.

The language of the constitution continued to attract vehement arguments. For many to adopt as the Constitution of independent India, a document written in English was an insult to all those who shed their blood to attain that independence. However, the drafting committee of the Constitution, chaired by Dr. Ambedkar, strongly favoured English as the language better placed to incorporate the technical legal terms of the document (Guha, p.118). For Dr. Ambedkar, among the many dangers that faced the newly formed nation, the retention of English as an Indian language was not problematic. For him the far greater issue was that though the constitution which ensured political equality, it was valueless if it did not pave the way for social and economic equality<sup>1</sup>. Soon after independence campaigns were under way to facilitate the formation of Samyukta Karnataka, uniting Kannada speakers, Samayukta Maharashtra uniting Marathi speakers, Mahagujarat uniting Gujarati speakers. The Telugu speakers wanted a separate state, so did the Malayalis. As Guha points out, “The movements for linguistic states revealed an extraordinary depth of popular feeling. For Kanadigas and for Andhra, for Oriyas as for Maharashtrians, language proved a more powerful marker of identity than caste or religion....one sign of this was official patronage of the arts. Thus great effort and cash, went into funding books, plays and films written or performed in the official language of the state” (p.199). Towards the end of the fifteen years that allowed English and Hindi to be used as the language of administration, fresh agitation started. The leaders from the south were determined not to accept the hegemony of Hindi. Everywhere there were strikes and processions. Bonfires were held burning Hindi books and Hindi signs, reminiscent of the bonfires burning western clothes during the nationalist campaign. The intensity of the anti-Hindi protests forced the then Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri to officially pronounce that every state would have complete and unfettered freedom to transact its affairs in the language of its own choice. He also assured that all transactions between the States and the Centre or from one State to another would be in English or accompanied by an English translation. It was clear to all that the English language was here to stay.

In India too, many were afraid that the creation of linguistic states would stoke the fires of secession. India however has survived. This survival maybe contrasted to the civil war that raged in Sri Lanka when Sinhalese was made the only language, disregarding the presence of a large Tamil community, as well as the formation of Bangladesh when Pakistan insisted that Urdu alone was the official language disregarding the sentiments of the Bengali speakers. In India,

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linguistic states have coexisted for sixty three years. There is now a more enlightened awareness that linguistic friction and violence occur not where language rights are protected but where they have been suppressed (Guha, p.180). Yet if some speakers of the various languages of India have one common fear, it is the distrust of the English language. The reason is simple. Each language represents a distinct culture, a distinct way of thinking, a distinct mode of life. If it is important to preserve biological diversity, it is equally important to preserve linguistic diversity, for language is the repository of history and knowledge. When a language dies, the history and knowledge coded in that language may die with it, leaving humanity impoverished.

### **Educational policies and the mother tongue**

Political leaders often try to prove their patriotism by demanding that English medium schools be banned. It does not garner mass support, because for all their emotional connection to the mother tongue, the public perceives English as giving them a greater chance of material success. Most states hence adopt an educational policy of bilingualism and even trilingualism where the child learns the dominant language of the state, along with English and Hindi. The complexity of the issue was brought out by a paper on multilingual education released by UNESCO in 2003, which observed that questions of identity, nationhood and power are closely linked to the use of specific languages in the classroom ([www.unesco.org/education/education](http://www.unesco.org/education/education)). The National Curriculum Framework 2005, which lays down broad guidelines for teaching and learning, sums up the views of experts when it says: "In language, a renewed attempt to implement the three-language formula is suggested, along with an emphasis on the recognition of children's mother tongues, including tribal languages, as the best medium of education. The multilingual character of Indian society should be seen as a resource to promote multilingual proficiency in every child, which includes proficiency in English" (Executive Summary, 1x). Thus, the framework recommends that English should find a place with other Indian languages. According to the National Curriculum Framework, the three-language formula helps in fostering bilingualism and multilingualism, traits that improve cognitive growth, social tolerance, divergent thinking and scholastic achievement. The fate of Kashmiri demonstrates graphically what happens to a language without such educational policies. Kashmiri is not taught in the local schools, though various dialects as well as written scripts like Sharda exist. (I lived in Kashmir for a year and this is something the locals pointed out.) The result is that little creative writing in Kashmiri is happening today, while the Sharda script appears to have disappeared. The Kashmiri Muslims have adopted the Urdu script while the Hindu Kashmiri pundits have adopted the Devanagiri script. In January 2010, the Bo language died with the demise of its last native speaker ([infochangeindia.org/media/...of.../the-case-for-a-linguistic-survey.ht](http://infochangeindia.org/media/...of.../the-case-for-a-linguistic-survey.ht)). Many languages are becoming extinct on a massive unprecedented scale (Crystal, p. 336).

