

# The 'English Obsession' in Indian Education: Colonial Legacy or Modern Necessity?

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**Abstract**—This paper explores the "English Obsession" in Indian education, examining whether it is a colonial legacy, a modern necessity, or a complex blend of both. Historically, the introduction of English during the British colonial era was a strategic move to generate a class of English-speaking individuals, which marginalized vernacular languages and created a bilingual elite. However, in contemporary India, English has transformed into a gateway of opportunity. It is the dominant instructional language in Indian education and a significant factor in primary and secondary schooling, especially in private institutions. Parents and students are fixated on English-medium education, viewing it as a path to social mobility, better employment, and global participation. Proficiency in English is essential for accessing international higher education, securing jobs in multinational corporations, and obtaining global scholarships. While the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 promotes multilingualism and the preservation of regional languages, the overwhelming dominance of English often leads to the marginalization of mother tongues and a focus on rote learning over genuine comprehension. The study argues that while English is a practical requirement for global engagement, its dominance should be balanced with robust support for India's multilingual heritage to ensure equitable educational outcomes and cultural sustainability.

**Index Terms**—English obsession, colonial legacy, modern necessity, Indian education, multilingualism, language policy, social mobility, cultural sustainability, globalization, vernacular languages.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The role of language in India extends beyond mere communication; it serves as a powerful reservoir of identity, heritage, and authority. The increasing dominance of English in the Indian educational system has ignited a vigorous public and academic debate, frequently termed the "English Obsession". This Obsession raises a fundamental question. Is it merely

a legacy of colonial oppression, an inescapable necessity in today's globalized, knowledge-driven economy, or a complex blend of both? Historically, the introduction of English during the British colonial era was a strategic move designed to generate a class of English-speaking individuals, which decreased the use of regional languages and fostered a bilingual elite.

However, in contemporary India, English has fundamentally transformed into a gateway of opportunity. It is now the dominant medium of instruction in Indian education and a significant factor in primary and secondary schooling, particularly within private institutions. Parents and students are intensely focused on English-medium education, viewing it as a clear path to social mobility, better employment, and global participation. Proficiency in English is deemed essential for accessing international higher education, securing jobs in multinational corporations, and obtaining global scholarships. While the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 promotes multilingualism and the preservation of regional languages, the overwhelming dominance of English often results in the marginalization of mother tongues and a focus on rote learning over genuine comprehension. This paper argues that while English is a practical requirement for global engagement, its dominance must be balanced with robust support for India's multilingual heritage to ensure equitable educational outcomes and cultural sustainability. The study traces this historical trajectory, examines its current socio-cultural roots, analyzes the marginalization of regional languages, and critically evaluates current policy initiatives. The present paper provides an insight to-

- the historical background of English during the colonial era.
- examine the current role of English in Indian education.

- analyze the reasons for parental and student fixation on English-medium education.
- highlight how English proficiency provides access to privilege, employability, global participation, and opportunities for higher education and scholarships abroad.
- examine how English in India functions as both a colonial legacy and a modern necessity in the context of education and socio-economic development.

## II. THE COLONIAL LEGACY: HISTORY OF ENGLISH IN INDIAN EDUCATION

The foundation of English launch into the Indian education system is deeply rooted in the colonial era. The East India Company, which began its functioning in India in the early 17th century, initially had no formal policy on education. However, as the British presence grew, so did the need for a system of education that would serve their administrative and economic interests. The Charter Act of 1813 marked a significant turning point, as it allocated funds for the promotion of education in India, with a particular emphasis on English (Kumar, 2018). The Macaulay Minute of 1835 is often cited as a pivotal moment in the imposition of English.

Thomas Babington Macaulay, a British historian and politician, argued for the establishment of an English education system in India. He believed that English was the language of science, literature, and commerce, and that it would be more beneficial for Indians to learn English than their own languages (Macaulay, 1835). Macaulay's proposal was accepted, and English became the medium of instruction in Indian education and government services. The colonial education system was designed to make a class of Indians who were proficient in English and could serve as Bridge between the British rulers and the Indian population (Viswanathan, 1989).

