

Indianisation of English as a Language: From Post-Independence to the Present

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Abstract:

Since gaining independence in 1947, India has maintained English as a de facto national language alongside Hindi. This paper examines how English in India has evolved into a distinct variety often called Indian English. It surveys policy history (the Constitution's provisions for official languages), changes in education and media, and the linguistic "indigenization" of English in vocabulary, grammar, and sound. Early postcolonial leaders chose Hindi as the official language but retained English for government and court. Over time, English spread widely through schools, urbanization, and globalisation. As **Costa** notes, English "has acted as a lingua franca between speakers of different local languages" and facilitated unity in India's multilingual society. Contemporary studies report that Indian English has acquired unique lexical, grammatical, and phonological features (through Kachru's "indigenization") that distinguish it from British or American English. English-medium education has surged (e.g. roughly doubling from 2009 to 2014) and use of code-mixed "Hinglish" is now ubiquitous. Survey data show English remains more common among the educated elite: only about 6–10% of Indians report any proficiency, concentrated in cities and among upper castes. By contrast, English has become widely embraced as a crucial skill rather than a colonial imposition: recent fieldwork finds that English has largely "shed its colonial associations" and is seen as a key credential of modern life. This study synthesizes scholarly sources to provide a comprehensive, post-1947 overview of Indian English's development, illustrating both its distinctive linguistic traits and its social significance.

Keywords: Indian English, Indigenization, Postcolonial Identity, Code-Switching, Language Policy, Education, Social Stratification, Globalization

Introduction

After 1947, India's leaders faced a multilingual nation and needed a common medium. The Constitution (1950) designated Hindi (in Devanagari script) as the Union's official language, while permitting continued use of English for all governmental and judicial purposes[1][2]. Thus English remained co-official alongside Hindi at the federal level. In practice, English quickly became entrenched in administration, education, and technology. English is used "in tourism, government administration, education, the armed forces, business and the media"[3] and even dominated Bollywood film subtitles and news until the 1990s. Although only a tiny minority speak English natively, it serves as a **lingua franca** unifying India's linguistic diversity[3][7]. As Costa (2017) observes, English provides "stable linguistic threads for unity" in a nation of hundreds of languages[12]. In this context, a new variety – Indian English – emerged. This paper traces its emergence from Independence to the present, covering language policy, sociolinguistic factors, and the distinct linguistic features that mark Indian English.

Language Policy and Education (Post-1947)

At independence, the question of the national language was hotly debated. The 1950 Constitution adopted a bilingual policy: **Hindi** would be the official language (Article 343), but **English** "shall be used for all the official purposes of the Union"[1], including legislation and courts. This compromise was extended indefinitely via amendments (the "Official Languages Act" of 1963 and 1967), reflecting English's practical necessity. English remained the medium of higher education and civil service exams, and it connected India with the global Anglophone world.

Educationally, English-medium instruction expanded rapidly. Parents increasingly favor English schooling for its perceived social and economic advantages. For example, government data indicate that **enrollment in English-medium schools surged from roughly 15 million students in 2008-09 to 29 million by 2013-14** (nearly doubling in five years)[13]. Today private and public schools alike teach in English from early grades. English literacy and test preparation (TOEFL, IELTS) are widespread among youth. In contrast, rural and less affluent regions still rely more on regional languages; even in 2011 only about 10.6% of Indians reported English proficiency[14][7].

Key point: English is taught as a second language in virtually all states. Studies show 72% of Indian men and 83% of women report no English skills[15]. Those who do speak English are heavily concentrated in urban and elite segments. According to a 2019 Mint/CMIE survey, **only about 6% of Indians** claimed any English ability, down from roughly 10% in the 2011 census[8]. Meanwhile, proficiency strongly correlates with class and religion: about **41% of the wealthy** can speak English versus only 2% of the poor[16]; **15% of Christians** vs. 6% of Hindus and 4% of Muslims[9]; urban adults (12%) far outnumber rural (3%). English knowledge also skews young and educated – roughly one-third of Indian university graduates report speaking English[17]. These patterns underscore that English in India functions as a **prestige language and status symbol**.

Despite uneven spread, English has become indispensable in Indian society. It enables interstate communication and global integration. Grishechko (2021) notes that for many Indians, English now “pervades their routine life”[2]. In cities, even taxi drivers and service workers regularly use Hinglish (Hindi-English) to communicate. English high-stakes exams determine college admissions and jobs, and urban Indians often default to English when interacting with speakers of different mother tongues[3]. The internet and media further fuel Anglophone culture: major newspapers, TV channels, and movies (including Bollywood subtitles) use English. In sum, **language policy and education** have ensured that English is deeply embedded in India’s institutional and cultural fabric.