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Proponents of the mother tongue are often seen as parochial and regressive (Srinivasaraju, p 10, 226). There is a tendency for the educated elite to treat such advocates with exasperated contempt. (The actual words in both the two sentences are mine but similar ideas are expressed by Srinivasaraju whom I have introduced below. Actually these thoughts are expressed whenever there is a public debate on the issue.) Yet an articulate group of intellectuals oppose the English language with equal vehemence. For them the concept of a global village dominated by the English language endangers cultural pluralism. Sugata Srinivasaraju, a Kannadiga writer and journalist of repute, writes, “It is popular, stereotypical understanding that homogenizing and globalizing would harmonize the world. But then we need to ask as to how neutral are the globalizing tools, be it the English language or the free-market economy or a twisted variety of democracy? If assertion of identity is perceived as violent and the concern to preserve it is seen as regressive, then homogenizing and globalizing is equally violent as it functions on the cruel ideology of indifference towards plurality” (p. 17). The other equally serious charge is that it creates elitist groups that use the English language precisely as the colonial masters did, as a symbol of superiority (It’s a charge often made including my students; I have no particular source). The English language is accused of facilitating the creation of power structures and widening the urban/rural divide. Those who are well versed in the English language are the affluent and the upper castes and they too often speak “for” the subaltern. Sometimes it furthers the problem, the civilizing mission of benevolence occludes the question of audibility of the subaltern (Miles, p 93). However, as Amartya Sen pointed out the post-colonial critique should be constructive and dialectically engaged rather than defensively withdrawn and barriered (p.85).

In this antagonism towards English language, it is necessary to separate the two strands of separate thought that shapes this hostility. The first is the association of the language with colonial rule and the second the desire to protect one’s own language and cultural identity. In this context it is important to note certain historical facts. The first periodical published in an Indian language was a Bengali monthly and weekly by the Baptist Missionaries of Serampore. Serious writing before the advent of the British had increasingly become confined to Sanskrit and Persian and the dominating role of these two classical languages prevented the growth of the popular regional languages. It was the advent of the printing press that broke the hold of the classics and facilitated the growth of prose literature in other Indian languages (Nehru, p.346). A further fillip was given by the missionaries who studied even minor and undeveloped languages giving them shape and form, compiling grammars and dictionaries for them. They even labored at the dialects of the primitive hill and forest tribes and reduced them to writing (Nehru, p. 346). The impact of the East India Company was of course not so benign. They followed a deliberate policy of undermining traditional education. For instance, in Bengal there existed a large number of tax-free grants of land that were given as endowments for educational institutions. Many schools as well as institutions for higher education subsisted on them. In order to confiscate these lands the East India Company demanded proof of the original grant. The old ‘sanads’ and papers had long

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been lost or eaten up, so the land was annexed and the educational institutions fatally destitute because the Indian system did not collect fees from students were forced to shut down (Nehru, p.347).