This policy had far-reaching consequences, as it neglects the use of vernacular languages and the creation of a bilingual elite. The Indian education system became increasingly Anglicized, with English being the primary language of instruction in schools and colleges (Krishnamurti, 2003).

## III. THE PRESENT SCENARIO OF ENGLISH IN INDIAN EDUCATION

In contemporary India, English is no longer merely a subject it is the medium through which privilege, opportunity, and global access are mediated. Currently, English remains the prevailing language in the Indian education system. It serves as the main language of instruction in the majority of higher education institutions and is being utilized increasingly in primary and secondary education as well (Nair, 2011). The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 seeks to transform the education system by acknowledging the significance of English while also highlighting the necessity of encouraging multilingualism and safeguarding regional languages (NEP, 2020).

In practice, children are often introduced to English from the very beginning of schooling — sometimes as early as preschool or kindergarten. In many private schools, English is not only taught as a subject but also used as the instructional language from Grade 1 or even nursery levels. At such a young age, most children have not yet fully mastered their mother tongue or developed the conceptual ability to understand abstract meanings in a second language. As a result, they are taught to memorize English alphabets, rhymes, and words without fully comprehending their meanings. This practice emphasizes rote learning over understanding.

Private K–12 chains such as DPS, DAV, and international boards (CBSE, ICSE, IB) overwhelmingly operate in English. Even Kendriya Vidyalayas, run by the central government, prioritize English over Hindi or regional languages beyond the primary grades (Times of India 2023).

## IV. THE OBSESSION WITH ENGLISH IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN EDUCATION

In modern India, the fixation on English continues, fuelled by both students and parents. English is frequently regarded as a pathway to improved employment prospects, advanced education, and increased social mobility (LaDousa, 2014). Parents, especially from middle and upper-middle-class families, often choose Institution adopting English as the instructional language for their children, convinced that mastering English will provide them with an advantage in the globalized environment (Procter,

2015). Consequently, numerous schools, particularly in urban regions, have transitioned to English as the main language of instruction, frequently to the detriment of local languages (Mohanty, 2008).

The disappearance of local languages from educational frameworks has sparked concerns regarding cultural identity and linguistic diversity. Critics argue that the excessive focus on English is resulting in a standardization of education and a decline in linguistic and cultural heritage (Khubchandani, 1997). Supporting this concern, The Times of India reported that "the popularity of English-medium schools is resulting in a reduction in the usage of vernacular languages" (Times of India, 2020).

NCERT Director D. P. Saklani expressed those parents are still drawn to English-medium schools despite many of these institutions lacking qualified teachers, calling it "no less than suicide," since government schools now offer quality education. He further stated that the habit of memorizing English content has resulted in a loss of knowledge for children, distancing them from their roots and culture. "Parents are fixated on English-medium schools; they choose to enroll their kids in these institutions even when there are no qualified teachers or sufficient training. This amounts to nothing short of suicide, which is why the new National Education Policy emphasizes instruction in the mother tongue," Saklani emphasized. (Indian Express 2024).

#### V. ENGLISH AS A GATEWAY OF MODERN NECESSITY AND OPPORTUNITY

English plays a pivotal role as a gateway to opportunity in the Indian education system. As a lingua franca, English transcends regional and linguistic barriers, enabling access to higher education, employment, and global communication. Despite the concerns about the dominance of English, it is undeniable that proficiency in English is crucial in the modern world. English is the Universal business language, science, technology, and diplomacy (Crystal, 2003).

Research indicates that students educated in English-medium schools perform better in competitive examinations. Finding from a study in the Journal of Educational Psychology indicates that students with strong English proficiency scored higher in

standardized tests (Kapur & Kumar, 2018). Additionally, the Annual Education Report (ASER) 2022 reveals that students in English-instructional schools exhibit better reading and comprehension skills compared to those in regional language mediums (ASER Centre, 2022).

