English Studies in India: A Historical Perspective

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The present paper deals with a historical perspective of English studies in India. When the British came to India, they were least interested in the education system in India; they did not want to interfere with it. They also never thought that they would introduce English in India. But the Charter Act of 1813 made the British to introduce English in India. Macaulay’s famous (or infamous!) Minutes on Indian Education came during the period and changed the indigenous education system. The present paper traces the journey of English in India from the pre-independence till the 20th century. It also touches upon the attitudes of the Indians towards English in the pre-independence era and the present attitudes of the people in our country. It is necessary to examine the role of English in India today as it occupies a special place in our education system and has molded our socio-cultural formations.

It is commonly believed that the English language came to India with the British. The East India Company was established on December 31, 1600 by Queen Elizabeth and British merchants started their businesses in Africa and Asia. Initially the company used local people to help them and the British realized that the political control would enhance their trade prospect. Thus in the 18th century they got the complete control over India after the Battle of Plassey (1757). The British purposefully kept themselves away from the indigenous education system. By the middle of the eighteenth century an important debate started about the introduction of English into the Indian system of education. The Bengali people were keen to learn English for social progression and economic reasons. Thus ironically it is the indigenous people who asked for English in the beginning of the nineteenth century. The early Indian poets writing in English welcomed the British rule and thought that it was a boon to Indians. Henry Derozio (1809-1831) in his famous poem The Harp of India supports the colonial ideology that the British rule is necessary in India and through it Indians can get their glory back. They supported the ‘white man’s burden’- to save the fallen Indians; God has sent them here for the upliftment of the ‘downtrodden.’

Although the East India Company was formed in 1600, they did not function in the field of education till 1813 when a Charter Act renewed their existence in the subcontinent. The debate over the education policies started between the Orientalists and Anglicists through this Act. The Orientalists supported the indigenous education system and they wanted to continue it for the education of the people in India; whereas the Anglicists advocated the introduction of English in schools in a systematic manner. They (Anglicists) thought that the old indigenous education system in India is no more useful to furnish the present needs. The Anglicists requested the British to replace or displace the traditional methods and supply a different educational system to survive in the world. So the philosophy that the British introduced English in India for their convenience is debatable; some Indians did want to learn the language. Here ‘English’ did not simply mean the language but the whole English culture and lifestyle that were imported by the British.
Before the British introduced the western education system in India, there were Pathsalas, Madarassa, Maktabs and other institutions devoted to teaching in Sanskrit and the vernacular Indian languages and the Indians were educated in their own methods/systems. But this system was not sufficient to cope with the changing social systems the indigenous system of teaching and learning had become old and less useful. As said earlier the Bengali people showed great interest in learning the language of the British merchants and political administrators - the new jobs that were opening up required the knowledge of English. The famous reformer and educationists Raja Rammohan Roy said that English would actually empower Indians for dealing with the future and believe that Indian systems of knowledge, belief and manners were flawed and they should be replaced by Christianity, English language and western knowledge system. Thus the intimate connection between ‘power’ and ‘knowledge’ was important at the time when the question of the relevancy of the indigenous education system to the British rule. Warren Hastings in 1784 had discussed the close connection of the two to Nathaniel Smith, chairman of the court of Directors for the East India Company. The senior British officials like Hastings and Lord Minto felt the need to introduce English in India and to expose the Indians to the western art and science through it.

Thus the Charter Act of 1813 was open to debate; the British had to decide how the money was to spend and there were different opinions among the Indians as well as among the British. Among the Englishmen the most important voice was that of Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859) and his Minute on Indian Education (1835) strongly advocated for the introduction of English in India. Like Hastings and Minto, Macaulay also thought that the indigenous forms of knowledge were no longer capable of catering to the demands of the new economic order. He was emphatic about the fact that it was simply necessary because of the expansion and existence of the British Empire in India. In the minutes he boastingly says,

“I have never found one among them [Indians] who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. The intrinsic superiority of the western literature is, indeed, fully admitted by those members of the Committee who support the oriental plan of education.”

It is remarkable to note the confidence and arrogance with which Macaulay discarded the prevailing languages and literature of Arabic and Sanskrit into disrepute. These languages, according to him, were totally out of relevance to the British Empire. The debate over ‘which language/literature should be promoted in India’ started by the Charter Act and Macaulay tried to prove that the only possible option for the British lay in teaching English and its literature as well as the promotion of science that was useful. Macaulay was keen to introduce the literature in English in India because by using English literature the British wanted to provide the ideological instruction and to dominate the Indians and therefore Macaulay suggested to teach English language through English literature and we can see Macaulay has been successful in his attempt in emphasizing the colonial ideology on the minds of the Indians. We still follow Macaulay’s method of teaching English in India, that is, the language is taught through the literature. It is evident from Macaulay’s minutes that his idea was closely related to the axis of power, his intention was to produce people who would serve that power through their language. He says,

“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 taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialect 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.”

Thus the beginning of English education in this country as an effort to create a ‘class’ of people who would be the ‘interpreters’ of all the things that the British did in this land; they were needed for the sustenance and expansion of the Empire. We have originated from this system and we still operate within it. Macaulay successfully convinced his ideology to the British and in 1835 the decision to introduce English in India was taken and slowly the indigenous education system was uprooted. His opinion was, “I would strike at the root of the bad system which has hitherto been fostered by us. I would at once stop the printing of Arabic and Sanskrit books, I would abolish the Maddrassa and the Sanscrit College at Calcutta... I would at least recommend that no stipends shall be given to any students who may hereafter repair thither, but the people shall be left to make their own choice between the rival systems of education without being bribed by us to learn what they have no desire to know.”

When the British Parliament took over the control of India from the East India Company in 1857, it continued the Company’s policy of the education. The parliament offered scholarships to the Indians to study in England and encouraged many to get a degree from a British university. It was a custom, then, among the rich and the upper middle class to send their son to England to become a Barrister and we have many such well-known names. The social reformer of the period such as Mahatma Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890) and others requested the British to teach English in schools in India because they had realized the futility of learning Sanskrit and the lower class people were not allowed to learn Sanskrit; education was forbidden to them. Thus the support to English came from within. But, again, there were some Indians who saw learning English as a sign of dominance of the British and they rejected use of English by the Indians. During the Home Rule and Swadeshi movements English was seen as the oppressor’s language and therefore the use of English by the Indians was seen as a sin. But such people were in minority. Most of the leaders of the freedom fighting movement such as Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Nehru, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, and Sarojini Naidu etc. had learnt English and were proficient in using the language. They did not see it as the sign of dominance of the British over the Indians through the language.

After the independence the policy of the government in the first five year plan was to drive away English from India for patriotic reasons but after the survey the government realized that English had spread in India tremendously and it is impossible for the government to finish English. The people wanted it and hence the government had to change its policy in favour of English. Today English is one of the official languages; we have highest numbers of English newspapers publishing in India and more English speakers than the native British speakers. Indians fluently write in English and many have won prestigious prizes in the world for their writing. It has become a part of our culture and the world has taken notice of Indian variety of English.

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