

English in Contemporary India

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Background

In 1835, the British Government in India designated English as the medium of education for schools and universities. During over a century of British rule, English grew in popularity as a language of power, prestige and convenience. Although it was a foreign language at that time, native Indians were quick to take to the language, and even those opposed to British rule would voice their resistance primarily in English. Even after India gained its independence from Britain, English continued to be widely used, and, in fact, the new constitution makers deliberated and wrote the Indian Constitution in the English language. While Article 343 of the Indian Constitution designated Hindi as the official language of the Union, it also provided for the continued use of English language for all official Union purposes for a period of 15 years.

After nine years, the Official Language Commission of India recommended extending the use of English; a recommendation that has been subsequently echoed by several other committees over the years. English came to be known as an 'associate official language' or an 'associate additional language'. Recognition of the need to train English teachers led to the establishment of several institutions, such as the English Language Teaching Institute and the Central Institute of English, and several Regional Institutes of English.

Indian English

The varieties of English one comes across in India may be considered to be distinct variants of the language. They evolved out of British English imbibing several features of pronunciation, grammar and semantics from the native languages of India. A superset of all those varieties could be referred to as 'Indian English'. Indian Variants of English (IVE) is, however, a more apt phrase for these varieties.

There is a great deal of regional variation in terms of pronunciation within Indian English. Similar to the different regional accents of English in Britain, Indian English has very distinct pronunciation patterns in the different regions of India. The different areas, such as North-Eastern India, Bengal, Orissa, Andhra and Karnataka, as well as Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Panjab and Bihar, all add different flavours of pronunciation.

Comparing 'Indian English' with British Received Pronunciation (BRP), we find many cases of Indianisms. A few examples are: (a) Diphthongs in BRP corresponding to pure long vowels in Indian pronunciation (e.g. 'cake' and 'poor' pronounced as 'ke:k' and 'pu:r', respectively); (b) The alveolar sounds 't' and 'd' of BRP pronounced as 'retroflex' (harsher sounds); (c) the dental fricatives θ and δ replaced by 'soft th' and 'soft d' (e.g. 'thick' pronounced as 'thik' rather than 'θik'); (d) 'v' and 'w' in BRP are both pronounced somewhat similar to 'w' in many parts of India and they are usually merged with 'b' in Bengali, Assamese and Oriya pronunciations of English (e.g. 'vine' and 'wine' are both pronounced somewhat similar to 'wine', whereas 'vet', 'wet' and 'bet' are all pronounced as 'bet' in Bengali speech).

Some words that are not found in Englishes elsewhere are used in Indian English. These are either innovations or translations of some native words or phrases. Examples here

would include cousin brother (for male cousin), prepone (advance or bring forward in time), and foreign-returned (returned from abroad).

There are also examples of Indianisms in grammar, such as the pluralization of non-count nouns (e.g. breads, foods, advices) and the use of the present progressive for the simple present (I am knowing).

English in Education

The status of English in India is different from its status in, say, a Western European country. In contrast to a country like Germany, where it is a foreign language, English is a second language in India, and, as such, it is widely used in the media, education, administration, non-localized business, etc. In the majority of cases, spoken and written English are learnt through formal education. Even for those who learn and use English as their first language at home, there will be constant exposure to one or more regional languages, as well as the local variety of English. While school textbooks are written in Standard English, students will also be continuously exposed to many varieties of Indian English outside of the classroom. Given this and the fact that spoken language instruction will always be greatly influenced by the regional flavour or variety used by the teacher, exposure to Standard English may be limited just to the grammar.

Though English was the medium of school and university education during the British regime, it is now mainly used as the medium of instruction in English-medium schools in the country. English-medium schools of varying standards (locally known as 'convent schools') exist in most cities and towns. Some of these schools insist that students only speak in English within the school premises. In other schools, English is taught as a subject within the curriculum. At university level, the usage of English becomes more intense. It is the medium of instruction and examination in all the prestigious institutes of technology, institutes of medical sciences, agricultural universities, and university departments of engineering and technology. It is also the favoured medium of instruction and examination at post-graduate level for many subjects in the majority of universities.

Newspapers

Both in terms of the number of periodicals and the numbers of copies printed, English newspapers are quite popular. For instance, according to information published in *India 1999 — A Reference Manual* (Publications Division, Govt. of India) the total number of newspaper copies for all languages circulated in 1997 stood at 105,708,191. Of these, a Hindi newspaper had the highest circulation of 1,292,277 copies followed by an English newspaper with a circulation of 1,243,603 copies. In the same year, a total of 41,705 newspa-

pers were published in various languages. Of these, 16,864 were in Hindi and 6,227 were in English. Urdu ranks next after English with a figure of 2,670. The *Press in India 2001* document published by the Registrar of Newspapers for India, New Delhi, gives the following circulation figures (in millions) for newspapers published in various languages within the country for the year 2000 — Hindi: 25.58, English: 7.85, Marathi: 4.48, Urdu: 3.16, Malayalam: 2.98, Gujarati: 2.81, Bengali: 2.46, Oriya: 2.06, Tamil: 1.74, Panjabi: 1.53, Kannada: 1.39.

The same document also shows that during the year 2000, the circulation of several local language newspapers fell, whereas the circulation of newspapers in Hindi, English, Marathi, Malayalam and Bengali increased. Circulations for Hindi newspapers and for English newspapers increased by 5% and by 4.7%, respectively.

Most of the major national newspapers are published in English and are popular in cities and towns. It is clear that English newspapers are maintaining circulation figures roughly similar to those of Hindi newspapers.