English is widely used as the instructional language in schools and universities across India. According to the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020; English is recognized as an essential language for higher education and research (Ministry of Education, 2020). A study by Kachru (2005) highlights that English-medium education enhances students' ability to comprehend complex subjects, particularly in science and technology. It is also the language of the internet, which has become an essential tool for education, communication, and information access (Graddol, 2006). In a globalized world, English Fluency is often seen as a prerequisite for success in various fields (Kachru, 2005).

#### VI. ENGLISH ACT AS A GLOBAL OPPORTUNITIES

- Access to Higher Education

Abroad Proficiency in English is a key requirement for Indian students seeking admission to foreign universities. According to The Times of India (2021), over 750,000 Indian students studied abroad in 2021, with English proficiency being a major factor in their success. A report by British Council (2020) states that Indian students constitute the second-largest group of international students in the UK, primarily due to their English language skills.

- Enhanced Employability

English proficiency significantly boosts employability in multinational corporations (MNCs) and global industries. A study by McKinsey & Company (2019) found that 70% of Indian professionals in IT and business process outsourcing (BPO) sectors attribute their career success to English language skills. Additionally, NASSCOM (2020) reports that English-speaking professionals earn 30-50% higher salaries than their non-English-speaking counterparts.

- Scholarship Opportunities

Renowned global scholarships, like the Rhodes, Chevening, and Fulbright scholarships, necessitate excellent English language proficiency, in both

writing and speaking, for the application process and ongoing academic endeavours (The Hindu, 2020).

- Opportunity of Social Mobility and National Integration

"Hindi is Our Ground, English is Our Sky: Education, Language, and Social Class in Contemporary India." This ethnographic work explores how middle-class families, including those from historically disadvantaged groups, see English-medium education as a crucial strategy for upward mobility. It allows their children to compete on a more level playing field with the urban elite. Popular media narratives, such as those covered by The Indian Express, often feature stories of students from small towns and villages who cracked national-level competitive exams like UPSC (civil services) or JEE (engineering).

#### VII. ENGLISH IN INDIA REPRESENTS BOTH A COLONIAL LEGACY AND A MODERN NECESSITY?

On the basis of above facts and data it could be said that, English in India represents both a colonial legacy and a modern necessity. It entered the Indian education system during the colonial period as a tool of administration and control, often at the cost of indigenous languages. This historical background cannot be ignored, as it shaped a hierarchy where English was associated with power and privilege. However, in the modern era, English has transformed into a gateway of opportunity. It connects India to the global community, provides access to higher education and research, and opens doors to employment in multinational companies. While its colonial roots remind us of cultural loss, its present role as a medium of progress and global engagement makes it indispensable. Therefore, the challenge lies in striking a balance valuing English as a modern necessity while also protecting and promoting our rich vernacular heritage.

#### VIII. CONCLUSION

The role of English in Indian education cannot be understood in isolation it is both a reminder of colonial imposition and a vital necessity in today's globalized world. Historically, English was introduced to serve colonial interests, creating a class divide and undermining indigenous languages. Yet, over time, it has evolved into a powerful tool that offers access to

higher education, technology, international business, and social mobility. Parents and students continue to view English as a passport to success, even though this obsession often sidelines mother tongues and cultural identity. Therefore, the path forward lies in adopting a balanced approach: while English must be embraced as a modern necessity, equal importance should be given to preserving and promoting India's vernacular languages.

This dual commitment will ensure that India benefits from global opportunities without losing the richness of its linguistic and cultural heritage. The English language in India represents both a colonial burden and a modern tool. Rather than viewing this as a contradiction, we should see it as an opportunity to forge a unique path that honors our linguistic heritage while embracing global connectivity. As Shashi Tharoor eloquently puts it in "An Era of Darkness" (2016), "English has become an Indian language, used and transformed by Indians for Indian purposes." The key lies not in rejecting English or embracing it wholesale, but in finding a balanced approach that allows India to maintain its linguistic diversity while leveraging English for global engagement. This nuanced understanding allows us to move beyond the binary of colonial legacy versus modern necessity, towards a more complex and productive relationship with the language.

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