

## “Can India afford to be Monolingual?” -The Relevance of English learning in India Today

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper attempts an analysis of the prevailing national education policies and the use of English as a second language in the multilingual context of India. During the pre-Independence and post-Independence era, English as the foreign/international language of the imperial masters was adopted as the official language as well as the medium of instruction at higher educational institutions. Lord Macaulay strongly recommended its use as the ‘lingua franca’ among young Indian graduates for the rapid spread of the western education and European values/culture. This was promoted at the cost of the Indian vernaculars including the classical language Sanskrit. As a result, we can see little use or no use of regional languages and dialects in our public schools and colleges. We have already paid the price for it, as our learners generally fail in language subjects, making mistakes in sentence structures. In this age that is dominated by science and technology (ICT), we have the provision for ‘machine translation’ and we should adopt Indian vernaculars and dialects as the mediums of instruction and try to replace English. Even Hindi cannot be used as the national language for mass education all over the country, specially the southern part of India. We should try to be broad in our perspective and encourage our learners to retain their mother tongues and native culture in order to have a sense of “unity in diversity” as it is popularly said in the Indian context that is multilingual as well as multicultural. Our present generation teachers, in fact, are not properly trained to speak English fluently and write it correctly. That is why we see our learners committing all sorts of mistakes at the level of lexis and syntax and they also demonstrate inefficiency at all four language skills practically. As an academician with teaching experience of two decades, I feel that our young learners are unable to grasp the foreign tongue or concepts as reflected in their written as well as oral performance. Hence, I raise this question in the title: Can we afford to be “monolinguals” in India at all? I would refer to several scholars for illustration and justification of my points raised here.*

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**Key Words:** *Multilingualism, Vernaculars/Dialects, English and National Educational Policy*

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## Text:

“The true cure of darkness is the introduction of light. The Hindus err because they are ignorant and their errors have never fairly been laid before them. The communication of light and knowledge to them would prove the best remedy for their children and this remedy is proposed from a full conviction that if judiciously and patiently applied, it would have great and happy effects upon them, effects honourable and advantageous for us.” (Grant 1792)

This statement was pronounced by Charles Grant who came to India as a director of the East India Company in 1767 and wrote his famous treatise under the title **Observations on the State of the Society among the Asiatic Subjects of Great Britain, particularly with respect to Morals and the Means of Improving It**. This document is considered to be the first blueprint of English education in the Indian sub-continent and this suggested for a policy to be made by the British Imperial Administration. This policy would bring about a change in the Indian society –moral, social, and mental- through the English language, Western education and Christianity.

Thomas Babington Macaulay, popularly known as Lord Macaulay, prepared his **Minutes on Education for India** (1835) as the chairperson of the Council of India and a member of the Committee of Public Instruction. He made an attempt to review the previous Act of Parliament of 1813 with regard to Indians’ education of Sanskrit and Persian in the *gurukuls* and the *madrassas* run by the Hindu pundits and Muslims. In his text, he writes: “ All parties seem to be agreed on one point that the dialects commonly spoken among the natives of this part of India contain neither literary nor scientific information, and are moreover so poor and rude that until they are enriched from some other quarter, it will not be easy to translate any valuable work into them. It seems to be admitted on all sides that the intellectual improvement of those classes of the people who have the means of pursuing higher studies can at present be effected only by means of some language not vernacular amongst them...What then shall that language be? One-half of the committee maintains that it should be English. The other half strongly recommends the Arabic and Sanskrit.” (Macaulay 1835)

The above document discarded all sorts of Oriental philosophy and knowledge available in Sanskrit and Persian and advocated for the Occidental education by means of English. The English tongue of the colonial masters was treated as the most useful to native subjects of India. The white man’s burden of civilizing the barbaric native Indians resulted in the following declaration made by Lord Macaulay: “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 tastes, opinions, in morals and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population.” (202) Thus, the western education for a few Indians by means English was meant for producing a special class of *babus* to assist the British rulers in administrative assignments. The reforms in public instruction system were recommended for immediate implementation, otherwise Lord Macaulay would ask for his resignation from the committee.

