

Spread of English in the 21st Century India

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In the post-independence India, a multilingual nation, English was expected to play the role of a 'neutral language' since no other Indian language was acceptable as a language for pan Indian communication. English was one of the fourteen languages in one of the draft of the Schedule of languages in the draft Constitution of India. Now, after the Constitution came into existence it is called as 'Associate Official Language' of the Union of India, but in reality, it is the *de facto* Official Language, since Hindi has failed to become the real Official Language of India. English is also the official language or the additional official language in eleven states and three union territories; however everywhere English continues to be used for most of the administrative purposes.

English version of the Constitution of India is the legal version, though the translations of the same are available in some of the major Indian languages. Though it was a Non-Scheduled language, the founding fathers of the Central Sahitya Akademi, because of their generosity and because of literary productions by Indian scholars in English, it was included in the list of recognised languages by the Akademi in 1954.

It is more or less a compulsory part of the so called Three Language Formula, a strategy for secondary education.

Globalisation has reduced the number of school languages and number of languages as medium of instruction. For many years, state after state is introducing English as a school language from the first standard itself. It is the medium of instruction that people are craving to choose for their children.

Indian languages could not become full-fledged languages of technical or scientific discourse in spite of every effort. Research output in Indian languages is near cipher. Due to

socio-economic-political reasons, English has become a language in demand as medium of instruction, administration and mass communication.

Economists are discussing economic inequality, sociologists social inequality but neither linguists nor educationists are bothered about linguistic inequality. Due to this linguistic inequality speakers are getting stratified and languages and mother tongues are dying. English is the language of elites of the Indian society. English, off late has become a new caste of 21st Century. There is no dearth of tokenism and lip sympathy in the form of survey, digitisation, and awards for mother tongues of India by the haves towards have not Indian languages.

To a large extent, mother tongues of India are going to survive only as cultural languages due to the bonding they have towards the life cycle of its users and their rural base. Rapid urbanisation may cause havoc in due course of time. Linguistic ecology of India is in danger due to English.

With these introductory remarks about English, I would like to go back to the history of English in India and look at the Census of India reports and its choice by the people as first subsidiary language and compare the same with choice of Hindi as first subsidiary language in the Census returns.

The British, who brought English with them, reached Surat, in present day Gujarat around 1603 AD and built Kothis with the permission of Mughals. They expanded their jurisdiction to Kolkata, Madras and Mumbai, etc. English became a language of administration when they took over the rights of administration of Bengal from Shah Alam in 1765. As most of us know, Macaulay's Minute on Education was dated February 2, 1835. The Governor General of India, William Bentinck approved the Minute on March 7, 1835 and it became the cornerstone of British India's educational policy. The Governor-General had the opinion that '...English was of greater cultural value and of greater practical use than Sanskrit or Arabic, or even Persian'. Also, like many others of his day (including Indians), he believed that the spoken languages were too crude and undeveloped to be suitable vehicles for the communication of modern knowledge. His advocacy of higher English education was based on the assumption that if the upper classes were given facilities for the acquirement of

modern knowledge, such knowledge would gradually percolate down to the masses. English became the official language also from 1838.

The ‘mother tongue’ (concrete) has to be understood as in actual use, whereas ‘language’ (abstract) is a bunch of one or more mother tongues. The first Census of British India was taken in 1871-72. It was ‘...an attempt to obtain for the whole of India statistics of the age, caste, religion, occupation, and infirmities of the population...’ No specific statistics about languages are presented except that ‘Nationality, language and caste’ are elucidated very briefly without any statistical information relating to language in a few paragraphs. The Census of India 1891 reports 238,499 persons with English as mother tongue [The language ordinarily spoken in the household of each person’s parent, whether or not it be that of his locality in which he or she was residing at the time of the enumeration, was recorded as the mother tongue.]. The Census of India 2001, reports 226,449 as speakers of English as mother tongue, amounting to 0.02% of the population of India. In India, languages of the 8th Schedule of the Constitution are 22 in number. They constitute 96.56% of the population, the rest one hundred are Non-Scheduled languages.

Here in the Census enumeration the choice of first subsidiary language Hindi or English by the Scheduled language speakers in of India is discussed. It is the choice of 96.56% of the population.

Though data on bilingualism is gathered since 1901, it was in the Census 2001, that in clear terms the ‘first subsidiary language’ and the ‘second subsidiary language’ choice by different mother tongue/ language speakers were collected. This provides a wealth of information for population studies. Below is the information processed from the Census of India 2001.

	Language Name	All India %	English First Subsidiary Language %			Hindi First Subsidiary Language %			Monolingual or Other First Subsidiary Language %
			Female	Male		Male	Female		
1	Assamese	1.28	10.6	59.97	40.03	11.13	63.30	36.70	78.27
2	Bengali	8.11	11.08	62.78	37.22	6.03	64.46	35.54	82.89
3	Bodo	0.22	3.54	64.35	35.65	3.15	64.83	35.17	93.31
4	Dogri	0.13	4.74	59.90	40.10	50.61	56.71	43.29	44.62