Radio and Television

The radio network known as All India Radio (AIR) is a major channel for radio broadcasts. It runs programmes in English, Hindi and other regional languages. Prime time slots are allotted for news in English and Hindi.

Until about a decade ago, Doordarshan, the television channel owned by the central government used to be the only channel available to Indians. It had, and still has, programmes in English including frequent news bulletins. The advent of satellite television and the availability of many channels, such as Star TV, Zee TV and a large number of local channels, have opened up the skies to entertainment and news. Scores of service providers (known as Cable TV Operators) provide many such channels through cable networks throughout many cities and towns and even in rural areas.

These channels broadcast many programmes in English and regional languages. Sports commentaries, which have wide audiences, are delivered in English, Hindi and in some regional languages. Newscasters, particularly on AIR and Doordarshan, try to maintain an accent close to British Received Pronunciation. Until about a decade ago, the diction of the newscasters on AIR was regarded as a model for pronunciation. However, the diction of newscasters and anchorpersons on some of the satellite channels is now closer to the regional varieties of English. CNN, BBC and some other international channels have proved to be very popular with urban audiences.

Computing, Internet and Telephony

India is now seen as a major centre for software development. A significant number of international software companies have set up branches in India. English is the main language used in computing and Indian software engineers are proficient in English. International software companies see this as a positive feature when recruiting Indian software engineers and setting up branches in India. The Internet is proving to be a popular medium of communication in India. Inexpensive Internet cafes have popped up on many corners



Newspapers (Hindi, English) and magazines in English published in India (courtesy of Asia Center Library, The Japan Foundation, Tokyo)

in cities and towns. As predicted elsewhere in the world, English has evolved as the major language of the Internet in India too. Although people try to communicate via the Internet using regional languages (often typed in with makeshift transliteration methods), English is still the popular language for Internet use.

The Internet is also providing Indians with a powerful medium for the offshore development of software. In contrast to the conventional offshore development of software, with programmes written in India under subcontracting, more recently, a 'processing' type of offshore operation, such as medical transcription has become very popular. In this process, for instance, a medical transcription agency in India receives oral dictations of medical prescriptions, surgery procedures, etc, sent either on recorded media or through the Internet as compressed sound files, which they would input and return. Some international organizations that need to respond to customers throughout the day and night have set up branches in India, with operators responding to questions in American English.

Administration

The Union Government has been trying hard to implement Hindi as the language of official communication. Several organizations that belong to the central government conduct what they call 'Hindi Week' to inculcate the use of Hindi among administrators. Various state governments also have been trying to establish the use of local languages in administration. However, educated Indians, especially in cities and towns, tend to use English language in their communications with administration.

Public Use and Attitudes

India is a multi-lingual and multi-ethnic country. Languages belonging to four different families are spoken in India. The language families are: Indo-Aryan (a branch of Indo-European), Dravidian, Tibeto-Burman and Austro-Asiatic.

In 1950 the states in the country were reorganized to roughly coincide with linguistic boundaries. Thus, for instance, Telugu is spoken by a majority of speakers in the redefined state of Andhra Pradesh. Eighteen languages were given recognition by the government. Each of the states has one or two of these languages designated as its official language(s). In rural areas, people are usually monolingual. In the urban areas, a good amount of bilingualism is encountered. In large cities, one comes across persons who even may not know the local language.

In the public sphere we find some differences in the usage of English. The popularity of using English in public places varies greatly around the country, with marked variations in

regions (southern India vs. northern India) and setting (rural vs. semi-urban and urban).

In the streets of a city like Hyderabad or Bangalore, for example, one may be able to approach a person of educated appearance and talk to him in English. The roman script is still the preferred medium for writing signboards and restaurant menus, etc. It is easier to find a railway timetable printed in the roman script than it is to find one printed in a regional script. Although the Department of Posts and Telegraphs of the Union Government encourages the dispatch of telegrams in Hindi language, a good number of them are still composed in English. In hotels and restaurants in cities and towns, one is able to converse in English at the reception, and to place an order in English at medium to large restaurants. In several southern Indian states, personnel at the counters of railway and bus stations, owners of small shops, drivers of taxis or autos (3-wheeled motorized vehicles), as well as many others, have sufficient command of spoken English for communication.

An Indian who knows English does not hesitate in speaking in that language with a foreigner (who is anticipated to know the language). For instance, an Indian dignitary who knows English would readily converse in English with a visiting foreigner or deliver a talk in English at an international forum. This can be contrasted with the medium that delegates or dignitaries from other countries use in similar circumstances. Except in a few areas, English-knowing Indians do not have antagonism towards English.

Summary

English language in its different variegations continues to thrive in India. It is a major medium of communication in technical and scientific education, governance, personal interaction among the educated, public information, broadcasting, news media etc. Education in the medium of English language is still valued. It is the main language used in the field of computing and internet-related enterprise. It is an essential tool of interaction between a foreigner and an Indian. India has been hospitable to English and each benefits from the other.

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Born in 1947 in the Telugu-speaking state of Andhra Pradesh, India. His schooling upto the 12th grade was in Telugu medium with English as a subject of study. His undergraduate education was in sciences, Sanskrit and English languages. Later he studied Sanskrit for two years at master's level at Andhra University followed by another two-years' study of general linguistics for another master's level course at Deccan College, Pune, India. He obtained the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in linguistics from the same institute. From 1970 till 1995 he was a member of the faculty of linguistics at Deccan College. In 1995 he left that Institute while he was a professor and Joint Director to join the Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. His main fields of interest are phonetics including speech synthesis and computational linguistics including script processing. He has experience of working on different languages of South Asia. He speaks and writes in Indian English.

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