William Adams opposed to this filtration theory of Macaulay and suggested for an alternative policy in his report on public instruction. He not only wrote against the top-down policy of Lord Macaulay but suggested a bottom-up system as an alternative: "Children should not go to colleges to learn the alphabet. To make the superstructure lofty and firm, the foundations should be broad and deep; and thus building from the foundation, all classes of institution and every grade of instruction may be combined with harmonious and salutary effect. To labour successfully for them, we must labour with them; and to labour successfully with them, we must get them to labour willingly and intelligently with us. We must make them, in short, the instruments of their own improvement." (Adam 1868) Macaulay as a member of the Governor General's Council commented on this report and recommended of its impracticality and inapplicability.

Charles Wood, the then President of Control of East India Company, prepared another document known as the **Wood's Despatch** in 1854 and it is regarded as the Magna Carta of English education in India. It was in fact the first policy document of the British Government on education of Indians. This recommended for English as the medium of instruction in schools and colleges but it also stated that English was not to replace the vernaculars of Indians. Teachers must be trained for teaching western subjects in this foreign tongue. Wood states: "In any general system of education, the English language should be taught where there is a demand for it. But such instruction should always be combined with a careful attention to the study of the vernacular language of the district, and with such general instruction as can be conveyed through that language. While the English language continues to be made use of as by far the most perfect medium for the education of those persons who have acquired a sufficient knowledge of it to receive general instruction through it, the vernacular languages must be employed to reach the far larger classes, who are ignorant of, or imperfectly acquainted with English." (Wood 1854) It somehow attempted to compensate the loss of Sanskrit, Persian, Urdu and other vernacular languages used in different corners of India.

As a result of these policies implemented by the British rulers, Indians learnt English as a compulsory language in educational institutions. The study of English literature was inevitable for all university graduates, whether he opted for English as a compulsory or optional subject. To pass in English was mandatory for promotion to the higher grades. All students had to master the intricacies of this foreign tongue in order to get the qualifying marks in English tests. The post-Independent India has made a large number of policies called the National Policy on Education (NPEs) to maintain English as the medium of instruction at higher educational institutions. There have been a number of Commissions and Study Groups appointed by the Central Government. Beginning with the Radhakrishnan Commission, the Kothari Commission, and the Ramamurthy Commission, there have been a great number of reports and recommendations for bringing about reforms in education, whether formal or non-formal, mass education or distance education through open universities, higher education and professional education. Many of these have not been implemented wholly by the authorities to get the desired result at the national level uniformly. The state governments hesitate to implement all recommendations entirely at the stipulated time frame and the central government has no mechanism to review its policies, whether implemented or not, and the follow-up activities to be taken up as recommended by the specialist study groups.

An average Indian learner is basically a bilingual or a multilingual. He speaks his mother-tongue at home and with people in his own speech community. He also speaks English as the link language to communicate with colleagues and teachers. He can also comfortably speak Hindi as the national language without even learning its grammar rules. When a child goes to a school for education, he has to learn minimum three languages as a part of our national education policy. He not only learns the syntax and the standard vernacular, he also studies the literary works produced in the target language. Then he has to join the college and the university to get the higher education by means of English compulsorily. We pick up our Hindi from our exposure to Bollywood films, songs and story books in Hindi. We also learn informally another regional language if we move out of our home state and settle down in another state for our job or profession. Many Bengali like me have migrated to Odisha, Assam and other Indian states for work and not only use Bengali at home but also Odia or Assamese or Gujarati for oral communication in the state of settlement. This complexity is further enhanced when Indian students go abroad for higher studies in Western countries like the USA, UK and Canada. They must learn the standard variety of English of the respective country to continue their studies or professional career afterwards.

Indian languages and English have influenced each other in terms of lexical borrowings. The socio-cultural contexts demand such words for better comprehension and writers as well as ordinary speakers make use of specific terms available to a particular culture or social context. Prof. N. Krishnaswamy in his book writes: "English is not the only borrower and it was not one-way traffic. English has influenced all the Indian languages in a big way. More than a thousand words are used in every Indian language as though they are words native to them, particularly in areas where modern technology matters most." (169)

My proposal here is to link language learning with culture learning. Culture must be considered as the core part in the second language learning of English. The national standards for foreign language learning emphasize on this aspect that students cannot truly master any language, until they have mastered the cultural contexts in which the target language occurs. In the Indian context, our attention must be shifted from the mere learning of English to our own cultural learning through its use. It will help our learners discover different ways of viewing the world also develops their intercultural communicative competence necessary to participate fully in an increasingly global community. Ironically, English learning in India is examination-centric and does not yield the desired result in our learners as effective communicators of English with Received Pronunciation (RP) and proper intonation. Our vernaculars and regional dialects are syllable-bound and English is stress-bound. Due to our mother tongue interference, we mispronounce English words and also write the spelling incorrectly.