In the conflict between mother tongue and English, an area that the politician and educationists gloss over, is the marginalization of dialects. For instance, the language spoken in Travancore, Central Kerala, Trissur, South Malabar and North Malabar are regional dialects of the standard Malayalam taught in the local schools. The standardization is necessitated by practical concerns. Again, many Dravidian languages such as Irula and Kurumba do not have a written script. These dialects are repositories of culture and knowledge which are lost by the imposition of a standard language established through the modern educational system. Similar concerns are raised in other parts of India as well. In Karnataka Srinivasaraju points out “the people who are expected to save the language have had to forego the features of their local tongues and the rich dialectical variants of Kannada for the sake of using a standard Kannada tongue” (p.50). As a result North Karnataka, which has a rich dialectical form of Kannada, (harnessed by the poet D R Bendre), has raised the banner of revolt complaining of ‘step-motherly’ treatment (Srinivasaraju, p.50). Similarly, the script of the Tulu language considered by many linguists as one of the oldest languages in the Dravidian family and still spoken by more than three million people has been replaced by the Kannada script.

The vernacular advocates are also concerned that the regional languages will be reduced to the kitchen i.e. the domestic sphere, while the arena of technology, science and business is taken over by English (Srinivasaraju, p.35). They are also greatly exercised about retaining the purity of the language and agonize over the entry of simple English words in vernacular utterances. One point they do not realize is that the great strength of the English language is precisely its “impurity”. Ghosh points out that the words he uses in *Sea of Poppies* can be found in every seaman’s journal, and in an interview observed, “English is an incredibly rich language, in what it has and in what it has forgotten. ...Nineteenth century English was much more open, much more varied, it had many more influences. It’s exciting to reclaim those influences” (www.sfgate.com/.../Amitav-Ghosh-author-of-Sea-of-Poppies-318991). The English language has nonchalantly absorbed words from practically every European language and now is busy absorbing them from Asian and African languages. A number of Indian words find their way into the English dictionary every year. Similarly simple English words like *bus* and *car*, *light* and *fan* have replaced the vernacular synonym in almost every regional language. There are certain oddities in this method of absorption. For instance, while the English word *bucket* has become part of the vernacular vocabulary, the word for ‘broom’ still differs from language to language. In an attempt to stem the English language tide, politicians have resorted to interesting strategies. In Tamil Nadu, commercial films are a strong cultural bastion and the government recently announced that movies with Tamil names will be exempt from entertainment tax. Subsequently

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the blockbuster movie of the South Indian superstar Rajnikanth titled “Robots” was changed to “Endhiran” with much fanfare. Though the decision created controversy, it is a comparatively painless piece of protectionism. In Karnataka, the government has decreed that pubs must henceforth play songs in the local language. How far measures like these help to protect regional culture remains to be seen.

The reason that the movement for the vernacular does not gain support is because English is perceived as the means of escaping the trap of poverty. Besides, in the urban schools, students from various linguistic backgrounds sit in the same classroom. The adoption of the local language as a medium of instruction will not give the advantage of learning in the mother tongue uniformly to all children for the average classroom has children from different linguistic backgrounds. Yet the necessity to learn a foreign language imposes a heavy burden on the youngsters from the rural areas for the English language is not easy to master because good teachers are scarce, the grammatical rules often confusing, and pronunciation a quagmire. Eliza Doolittle learnt it long ago when she spoke the right words with the right accent to find herself still a social misfit. All of these subtleties can be mastered. The reality of the globalisation of the market place has made mastery of the English language a necessity as English has become the lingua franca of the business world.

However many nations including the United States have come to realize the disadvantages of monolingual education and now encourage foreign languages. The concept that a common language was a binding force necessary for the survival of a nation is advocated by almost every country in the world. In Russia, learning Russian is obligatory. Speaking a single language has come to reflect patriotism. Even in the United States, minority language speakers were encouraged to abandon their native tongues and become monolingual in English. In the celebrated Meyer vs Nebraska case ([en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meyer\\_v.\\_Nebraska](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meyer_v._Nebraska)), Meyer was convicted for breaking the law that prohibits the teaching of any foreign language before the completion of the eighth grade. Within the European continent, some nations are officially bilingual. Switzerland has four national languages: German, French, Italian and Romansh. In the current scenario, the immigrant has the advantage of possessing cultural knowledge which was earlier regarded as valueless if not undesirable.