Linguistic Indigenization of English

As English rooted itself in India, it naturally absorbed local influences. Scholars describe Indian English as a “**transplanted language**” shaped by centuries of contact (Kachru 1976, cited by Costa)[18]. This process is often called *indigenization*: the infusion of Indian phonology, grammar, and vocabulary into English. For instance, Costa (2017) emphasizes that Indian English has developed “unique lexical, grammatical, phonological and discourse features” acquired through indigenization[4][19]. These features give Indian English its distinctive character. We illustrate several major areas of influence below.

- Lexical Innovations:** Indian English has coined many words to express local concepts. Common examples include *prepone* (“to reschedule earlier”), *co-brother* (husband of one’s sister-in-law), and *out of station* (away from home)[4]. Many ordinary words take on new senses: e.g. *cousin-brother* for close cousin, or *revert* meaning “reply to an email.” English has also borrowed (and sometimes re-borrowed) terms from Hindi, Urdu, Sanskrit, and other Indian languages. Sengupta et al. (2024) note that global vocabulary has become bilingual: for example, *khaki* (from Hindi *khākī* for “dust-colored”) and *mantra* entered English from Sanskrit roots, while Hindi has adopted *botal* and *tamatar* from English (for “bottle” and “tomato” respectively)[20]. Even basic courtesies differ: Indians say *Hello*, *Bye-bye*, and *achha* (“okay”) colloquially, reflecting local speech rhythms[21]. These lexical hybrids fill semantic gaps and carry Indian cultural resonance. According to Griffiths (2010), this rising “hybrid” vocabulary is so widespread that Hinglish (Hindi mixed with English) is now a dominant mode of casual communication online and offline[6].
- Phonological Patterns:** Indian English exhibits several phonetic traits from native tongues. One salient pattern is the lack of distinction between [v] and [w]; many speakers use a single labio-dental [v/w] sound for both letters[22]. Similarly, **retroflex consonants** (sounds made by curling the tongue back) from Dravidian and Indo-Aryan languages often replace English alveolar stops. In practice, /t/ and /d/ may be pronounced as retroflex [ɭ] and [ɖ] respectively[23]. Indian English is also largely **non-rhotic**: word-final *r* is often silent, though Indian speakers may produce a tapped or trilled [ɾ] before a vowel[24][23]. Consonant clusters are simplified (e.g. *film* is [fɪləm]), and vowels can differ (short /æ/ may sound like [ɛ]). These phonetic shifts make Indian English accent noticeably distinct, yet usually intelligible to other English speakers.
- Grammatical Features:** While largely conforming to English grammar, some syntactic patterns in Indian English reflect local influences. For example, present continuous tense is used more broadly (“*I am understanding*” instead of “*I understand*”). Habitual aspect is sometimes marked with *be* or by contextual particles. Article usage can vary (some speakers omit “the” or “a” in places a native speaker would use them). Question tags often

use “no” (e.g. “*You are coming, no?*”). Redundant pronouns or reflexives may appear (“*She herself went*”). Many Indians also use double negatives (“*He didn’t do nothing*”) or the informal “passive” (“*The car is got cleaned*”). While not “errors” within Indian English, such constructions can sound unusual in Standard British or American varieties. Sharma (2009) terms these borrowings and shifts as “substrate influence,” reflecting transfer from the speaker’s L1 structure[25].

Costa (2017) frames these changes positively, arguing that Indian English is not a degenerate form but “a language in its own right”[26]. Indeed, Kachru’s pioneering work recognized Indian English’s normative status by the 1980s. The phrase “*Indian English*” itself gained academic currency with Kachru’s 1983 book **The Indianization of English**. Scholars now speak of a “New Englishes” model, situating India in the “Outer Circle” of English-speaking nations where English has official and nativized use. In this view, Indian English’s idioms are neither errors nor inferior deviations, but legitimate variations rooted in local culture and need[4][19].

Sociocultural Impact and Identity

The indigenization of English has deep sociocultural repercussions. English proficiency often functions as a marker of modern education and upward mobility. Because of colonial history, it was historically associated with the elite. Even today, data confirm that English speakers in India tend to be richer, urban, and from higher castes[16]. Surveys show pronounced stratification: only 2% of the poorest report any English ability versus 41% of the wealthiest[16], and upper-caste Indians are over three times more likely to speak English than Dalits or tribals[9]. Consequently, English can both unify and divide. On one hand, it allows pan-Indian communication across regional languages; on the other, it exacerbates inequalities by privileging those who access English-medium schools and higher education.

