

Presence of a Global Language in India

A Case for English

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Abstract

Societies have been losing out their native languages. As a result of vanishing of languages, many elements of traditional knowledge are also lost. The major reason of accelerated rate of the extinction of native languages is the forces of liberalisation and globalisation. Due to this English has acquired the status of language of opportunities and has endangered native languages. The paper will focus on the reasons of spread of English in our country where its growth is contrived and not organic. It is high time that educationists and linguists should develop meaningful and relevant curriculum of English so that it coexists with native languages.

In a world where socialism and communism have lost its hold capitalism along with English has emerged as a strong force. It is the 'world standard language: an intrinsic part of the global communications revolution'. (The Economist, 21 December 1996, p. 39) English has very strongly influenced the areas of commerce and trade mostly in developing countries which are aspiring

to attain global standards of development.

English is also used for more purposes than ever before. This has resulted in the evolution of English language which has given rise to new semantics and syntax. English has merged with fabric of social life attaining its momentum and vitality, reflecting local culture and influencing languages in its own way.

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In school education English is a second language which implies it is second to one or more than one Indian languages. And English is introduced in school Education with much studied pedagogic inputs. Under Three Language Formula enough care is taken for teaching learning of English in contrast to other Indian Languages.

The role and relationship of English vis-a-vis the Indian Languages is important. Whatever the language planning imply, in reality all Indian languages have become regional languages. Hindi has become an edge over other Indian languages because of its status as an official language of the Union. English is also another official language and its status remains undisputed. Since it cannot be identified with any region it has acquired the status of pan-Indian language that is serving the purpose of creating channels of communication among regions.

“English will continue to enjoy a high status so long as it remains the principal medium of education at the University stage, and the language of administration at the Central Government and in many of the states. Even after the regional languages became media of higher education in the Universities, a working knowledge of English will be a valuable asset for all students and a reasonable proficiency in the language will be necessary for those who proceed to the University” (Ministry of Education 1966:192).

More and more parents demand English medium instruction schools for their wards. As a result, an incredibly large number of English medium schools have sprung-up. These schools have attracted large number of children from humbler strata of society. Parents are paying heavy fees for these schools in contrast to Govt. – aided schools offering free education and other benefits. This is a pointer to people’s belief that English medium schools have a distinct advantage over others.

All the State Governments, whether they have adopted three language or two language formula have retained English as a compulsory subject at the secondary stage. The National Policy on Education adopted by the Government of India in 1968 clearly specifies that: “Special emphasis needs to be laid on the study of English and other international languages. World knowledge is growing at a tremendous pace, especially in science and technology; India must not only keep up this growth, but also make her own significant contribution to it. For this purpose, study of English deserves to be specially strengthened”.

LANGUAGE AND PROSPECTS OF EMPLOYMENT

The phenomenon of globalisation has overtaken caste considerations for larger issues of survival and livelihood. Globalisation has given opportunities for realising their dreams to some and shaken the

consciousness of others to dare and move ahead leaving behind their cocooned lives. Media and other forms of information technologies have played a significant role in supporting a new social paradigm which has given new dimension to economic and social life of country. Undeniably, language is playing an important role in this process of transition. The recently created job market demands cultural-mixing, common language for the execution of jobs and parlance. The common language which has emerged strongly is English; prime reason for this is probably absence of an indigenous job market as an alternative to globalisation. This has also resulted in extinction of many Indian languages. There are no linkages between language learning and prospects of employability so far as Indian languages are concerned. This scenario has promoted, though unnecessarily, the status of English and its hegemonic characteristics.

Closely linked to this issue is the absence of nurturing dignity of labour among the citizens in our country. Ironically, the most frustrated segment of society holds their lack of knowledge of English as a factor responsible for it. Parents are spending money beyond their capacities to provide education in English medium. For them 'medium' (English) is synonym of education. Their faith in English language is indomitable. For them the only way to rise vertically in the society,

which they strongly aspire, rests on knowing English. This is also delineation of their desire—though not rightly executed to be heard and seen so as to emerge from an identity crises.

LANGUAGE AS A MEDIUM OF EXPRESSION

Language is considered a tool for fulfilling social compulsions of communication but it has more gratifying function of self-expression. Language plays an important role in knowledge acquisition and communication. Above all, language gives a concrete shape to our perceived notions of this universe. Therefore familiarity with language is the precondition. Child's first language is his most familiar known language. And the journey of child's education should begin in child's own language.

There is no denying the fact that individuals have innate desire to learn and express in many languages. There can also be a need and justification for learning a language as is the case with English. But it's possible naturally and meaningfully, if the individuals find themselves in pro-language learning situations; wherein children have already enhanced the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing in their own language.

A multi-lingual education programme aims to inculcate in children the pride for their mother tongue. This definitely leads to be

relevant, enriching and a smooth journey of young learners step by step. Under the Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act, schools should come forward to facilitate children's education in their mother tongue.

The initiatives have to come forward from the community, parents and other stakeholders in education. However the existing scenario seems to be dismal for nurturing mother tongues. The class I student is taught less of her mother tongue and more of state prescribed syllabus. Gradually the section of marginalised and first generation of school-goers tend to think that state language is a tool to move upward in class and caste hierarchy, that the local, indigenous languages are inferior. The saddest part of their journey begins when they have to struggle with another language (could be third language in class I), that is, English.