### **Discourse of resistance and creative writing**

Raja Rao argued in 1938, in the preface to his novel *Kanthapura*, that Indians cannot and should not write like the English, even though they may use their language. He went on to say that the tempo of Indian life must be infused into our English expression. This Indian cultural substratum breaks into the English language text as words and phrases from the regional

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languages or more subtly as a different underlying rhythm of speech. Both methods may be observed in the Booker Prize winning novel *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy. In 1975, R. Parthasarathy lamented that there was no special English idiom in his anthology *Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets* (p.3). Yet he praised A. K Ramanujan for conveying in English what at its subtlest and most incantational is locked up in another language. Ramanujan himself observed “English and my disciplines (linguistics, anthropology) give me my outer forms – linguistic, metrical, logical ...my personal and professional preoccupations with Kannada, Tamil, the classics and folklore give me my substance, my “inner” forms, images and symbols. They are continuous with each other, and I no longer can tell what comes from where.” (ibid. p.96) Nissim Ezekiel’s “Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T S” is probably the most well-known recording of the ideolectal features of Indian English such as the use of present continuous tense for simple present tense, un-English collocation of lexical items and literal translation of phrases and idioms. However, Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* was probably the seminal work that gave Indian English its authoritative place in the canon of Englishes. Its self-referential narrative and magic realism celebrated the “chutnification” and advent of an unapologetic Indian English that entwined indigenous and non-indigenous cultures.

In Amitav Ghosh’s novel *Sea of Poppies* the dialects of the lascars, mingling nautical terminology with Arabic, Mandarin, Portuguese, Hindi; Bhojpuri of the villagers, Bengali of the boatmen; the slang of the Englishmen; the pidgin of the domestics, all dance on the pages. Language is shown as forming and defining an individual’s identity and even his destiny. When Zachary could not understand the pilot Mr. Doughty’s words “The kubber is that his cuzzanah is running out”, an exasperated Doughty tells to stop behaving like a right gudda. He says, “If he, Zachary, wasn’t to be diddled and taken for a flat, he would have to learn to gubbrow the natives with a word or two of the zubben.” When asked again what zubben was, the pilot explains “The zubben dear boy is the flash lingo of the East. It’s easy enough to jin if you put your head to it. Just a little peppering of nigger talk mixed with a few girleys. But mind your Ordoo and Hindee doesn’t sound too good: don’t want the world to think you’ve gone native. And don’t mince your words either. Mustn’t be taken for a chee-chee.” (p. 49) Language is clearly identity.

English language has become a contact zone where the discourse of power used by the colonial masters is subverted to form a discourse of resistance, forming what Homi K Bhabha called the third space of enunciation which ensures that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity. As he states, “the disruptive temporality of enunciation displaces the narrative of the Western nation” and the same signs are “appropriated, rehistoricized and read anew” (p.37). The emergence of writers like Chinua Achebe and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in Africa, as well as Salman Rushdie and Mohammed Hanif in Asia ratify Bhabha’s articulation of a different model for resistance located in the colonialist discourse itself through subversive

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counter discursive practices. The interpenetration of the two languages challenges the separation and division imposed by the imperialist culture often through violence, questioning not only its claim to superiority but also to its claim of authenticity (Young, p.23). The various forms of resistance such enunciation can create, are underlined in '*Sea of Poppies*' when Neel, the local ruler, is reduced to a common felon. At the moment of his greatest abasement, as he is prodded and probed physically as if an animal, Neel asserts his humanity by speaking in the language of the ruler. To quote, "The man's eyes flared and Neel saw that he had nettled him by virtue of simply addressing him in his own tongue- a thing that was evidently counted as an act of intolerable insolence in an Indian convict, a defilement of that language. The knowledge of this – that even in his present state, stripped to his skin, powerless to defend himself from the hands taking an inventory of his body – he still possessed the ability to affront a man whose authority over his person was absolute: the awareness made Neel giddy, exultant, eager to explore this new realm of power" (p 289). The knowledge of English becomes a weapon at a moment when he is treated as subhuman for it emphasizes their shared humanity; the power to speak asserts his human nature and demands the right to be treated as one.