5	Gujarati	4.48	2.22	59.34	40.66	32.40	60.03	39.97	65.38
6	Hindi	41.03	7.68	67.69	32.31	X	X	X	92.32
7	Kannada	3.69	9.82	62.36	37.64	5.81	63.18	36.82	84.37
8	Kashmiri	0.51	3.86	66.87	37.13	3.17	52.58	47.42	92.97
9	Konkani	0.24	19.85	51.39	48.61	8.75	51.81	48.19	71.4
10	Maithili	1.18	0.70	71.49	28.51	31.92	65.51	34.49	67.38
11	Malayalam	3.21	21.24	51.07	48.93	3.12	59.98	40.02	75.64
12	Manipuri	0.14	27.67	57.69	42.31	7.81	66.71	33.29	64.52
13	Marathi	6.99	2.22	61.52	38.48	35.93	60.17	39.83	61.85
14	Nepali	0.28	7.34	59.59	40.41	30.27	60.86	39.14	62.39
15	Oriya	3.21	15.32	62.92	37.08	8.05	64.80	35.20	76.63
16	Punjabi	2.83	9.31	57.38	42.62	41.94	55.90	44.10	51.25
17	Sanskrit	<i>N</i>	6.66	65.82	34.18	51.33	60.60	39.40	42.01
18	Santali	0.63	0.60	72.99	27.01	16.64	63.90	36.10	82.76
19	Sindhi	0.25	6.22	53.67	46.33	45.58	51.72	48.28	48.2
20	Tamil	5.91	14.88	58.33	41.67	1.14	59.80	40.20	83.98
21	Telugu	7.19	10.47	63.14	36.86	5.37	63.75	36.25	84.16
22	Urdu	5.01	3.79	60.82	39.18	25.45	57.35	42.65	70.76
23	English	0.02	X	X	X	46.48	49.76	50.24	53.52

The first and foremost thing to be noted is that the choice of English as the first subsidiary language across India is not uniform. Clear division is visible.

English is the first choice as a subsidiary language by 10 language speakers: Bengali – 11.08%, Bodo – 3.54%, Kannada – 9.82%, Kashmiri – 3.86%, Konkani – 19.85%, Malayalam – 21.24%, Manipuri – 27.67%, Oriya – 15.32%, Tamil – 14.88% and Telugu – 10.47% speakers. And 7.68% of Hindi speakers have English as their first subsidiary language. All the Dravidian language speakers and speakers of Bengali, Bodo, Kashmiri, Konkani and Oriya have English as their first choice. English is yet to make a deeper penetration in these language speakers as their first choice. Since English is mostly part and parcel of the Three Language Formula in education, it should have spread in the past 50 years more widely. Though most of the people want English as part of education, they are not accepting that language as their first or second subsidiary language. A cursory glance at census figures indicates that the neighbourhood language is their choice as second or third subsidiary language. This needs further investigation.

Similarly, choice of Hindi as the first subsidiary language across India is not uniform. In this case also, clear division is visible. Hindi is the first choice as a subsidiary language by 11 language speakers: Assamese – 11.13%, Dogri – 50.61%, Gujarati – 32.40%, Maithili –

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31.92%, Marathi – 35.93%, Nepali – 30.27%, Punjabi – 41.94%, Sanskrit – 51.33%, Santali – 16.64%, Sindhi – 45.58%, Urdu – 25.45%. And 46.48% of English language speakers have Hindi as their first subsidiary language. All the neighbourhood language speakers choose Hindi as their first choice. Hindi is yet to make a deeper penetration in these language speakers as their first choice.

There is a third group of speakers in these Scheduled Languages, who are either monolingual or have a language other than English or Hindi as their first subsidiary language. Their number is not small. The table given above illustrates the point.

In every part of the country, demand for education in English medium has increased enormously in the past 10 to 15 years. The Supreme Court in its judgment on medium of instruction has said that the parent/student have right to choose the medium for education. As of now, a language of 0.02% population of India, due to non-academic reasons has become a language of choice in all walks of life (other than home domain) in India thus endangering not only Scheduled languages, but all the indigenous mother tongues. When Persian was made the official language, people started learning it, similarly when English became the official language, people went behind it. Now, every state has its own official language. But, the inclination of people is towards learning through English, not through the official language of the State or official language of the Union. Indian languages have not become languages of economic opportunities and English not even Hindi, the official language of India is a language of economic opportunities.

As I said in the beginning of this short essay, linguistically also, our states of India are stratified. Let me take an example of Karnataka, a highly multilingual state with 34.13% of its population speak a language other than Kannada as their mother tongue. Though all languages in the state are considered as equal, in reality, they are unequal. Due to the language policy of the country and the state of Karnataka, the languages of the state get hierarchical status. First in the hierarchy - English and Hindi in that order are in the superior position in the state due to the policy of the Union and impact of globalisation. Second is Kannada, due to its status as a scheduled language, numerical strength and status of the state official language, compulsory subject in the schools, and essential prerequisite for the state government job. Fourth are the languages that are majority languages in their respective

states like Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, Malayalam, and Gujarati etc. Fifth are a group of languages like Tulu, Kodava (Coorgi), Urdu, Konkani, Byari which have the patronage of the state government due to various considerations in the form of academies to promote the language, literature, culture etc. At the end of the spectrum are Soliga, Yerava, and many more mother tongues with nothing to shield them from decay. I am observing the trend of allocating money for various activities relating to minor and minority languages/mother tongues of the country. Major part of the money thus allocated will go for empowering middlemen and not the community of speakers and their languages. Need of the hour is to rejuvenate our languages and make them languages of economic opportunities.

I would like to conclude this short essay by reporting the finding of a new research on medium of instruction at the primary school level in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh reported in The Hindu on Dec 14, 2015. The intention of the study was to find ‘... whether medium of instruction affected the learning outcomes at primary level’. Sample size was 915 students from 233 schools. And the result was ‘...introducing English medium of instruction at earlier grades in the school might negatively affect learning outcomes.’

This is a lesson for English loving parents, teachers, policy makers, politicians, judiciary about the medium of instruction.

Will they listen?

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