

# Indian English – A Progressive Propeller

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## Abstract

It is, indeed, no exaggeration to state that English has acquired the status of ‘the language of the twenty-first century.’ Moreover, it is the most important language that will be keenly studied and researched globally. Hence, this article makes an attempt to assess the global significance of learning English while acknowledging the contribution of the great pioneers of Indian English such as Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan. Finally, the author makes an appeal to the learned to teach English to their children and others from an early stage, as it is the language of the emerging generation.

**Key words:** Vernacular, propeller, emerging and global.

## Introduction

“Indian writing in English has become a bit of a trend” said Shashi Tharoor, author of *Show Business* and *Nehru: The Invention of India* (“Indian writers”). Indeed, Indian English has gained the status of world literature. Indian English writers such as Rabindranath Tagore and V. S. Naipaul have been honoured with Nobel Prize for literature. Arundhati Roy and Arvind Adiga were awarded with Man Booker Prizes. Giller Prize was given to M. G. Vassanji and Rohinton Mistry. Jhumpa Lahiri won the Pulitzer Prize. India too has recognized many Indian English writers with Sahitya Academy awards. Thus, the readers can find that Indian English writers have become shining stars in the galaxy of global literature. Hence, this article explores the relevance of Indian English as a unifying force which would propel the progress of the nation.

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## 1. The New Awakening

Though the British came to India in the early sixteenth century, they established themselves effectively, only in the beginning of the seventeenth century. Their original intention was not conquest but commerce. They took land from farmers and forced them to grow things which had high commercial value in England and levied heavy taxes on them. Battle of Plassey gave victory to East India Company over the Diwan of Bengal in 1765. They glorified their culture by re-writing Indian history. These were some of the adverse effects of British trade. Nevertheless, at the same time, they started English medium schools and introduced architecture to India. The British rule slowly and gradually triggered self-awakening which ushered in modernization and renaissance in India.

Many of the scholars of East India Company had a passion for oriental culture. As the English scholars such as H.T. Colebrooke, Sir William Jones and James Prinsep were rediscovering India's rich heritage in the *Purana* and oriental literature, the English education spread and many earnest Indians showed keen interest on western ideas. Again the growth of evangelical movement in Britain became instrumental for the spread of the gospel of Christ among the Indians. Thus, the mission schools which taught English, besides vernacular were established in the South at the end of eighteenth century and in Bengal and Bombay in the beginning of nineteenth century. The imperialists also spearheaded the spread of English education which was seen as a potent instrument to civilize 'the lesser breeds without the law.' The spread of English was also seen as the assimilation of western cultures by gradually the stability of the empire. At the same time, it was also known as a boon for the more forward-looking Indians.

Raja Rammohan Roy in his letter "On English Education" argued against the use of Sanskrit, for, it had kept the country in darkness and only English had the acumen to promote a more liberal and enlightened system of instruction. Besides, he also founded a few English medium schools and encouraged the best among the students for advanced coaching by English instructors. Macaulay was strongly convinced that it was necessary and possible 'to make the natives of this country, good English scholars' and he directed all his efforts towards this end. He

even threatened to resign from the post of the President of the Governor-General's Council, if his recommendations had not been accepted by the government. The government resolution under the Governor General, Lord Bentinck, made on 7<sup>th</sup> March, 1835 was a red letter day in the history of Modern India, because it stated that funds appropriated for the purpose of education would be best employed on English education alone. This policy was later on corrected by Sir Charles Wood, who had said that the use of English language would be focussed on the higher branches of instruction alone and the vernacular languages of India to the great mass of the people. The efforts of Wood were instrumental for the establishment of the first Universities in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras in 1857(Naik 7-13; "What did"). Thus, the new intellectual awakening began by the British was well assumed by some of the well educated Indians, who had the vision for the development of the nation through education.

## **2. The Teething Trouble**

Before Indian English writing came to be accepted as a world literature, it had its troubles and controversies. English, at the early stage faced a strong prejudice. The office of the inspector general of schools at Patna was at one time known as the devil's office. For one finds in the writing about the "Causes of Indian Revolt of 1857," Syed Ahmed wrote that the people of India had 'misunderstood' the intention of the British and failed to comprehend the 'good points' of their rule ("South"). Even today, there is a big debate going on about its viability and validity in writers' conferences. Many regional writers including Jnanpith awadees say that writing in English in India is a severe handicap, as it tends to make their writing export oriented. Rajendra Yadav, a Hindi writer opines that Indian Writers in English take a tourist look at India, like Pankaj Mishra's *The Romantics*, where he is simply a tourist who does not know the inner psyche of the people. Moreover, writers like Vikram Seth whose plot revolves around different localities and professions under the pretext of finding a bridegroom. As the writers' contributions are a creatively written travelers' guide, they travel into Indian culture and describe a bit of geography; but their approach is western ("English").