So far as the position of teaching of English in schools is concerned, it is worst than teaching-learning scenario of Indian languages because teaching of English requires proficient teachers in English, reading material appropriate for learners; in short a conducive environment for learning a foreign language.

The 'foreignness' of this language is further increased when children have to deal with a subject matter that is alien to them. There is every possibility that children in remote areas have never seen an 'apple' which is supposed to be the part of

the first lesson in English i.e. 'A for Apple'.

However, the English language carries the tag of cosmopolitanism and it's because of this it is greatly admired in societies, such as ours, where genuine diversity of reading and writing is not acknowledged; we uncritically admire English language for its monoculturism and confidence it engenders. In Indian society it may even be a more powerful marker of difference than caste. This may be considered on a positive note as an indicator of how education can overcome inherited disadvantages. However, the peculiar presence of English in India has created a situation of wasted human potential.

The global system of rewards for knowing English has resulted in massive loss of cultural memory and intellectual dimension. The brief hope offered by the Kothari Commission (1964–66), in the form of 'three language formula' has never been implemented in its spirit and has therefore withered. There certainly is no reason and logic to believe that one particular language offers the best medium for cultural and scientific creativity. We require more thoughtful policy discourse with state partners at national level.

The role of non-native English speaking teachers has grown meaningful in the teaching of English as a foreign language. This should give them empowerment, voice and identity in the profession. This also demands that they engage

in critical praxis, although it is not a linear and simple process. Therefore it is rightly felt that more research is needed. At the same time there is a need to develop a model which empowers teachers to have their voice, moments of reflection for sharing their experience of English language teaching.

FILTRATION OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN RURAL BASES

Migration of rural population to semi-urban or urban areas has helped filtration of English in remote urban bases. Migrated population in urban areas have two important reasons to use English: (i) it is the requirement of their jobs (ii) it is psychologically and socially satisfying experience for them. In the absence of growing indigenous job markets, Indian languages have not made their mark as languages of discourse and profession. This makes the case for English legitimate.

STATUS OF ENGLISH AS A NEUTRAL LANGUAGE

English has become a language of Indians, who have been said to be extremely proud of their own languages. Interestingly, country witnesses linguistic fights even today. But with the increase in population, particularly in the urban and semi urban areas, and with the spread of education and the increased internationalisation of English, there is a quantitative expansion and an increase in the number of Indian

users of English. The prominent functions of English in India are:

- (a) The domain specific, registral use—mostly for bureaucratic, administrative, legal, technical and scientific purpose.
- (b) The culture-translation use that shows culture-bound associative meanings and stylistic variations.
- (c) The journalistic use for print-media communication and the creative use for literary-writing.

It is in this context that we have to critically examine another concept—the concept of the ‘native speaker’. Monolingual users of English believe that a native-speaker is the centre of all decision-making in a language. In multilingual societies where different learners acquire two or three languages simultaneously and it is very difficult to say which one is the mother tongue or the first language; it is suggested that sociolinguistics must include multilingualism in its formulation of communicative competence because the social context of language use is created by dynamic social forces. There is semi-literate population in urban areas who have devised their own ways and means of learning English; it could be by coming in contact with tourists, print environment and urbanites. English for the purpose of communication is also learnt outside the classrooms and without standardized pedagogic support. Hence the social aspect of English language acquisition holds great relevance.

The term 'Indian English' has gained acceptance as a label to describe the use of English in India as it has emerged from the social context. Indian writing in English has its own market and, of late, a very flourishing one. However one should also take note of the fact that Indian writing in English is only one aspect of the use of English by Indians, and that the creative writers represent only a minority within a minority.

EMERGING NEW TRENDS

The driving forces which have made the case for 'English' are also facing opposition.

English is said to have negative influence on our regional languages. The socio-cultural fabric also does not favour its propagation. The use of English as a global lingua franca requires intelligibility and the setting and maintenance of standards in education of children. There is no way of precisely predicting the future trends regarding English. There has never been a language so widely spread or spoken by so many people as English.

There is a possibility of increase in economic terms, the size of the global market for the English language; but at the same time native languages are expected to stage a come back; as a result, the market share of English will probably be lowered.

An overview of existing scenario indicates the emergence of native languages though it is witnessed

in art, media and creative writing. The trends of multilingualism are gaining popularity as well as social acceptance. Code switching and mixing is a common and much to be observed phenomenon. It raises a question about the status of English in coming years. What appears realistic today is that English will be used as a vehicular language—like a tool of the trade. There is the fear that the spread of English will lead to over half of the world's languages becoming extinct. This may prove to be true but might be with some variation. There might be death of many dialects but there seems to be every possibility at strengthening of standardisation of major Indian languages. The trend would be merging of dialects and minor languages with broader major languages.

The language system of the world is gaining importance because of social mobility, new technology and rise in international communication both at the level of trade, business and academics. These changes will affect both written and spoken communication skills. It is quite possible that English may not be the dominant language of the future, and multilingual scenario will be enriched. It is sad to witness that a large number of languages are facing extinction, but at the same time, new ones are emerging in cities and extended social groups, English being the dominant among them.

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