India being a vast land with diverse cultures must prepare itself how to tackle all these diversified ways and represent as one nation. Suppose we begin to frame a new curriculum with General Indian English (GIE) as the medium of instruction and introduce our students to cultural learning, we may achieve this goal to an extent. We know that Indian experiences vary from region to region and similarly our expressions to express them also vary. The problem for English faculty in India is how to tackle this variety of issues by means of a standard variety of English in an elite manner. We may focus on inter-lingual translations to overcome such issues. We should highlight this aspect of

*Interculturality* as a dominant feature of Indian cultural ethos. As Indians, we must acknowledge the basic fact that we have adapted English simply to express our experiences in a different way. Creative writers experiment with all sorts of genre to express their thoughts and feelings on the basis of their experience and use English creatively for the purpose. They do not bother to even provide the English equivalents of culture specific vernacular words in their works that are primarily meant for the international audience. It becomes difficult for the Western readers to comprehend the complex thoughts and expressions of our Indian texts including novels, poetry and drama produced in the Indian English. They are yet to acquire a good taste for Indian English writings except a few foreign university departments or centres where it is taught regularly.

Here I would like to quote Raja Rao who in the preface to his novel *Kanthapura* writes: "English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up – like Sanskrit or Persian was before - but not of emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us in our own language and in English...We cannot write like the English. We should not. We can only write as Indians (...). Our method of expression... will someday prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American." (5) The Indian English writers including R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand then and contemporary writers like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghose, Sashi Tharoor, etc. have paid attention to the "Indianization" of English. As ordinary Indians, we can argue for the "Westernization" of Indian languages as is depicted in our TV serials and regional films.

In recent years, there has been focus on the use of regional languages or dialects of learners as the medium of instruction, particularly at the elementary and secondary levels. This is popularly called "Mother Tongue Based Multi-Lingual Education" (MTBMLE). The governments are taking more interest with an aim to promote regional languages to be mostly used for higher education. The speakers of the minority languages or script-less dialects find it difficult to learn English and get higher studies in a foreign language. They commit mistakes of all kinds and struggle to get pass marks or professional success. They are the target audience of our education system and they are the true stake holders of our education policy. We should not design a curriculum to make their dialects extinct and promote English at all costs. The institutions should develop such cultural contents that can be learnt and comprehended easily by our learners. The use of technology and computer is highly recommended here, so that these young learners can learn languages independently making proper use of online resources available freely. The concept of "Blended Learning" is useful in this context.

## Conclusion:

To satisfy different groups of learners, we should have diverse courses, either General English or ESP or EST or EAP or EOP courses. Academics and subjects have been active in this direction and materials have been constructed and made available in the market too. The private study centres seen in the shopping malls and market corners advertise for various certificate, diploma and crash courses for all kinds of target audiences. I am not sure whether they successfully cater to the needs of the learners or not, as they advertize in a grand manner. My propositions may have a couple of challenges too. There is a shortage of trained teachers in the subject to deal with this matter. The proper

infrastructure may not be available at all places. The institutions may not be willing to implement such proposals. The study materials and the supporting technology may not be made available adequately for all our consumers-cum-learners. However, I would like to say that we can succeed if we plan systematically and sincerely. Finally, I would quote Prof. Krishnaswamy who states: "As a free nation, we are committed to the enrichment of Indian languages, so that they may serve all those purposes for which we now use English. To do so... we need to profit from the existing stock of knowledge in English. And with our long tradition in the use of English, we should be able to exploit the richness of this language to the advantage of major Indian languages." (209) I therefore strongly recommend for the use of learners' mother tongues for various learning purposes and English should be treated as one of the mother tongues available to us due to our long colonization.

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