In addition to that, Dr. Balachdra Nemade, a prominent Marathi writer says, "Under colonial rule, it [English] has exempted writers from being authentic, they use a language which

may not be understood properly and may be black slang is put into the mouth of a white girl or an Indian or a coolie” (“English”). English has always been the language of the rich urban and the educated classes, which represent a kind of life that is ‘un-Indian.’ Since, English is not the language of the land, Indian writers cannot express their deepest and inmost thoughts in it. A sense of vanity and desire to be fashionable are the motives which govern the creation of Indian writing in English. Hence, all Indian fiction writers in English are “a very inferior breed of authors.” (S. Rao 20). B. Jaya Mohan in an interview to *Outlook* magazine said “Writers like Roy [Arunthathi] are superficial and exotic. When Roy uses English to express a Malayalam idiom, it might be exotic for westerners.” R. Parthasarathy articulates his difficulties in using English that it is a part of his intellectual rational make-up. But, Tamil is his emotional and psychic make-up. Kamaladas who was considered as an accomplished poet said “It is half English, half Indian. Funny perhaps, but it is honest” (“Indian writers”).

### 3. Clarity of the Name

Although Indian writing in English is understood by different names such as Anglo-Indian, Indo-Anglian, Indo-English and Indian English, the Sahitya Academy, New Delhi, accepted Indian English as the most fitting and proper term to describe Indian writing in English in 1982. To this effect, the academy officially published a book by M. K. Naik entitled, *A History of Indian English Literature*. The term emphasizes two key ideas: first, Indian English literature constitutes one of the many streams of Indian literature and second, it is an inevitable product of the nativization of the English language to express the Indian sensibility ( X. Alphose 22). Though the basic tenet of the English language cannot be changed, it assumes different names as it is spoken in many countries. English, spoken by the British is generally known as British English; Americans, American English and thus it is fitting to call English used by Indians as Indian English. In this way, the Indian English writers can freely express all that pertains to the land of India and her cultural milieu.

### 4. Various Definitions

Indian English Literature has been defined in different ways by different thinkers. It is best defined as “Literature written originally in English by authors Indian by birth, ancestry or

nationality” (Naik 2). Nevertheless, by whatever name Indian English literature is called, it remains literary.

Thus, it becomes important to understand the term ‘Indian’ and ‘Indianness.’ The former according to Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, means “a person from India” (Hornby 791); and the latter, the ‘noun form’ of Indian, means a native, citizen, or inhabitant of the republic of India. Accordingly, it refers to people or peoples of Indian Republic. The ‘adjective form’ of Indian refers to ‘of, relating to, or characteristic of India, its inhabitants, or any of their languages.’ Therefore, it also means the name of the place, social science, people, peoples, linguistics or languages (“Indian”). But, for critics, the term ‘Indianness’ has many connotations. For Paul Verghese, it is “The sum total of the cultural patterns of India.” “The writers’ intense awareness of his entire culture” says V.K. Gokak. Again Vasant Shahane says it is “The stock images of Indian culture.” Samares Sanyal calls it “A perception of the mind” and “a sensibility” says William Walsh (qtd. in X. Alphonse 23). These various attempts to arrive at a definite definition seem difficult because these ideas seem to be very subtle to a large extent.

## **5. Clarity on the Language**

The real problem is the suitability and adaptability of English as a medium of expression for an Indian English writer. This is a fundamental problem raised by Jyoti Datta, a Bengali writer and critic. He poses “How can a writer use a language creatively when all around him another language is being spoken and when the creative centres of the language are thousands of miles away? From where can he receive the feel of the living, changing language?” (qtd. in X. Alphonse 26). Many critics have argued against the Indian English writers. The simplest argument is that English is only an acquired language for many Indians. Therefore, the Indian writers in English cannot adequately express their feelings through it.

## **6. Global Acceptance**

The global acceptance of Indian English literature could be assessed from the thought-provoking words of K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar who was invited to the University of Leeds to give a series of lectures on ‘Indian Writing in English’ in January 1959. He said to the august gathering “Your decision to start in your university a course in the various literatures produced in English in the

commonwealth countries and to inaugurate this commendable project with the present series of lectures on Indian writing in English came to me as to many of my friends in India as a pleasant surprise (Iyengar 1). He further stated in the same lecture, "... Indian writing in English is but one of the voices in which India speaks. It is a new voice, no doubt but it is as much Indian as the others" (3).