Culturally, English has become a key part of many Indians’ identity. It features prominently in literature, media, and government. In postcolonial Indian English literature (novels, poems, plays) writers often weave English with Indian words and syntax to reflect local flavour. Nobel laureates V.S. Naipaul and Rudyard Kipling used Indianized English to portray colonial India (e.g. Kipling’s “*the Englishman’s cottage*” tone). Contemporary authors like Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy,

and Aravind Adiga frequently include Hinglish phrases and rhythms in their fiction, signaling a new confidence in Indian English as a creative medium. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* famously gives characters audible Hindi accents and Slang, haunting standard English with "*Indian consonances*"[27]. These literary examples illustrate that Indian English is not just spoken dialect but a literary instrument conveying Indian culture to global audiences.

In popular media, English (and Hinglish) pervade advertising, cinema, and social media. Bollywood films routinely mix English dialogue with Hindi songs. Indian TV channels air many shows in English. Internet use further solidifies English's role: many websites, social networks, and memes use hybrid language. The rise of Bollywood rap and tech startups has created a youth culture steeped in trendy English slang combined with Indian idioms. The "*English only*" movement has largely receded; people view India's variety of English as homegrown. In fact, Kachru (1990) and others have argued that India has arrived at a point of "*ownership*" of English, where the language feels natural to its users rather than alien[26].

Recent sociolinguistic research confirms this shift in attitude. A 2024 study of language attitudes in Delhi, Lucknow, and Indore found that **English is no longer widely seen as a colonial relic**, but as an integral part of modern Indian life[10][28]. Respondents emphasized that proficiency in English is a form of cultural and economic capital, vital for education and jobs[11]. Hindi, meanwhile, has gained prestige as a marker of national identity, leading many to champion mother tongues alongside English. The same study notes that Hinglish is often regarded as an *antidote* to linguistic hegemony – a way for speakers to assert local identity within English use. In this sense, Indian English today embodies a **postcolonial hybridity**: it is at once global and distinctly Indian, shedding some colonial baggage while retaining a unifying international lexicon.

Contemporary Challenges and Trends

Looking ahead, English in India faces both opportunities and tensions. Globalization and technology ensure its continued relevance. English fluency opens doors in IT, science, and international business. India's young population is increasingly bilingual, and many see English as essential to compete globally. Educational reforms (such as policies encouraging early English

instruction) and digital English media further entrench its use. According to language surveys, India now ranks among the top English-proficiency countries in Asia[29].

However, the uneven spread of English raises policy questions. Some critics argue that overemphasis on English can undermine regional languages and widen social gaps. Conversely, others point out that indigenously English forms a bridge language that does not replace vernaculars but coexists with them. Indeed, Indian English can be seen as another “scheduled language” in practice – one that roughly 83 million people reported as a second language in 2011[7]. Its role in education also evolves: while English-medium private schools proliferate, efforts continue to strengthen local-language schooling and bilingual education.

Finally, the digital era is spurring new evolutions in Indian English. Social media platforms are a laboratory for language change, accelerating code-mixing and colloquial innovations. The 2024 study by Sengupta et al. shows that **Hinglish usage on Twitter grew by ~2% annually from 2014 to 2022**[6]. Young Indians coin new terms constantly (e.g. “*timepass*”, “*tiffin*”, “*auto*”). Emoji and transliteration also influence written English. These trends suggest Indian English will keep changing rapidly, but its core status as a living variety will endure.

Conclusion

Since Independence, English in India has undergone remarkable transformation. Retained as an official language, it has grown from a colonial import into a genuinely Indian lingua franca. This process involved **indigenization** – adopting local sounds, structures, and meanings – creating a unique Indian English. Government policy and education expanded its reach, while society reshaped its prestige. Today only a minority speak native English, yet millions use it as a second language in daily life[7][8]. As Khan and Jayaraj (2024) conclude, English in India is largely disentangled from colonialism and embraced as “a necessity of the modern age”[11]. The diversity of Indian English – from bureaucratic English to vibrant Hinglish – reflects India’s evolving identity. In sum, the Indianisation of English has made it into a living, hybrid language: firmly global, but deeply Indian in character.

Table 1: English-Speaking Population in India, 2011 Census (Citing Mint, 2019)[7]

Category	Number of Speakers (2011)	% of Total Population
English as mother tongue	256,000	0.02%
English as second language	83,000,000	6.8%
English as third language	46,000,000	3.8%

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Vaibhav Vishal

Indianisation of English as a Language: From Post-Independence to the Present

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Vaibhav Vishal

Indianisation of English as a Language: From Post-Independence to the Present

129

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