Creative writing by Indian writers in English has been growing exponentially. Srinivasaraju has drawn a parallel between this and the fate of writing in Irish language. While some of the greatest writers in English including four Nobel laureates have hailed from Ireland, there is very little writing in Irish language *per se*. He wonders what would have happened if Joyce, Yeats, Beckett and others had written in the Irish language. The choice they made to write about their Irish experiences in English and during a self-imposed exile has interesting parallels with many of the Indian writers in English like Rushdie and Anita Desai. But the differences are too huge to be ignored. In the first place any visit to the local bookshop will reveal the large number of titles being released in the vernacular languages. Writers like Premchand (Hindi), Visnu Prabhakar (Hindi), Basheer (Malayalam), O Nambisan (Malayalam) are well known names. It is the English language that makes the works of these great writers accessible to Indians who cannot read them in the original language, thanks to a thriving translation industry. The Sahitya Akademi and the prestigious Jnanpith Award honour vernacular writers every year. The writers are naturally highly revered by the common man, for Indian culture has traditionally revered learning.

The question then remains as to why many writers are opting to write in English and if their facility with the language has alienated them from their culture, for it cannot be denied that language shapes one's perception and sensibility. Jose Lourenco, a Goan Christian, writes in both Konkani (the language of Goa) and in English. He observes, "Being born into a Christian family in Goa has not handicapped me as a writer. I speak English, Hindi, Konkani and can understand a bit of Marathi, Portuguese and French. I write in English as well as Konkani, the tongue of Goa. My stories are largely based in Goa and so I find that Konkani expresses the local

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idiom and character better. But I cannot call myself only a Konkani writer or only an English writer. Like many others, I am a bilingual writer, made so by education and circumstance! I have many identities. I am a Goan, a Christian, an Indian, an Asian, a writer, an engineer, but above all I am a human being. I have come to believe that all the human quirks and quackeries happening around me are my 'culture' (Personal Communication, May 31, 2009).” Jahnavi Barua, a well-known writer from Assam who is passionate about her distinctive culture and land, writes in English. She talks about another young Asomiya poet who is actually a physicist with TIFR, but whose passions are poetry and film. “He also told me how many younger Asomiya writers are no longer bothered about this distinction between vernacular writers and writers in English - as long as the artist/writer represents their ideas/ideals with integrity it is all the same. In fact, he told me of some poets who began writing in Asomiya and then switched to English and now shuttle between both. I think that is such an encouraging thing!” (Personal Communication, July 12, 2009). What such observations reveal is that for many English has become another Indian language, and no longer carries colonial baggage. They are equally comfortable in the skins of both languages

## Conclusion

At the heart of the linguistic debate is whether the English language once used as a tool of repression and ideological domination can be separated from the perceptions and attitudes of the original culture from which it sprang or shaped. In the current socio-cultural context, English has become an Indian language; in the hands of the Indian users, it is infused with a cultural substratum that is unique to India. This is a reality that antagonists of the language must accept. For Indian political leaders there can be no better example than Rabindranath Tagore who wrote in Bengali and English, whose love for the English language and literature did not hinder his implacable opposition to the English political rule. As the poet Kamala Das wrote, the English language, “voices my joys, my longings, my/ Hopes, and it is as useful to me as cawing/ Is to crows or roaring to the lions”. Indians with knowledge of both the vernacular and English are in an exceptional position to help India take its place in the global arena, as well as facilitate cross-cultural communication.

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