## **7. Indian English: A Global Voice in Which India Speaks**

"Raja Ram Mohan Roy's essay on "A Defense of Hindu Theism" may be regarded as the first original publication of significance in the history of Indian English Literature" (Naik 14). Since then, the popularity of Indian English authors has steadily increased. "The beauty and gracefulness of the English language, as used by Raja Rao, have been praised by even Englishmen who think the writer has done honour to them by creatively using their language." And Rao had been very candid to accept this fact while acknowledging his difficulties in using Kannada or Sanskrit language (Tripathi 170).

R.K. Narayan, one of the pioneers of Indian English Literature admitted that the language had served his purpose admirably to convey his thoughts unambiguously. He also said that English is a flexible language that anyone can communicate an experience through it. He chose to be a writer because it is the only career that ensures total freedom. He utilized this freedom to be a qualitative writer mainly because of the medium of English with which he was very comfortable. Therefore, anyone can vouch that it is the language of English that has made him join the 'immortals of Indian Literature' (R. Rao 111-15).

Mulk Raj Anand who is credited with a number of novels, short stories and essays "is known all over the world for his robust humanism, peasant sensibility, compassion and forthright outlook. He attacks evil of all sorts, and like G.B. Shaw, seeks to convert people to his viewpoint in his fiction of revolt through his anti-tradition stance." (Ram xvi) Moreover, he is "an innovator in several ways. He was among the first few Indian writers to define the scope and nature of Indian novel in English... experimented with language and technique. He is most aggressive in the adoption of Indian English" (xx).

Kamal Das, a credible woman poet in English testifies,  
I am an Indian, very brown, born in  
Malabar, I speak three languages, write in  
Two, dream in one. Don't write in English, they said  
English is not your mother-tongue. Why not leave  
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,  
Everyone of you? Why not I speak in  
Any language I like? The language I speak  
becomes mine,... It is half English, half  
Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,  
It is as human as I am human (122).

Anita Desai, a notable woman writer among Indian English novelists, states that she feels very comfortable to write in English. Neeru Chakraverty pays rich tribute to Anita Desai in the following words. "Placed among the second generation of Indian writers of English, Anita Desai has been intimately associated with the realm of the introspective psychological novel and a metaphysical inquiry into the existential dilemma of human beings." She further says "She [Anita Desai] represents a new focus and orientation of Indian English writing, which turned away in the sixties from delineating outer reality to the equally powerful inner reality" (2).

Now the focus is on a new crop of writers in English. Many have moved beyond the traditional Anglophone market to enter into European territory as publishers from France, Germany, Spain, Italy and the Netherlands have trickled into India in recent years in search of the next literary sensation ("Indian Writers"). Nuzhat Hassan, head of the Delhi based National Book Trust, says that there is no denying that India is the 'flavour of the season.' Arundhati Roy's only novel, *The God of Small Things* gained international recognition. The novel has transcended geographical boundaries and has made her presence felt among the contemporary literary greats of the west ("Indian Writings").

“We’re still only at the threshold of a hugely exciting continent with a vibrant literary scene,” said Michi Strausfeld of the Suhrkamp publishing company in Germany, which has translated a number of Indian titles. She further said, “Writers definitely do much more than politicians and the media in helping outsiders understand their country” (“Indian Writers”). With scholarly works and research activities of international academia, rising readership and rave critical attention, one can surely echo the prophetic words of K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar that Indian English literature is undoubtedly the global voice through which India speaks.

### **8. Summation: Indian English: A Progressive Propeller**

The whole world admires at the tremendous progress Japan and China have made among the Asian countries. Undeniably, the whole globe knows that the people of these countries are very hard working. Nevertheless, their distinguishing mark is that they have one common language: Japanese and Chinese respectively. Since, most of them, if not all of them, speak the national language, they feel for their nations and own them. When the Prime Minister or the Premier speaks on national issues, it is widely understood. In contrast, Indians speak numerous languages. When the head of the state in India speaks, most Indians can understand only the translated and modified version of his concepts, because India does not have a unifying language for all her citizens.

Many would argue that English is an adopted language and so why should one speak in an alien language? Instead, all can try to speak in Hindi which is widely spoken in India. But, any reasonable person would understand that the utility of Hindi will be confined to the width and breadth of India, whereas learning of English will take one and one’s ideas across the world in this techno-savvy world. Therefore, learning English for an Indian has many advantages over learning any other language other than one’s own mother tongue. Moreover, learning English will enable the readers to have direct access to the ocean of resources of knowledge available in English with the help of modern technology. Hence, learning from the progressed countries which have one main language for communication among their citizens, the people of India can also adopt this method and directly participate in the development of the nation as well as the world. In order to realize this goal, children must be taught English at an early stage along with their mother tongue. In this way, learning English need not be construed as submission to the



alien force, but on the contrary, it must be understood as conquering of the aliens with one's concepts.

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