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English Language Education in India A Journey from Imperialism to Decolonization

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Abstract

For various purposes the colonial rulers of India introduced English in India. While English was very important for them to run the colony, English proved to be a boon for Indians as it gave them the opportunity to know about the world and new ideals evolving around the globe. This gave Indians the courage to challenge the empire on the same principles of democracy, equality and universal brotherhood which the masters had been preaching for long.

In addition, English education also created social awareness which enabled various sections of **Language in India** www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:3 March 2014
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Indian society to fight for their rights from the domination of upper castes. The present paper is an attempt to show the misuse of English in India by the Empire to fulfill its imperialistic ambitions and its decolonization in the post Independent India.

Key Words: Education, Imperialism, Decolonization, Democracy, Equality.

Meaning and Growth of Imperialism

Growing changes in the economic activities in Europe brought Europeans to India in the sixteenth century. The French, Dutch, Portuguese and British began to arrive in India as traders. Later on realizing the immense wealth and business potentials of India, they started settling in the country and building their factories across India. Gradually the British became more and more powerful. As a result East India Company was formed in mid-eighteenth century to monopolize trade with India and to realize the British imperial ambitions.

Before we move further, let us first understand what imperialism is and what impact the arrival of empire had on the socio-economic and cultural life of the colonies.

Defining Imperialism

Imperialism is a system of subjugation, where the dominant country or the empire gets the political, social, cultural and administrative control over the poor nation by virtue of their military might and technological advancements so that they can manipulate the policy for exploitation of the colony and to meet their imperialistic ends. Analyzing the havoc created by imperialism on the colonies, Edward Said in his *Culture and Imperialism* quotes J.S Mill, a noted British philosopher and economist, who very aptly described the British economic exploitation policy in their West Indian colony:

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These outlying possessions of ours are hardly to be looked upon as countries carrying on an exchange of commodities with other countries but more properly as outlying agricultural or manufacturing estates belonging to larger community. Our West-Indian colonies, for example, cannot be regarded as countries with a productive capital of their own... (but are rather) the place where England finds it convenient to carry on the production of sugar, coffee and a few other tropical commodities. All the capital, almost all the industry, is carried on for English uses, there is little production of anything except for staple commodities, and these are sent to England, not to be exchanged for things exported to the colony and consumed by its inhabitants, but to be sold in England for the benefit of the proprietors there. The trade with the West-Indies is hardly to be considered an external trade, but more resembles the traffic between town and country. (Said 90).

Use of Military Force and Cultural Invasion

Once the empire got the control of the colony, the next logical step was to spread and augment its hold on its subjects. There were many ways through which they did this. Major channel among them were the use of military force and cultural invasion.

Linguistic Imperialism

One of the important components of cultural invasion was the language and education policy for the subjects of the empire, which gave birth to what we now call as Linguistic Imperialism. It is a concept in which the language of the dominant race is passed on to the colony with the aim of making natives acculturated to the institutions of the rulers, and to absorb

current developments in science and economic activity, etc. This could ultimately lead to the demise of local language, literature and societal structures. Penny Cock argues that “English threatens other languages, acts as a gatekeeper to positions of wealth and prestige... through which much of the unequal distribution of wealth, resources and knowledge operates” (86).

It helped British rulers of India to introduce English as the language of trade, business, administration and education so that the British could strengthen their rule over their biggest and most important colony and this proved beneficial for the growth of the empire even as members of the dominating castes readily accepted English and what it claimed to signify with suitable changes to continue to maintain their leadership in India. While the introduction of English helped Indian languages to develop a variety of genres, it also led Indians to neglect their own tongues in favour of English. Raja Shekhar quotes Phillipson, “The spread of English...language is repressive since it not only substitutes and displaces other languages but also imposes new mental structures on learners. These mental structures are possibly the ideologies that westerners use to justify their culture and impose these ideas on others” (166).

Introduction of English in India

English was introduced in India in the early nineteenth century after a fierce debate on the nature of education to be imparted to the locals. There was a group which supported oriental education system for the Indians as they thought that our Indian education system is adequate in itself and there was no need of any foreign model, while the other group pitched for the western system of education for natives, as they regarded it as the passport for higher paid jobs and lucrative careers in the government as well as in the merging market place and as a medium of rapid growth and societal development, necessary for the future of our country. As was expected,

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the decision was finally made in favor of western education because it was assumed to help establish better colonial administration by training natives in all fields. Macaulay in his famous minutes (1835) had very clearly outlined the object of English language education in India, “It is possible through English education to bring about a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and intellect” (70).

Acceptance and Resistance

There are many critics who are of the view that British education policy in India was not repressive or exploitative in nature but in fact, has immensely contributed to the growth of academics and intellect in our country by strengthening and modernizing our education system. However, we also need to underline the problems this policy created. For one thing, English education was restricted to major centers where colonial offices were located. Thus, people in large parts of India did not derive much benefit out of this policy. Secondly, the program focused more on imparting knowledge and training to natives so that they would serve the government well with acquired efficiency. It did not focus on eliminating illiteracy that prevailed all over India. Thirdly, support in favour of English resulted in reduction in support to traditional schools which were mostly religion-based. These schools have historically played crucial roles in maintaining religious and cultural traditions, even when some of these such as the Sanskrit schools had some caste-preferences. Ultimately, the policy to introduce English as the primary medium and as subject of instruction established the supremacy of the colonial power even as it strengthened the existing power distribution based on caste system among the natives.

Nationalist Desire for Change

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Annie Besant had very early realized the disasters of an education system based on foreign model. She exhorted, “Nothing can more swiftly emasculate national life, nothing can more surely weaken national character, than allowing the education of the young to be controlled by foreign influences, to be dominated by foreign ideals”. (291)

Since independence there has been growing awareness that if we continue with the same English language education policy, as was practiced by the colonial rulers, then we will fail in our endeavor to provide free and qualitative education to all our citizens. Therefore to follow the same policy without making necessary changes would be catastrophic and would seriously vitiate our educational environment.

India Needs a Different Type of English Education

India required an English education system, which was decolonized. It should have a national character and which would provide an impetus to our overall education scenario without compromising with the basic tenets of English language.

Defining Decolonization

Before we move further, let us first understand what the word *decolonization* stands for and what it signifies in terms of language education. The United Nations Special Committee on Decolonization says that it “may involve either non-violence revolution or national liberation wars by the native population” (web). Further clarifying the meaning of decolonization, Vaish (2008) states, “Decolonization refers to the dismantling of the colonial machinery and the departure of the colonizers in grand or gory manner”. Similarly, Decolonization in language

means departure from those principles and phenomenon of language which served the purpose of colonial masters.

Suitable Modification of English Education

When the nation became independent, the concern of our law makers was to provide our children with such an English education system that was neither archaic nor devoid of moral values and national character so that our youth could acquire vocational skills necessary for excelling in the modern times without compromising their pride and national identity. But it was a very daunting task for such a big and diverse country like India.

Suggestions by CABE

The answer finally came from a recommendation given by the country's premier advisory body on education, CABE. The Central Advisory Board on Education suggested three language formula for the decolonization of English in India. The reason why CABE suggested TLF was, the apex body knew that we cannot summarily discard English, simply because of its imperial legacy. There was a lot of good that English had offered to Indians and hence it was necessary to strike a balance between a language that had provided a lot of avenues to our citizens and was the language of the future. At the same time it is only to right to give due importance to our own native languages which were equally competent and rich in literature.

Three Language Formula

The carefully devised and extremely debated TLF was prepared, keeping in view the Gandhian principle of using Hindustani or the mother tongue as primary language and English as secondary language in our schools to cater to the needs of an independent resurgent nation

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looking to reclaim its past glory and to keep itself in the global hunt for pursuit of knowledge, development of scientific temper and rational thought without losing its feature of ethnic diversity, multilingualism, multiculturalism and the need of equipping our citizens with the language of globalization.

Modified English Education Has Helped

That is why India today is a global leader in the field of software technology, biotechnology, space science, nuclear and aviation technology and other fields of science and engineering. This decolonization also resulted in what we now term as Indo-Anglican literature in English or Indian Writing in English, by which India has produced many authors and poets in English who re-write the norms of composition in English and excel in literary creation.

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