



## USING LANGUAGE AS A TOOL TO SERVE POLITICAL INTERESTS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE INTRODUCTION OF ENGLISH BY THE BRITISH IN INDIA - AN APPRAISAL

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### ABSTRACT

*By the mid-eighteenth century A.D., the Colonial Government in India thought it prudent to introduce and popularize English among the natives to produce cheap and docile educated workforce locally to work as writers in the numerous establishments of the East India Company. Besides, it also aimed at producing experts, who along with English are also conversant with one or more Indian languages to be employed as interpreters and translators in various courts to help the British judges to dispense justice. Undoubtedly, the exercise helped the rulers for quite some time, but in the long run it proved counter productive, as it enabled the Indians to take inspiration from the liberal British institutions, enabling them to fight for their own justice. It eventually led them to get organized and fight for the liberation of the country from the British rule, heralding the dawn of the national movement in India. It is against this backdrop that the present paper seeks to explore the significance of the introduction of English in India.*

**Keywords:** Colonial Government, East India Company, Language, English, Justice, etc.

### INTRODUCTION

Language is by far the most powerful means of communication, which not only reflects the traits of the personality of an individual but also the society as a whole. However, it is not the only means of communication, as Balasubramanian opines, the communication is also possible without the use of language. Exemplifying the fact, he adds that a dog barks and informs its master of the approach of a stranger, a child cries and informs its mother that it is hungry, thirsty or uncomfortable and in both the cases the communication does take place, but no language is used (Balasubramanian, 2005: 2). Nonetheless, unlike birds, beasts and infants who convey their feelings through sounds and gestures only, human beings express

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themselves mostly by words, which constitute language, wherefore, the use of language is the major factor which seeks to distinguish man from the animal. The mode of expression through words can be technically called as the linguistic communication, which also “has a very important social purpose” (Balasubramanian, 2005: 1). In fact, it is language that gives rise to the society, which in turn helps to reshape and remodel it according to the need of the time. Thus, both language and society are interdependent and interrelated as flesh and blood, as Jiang avers, “Language and culture makes a living organism; language is flesh, and culture is blood. Without culture, language would be dead; without language, culture would have no shape.” (Jiang, 2000: 328) Besides, language serves as one of the most effective tools to preserve culture and civilization, and to secure national integrity and solidarity. Similarly, language is also an effective weapon for the belligerent communities to launch a cultural invasion so as to extend their sway over the less important communities. Accordingly, it was in the wake of the Industrial Revolution that the European countries tried to impose their own language upon the backward communities of the world to enslave them economically and it was, in fact, in this process that in the middle of the eighteenth century the British introduced English in India. However, before delving deeper into in the matter, it is imperative to understand what the language is all about.

The term language has been defined variously by the scholars, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “the earliest sense of language was that of the whole body of words and of the method of combination of words used by a nation, people, or race”, but in a generalized sense it means “words and the methods of combining them for the expression of thought” (Murray et al., 1933). Emphasizing upon the significance of language as the means of expression Sweet opines that “Language is the expression of ideas by means of speech-sounds combined into words. Words are combined into sentences, this combination answering to that of ideas into thoughts.” (Sweet, 1975) Similarly, Edward Sapir terms language as “a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols” (Sapir, 1939: 8). As to how language reflects the personality of a man, Ben Jonson says that “Language most shows a man, speak that I may see thee.” (“Ben Jonson Quotes” *Quotes.net.*) Defining the term more candidly Jespersen says that language is a purposeful activity and is “a set of human habits, the purpose of which is to give expression to thoughts and feelings; and specially to impart them to others” (cf. Tiwari, 2008:49) Nicholas Hans treats language in yet broader a sense and says that it is “one of the symbols of a nation. It expresses the mental character of the people who speak it and reflects the features of their natural surroundings.” (Hans, 1958: 40) Robins et al define language as “a system of conventional spoken, manual, or written symbols by means of which human beings, as members of a social group and participants in its culture, express themselves. The functions of language include communication, the expression of identity, play, imaginative expression, and emotional release (Robins et al., January 05, 2018), while according to Bloomfield “each community is formed by the activity



of language” (cf. Hockett, 1970: 268). Obviously, language reflects the personality of not only an individual but also the society and the nation at large, through which one can give vent to one’s thoughts and emotions. Also it is the kind and quality of language an individual uses that determines his status in the society and enables him to be classed as good or bad. Therefore, a teacher who has good command over the language, even if not so well equipped in the knowledge of the subject, can impress his students more than the one better informed in the subject but ill-equipped in expression. Not only a teacher but any speaker for that matter who has a good command over the language can captivate his audience at the very first instance. Thus, language is an effective tool to study the socio-cultural aspects and behaviour of a community and is a “perfect symbolic system,” capable of “handling all references and meanings” of a given culture. (Sapir, 1949: 10-12) It is also the medium for knowing a community and is an axle on which the wheel of culture rotates, as Leonard Bloomfield says:

*Each community is formed by activity of language; speech utterances give us the most direct insight into its working and play a part in everything that is done. In order to observe a human group, we must understand its speech. If we want to probe deeper into the ways of the community and their historical origin; we must possess, to begin with, a systematic description of its language. In order to know anything about mankind we must study in this way a varied set of communities. What little we know about man has come from a study of this kind. Without such knowledge we are slaves in this matter, to rationalization, prejudice and superstition. (Hockett, 1970: 268)*

In the above backdrop, it is interesting to unfold the background history of the introduction of English language in India, which reveals that subsequent to the European Renaissance, the European adventurers particularly those from the coastal countries like Portugal and Spain embarked upon a series of sea-voyages to unknown destinations to locate new habitable lands. It was in this process that the sailors like Columbus and Vasco de Gama were able to reach America and India respectively. It is from then onwards that the merchants of the above countries also began to pour into the above regions and sometimes also making their permanent settlements there, accordingly the Portuguese were able to settle in Goa and the Spaniards in Bombay, both situated on the western coast of India. Naturally, thereafter the stories of the affluence of India began to take rounds across the Europe faster than ever, which encouraged the French and the British also to enter the fray. The industrial developments that took place in Europe in the wake of the Industrial Revolution provided huge impetus to these countries to come to India in search of new markets, where they could sell their finished goods and procure raw material for their industrial units at home. However, it also triggered a strong rivalry among these people, particularly the French and the British, in which the British represented by the East India Company eventually came out victorious. In fact, as a result of the defeat of the French in India and the inherent weakness of the local



rulers, the East India Company gained a huge political mileage and its character was drastically altered, from traders to a political force to reckon with. Thus, taking advantage of the weaknesses of the local rulers, the East India Company was soon able to make their permanent settlements in Calcutta, Madras and Bombay. Further, the internal bickering and the court conspiracies by the over-ambitious chieftains of the Nawab of Bengal led the British to gain an easy victory in the mock-fight of Plassey (1757), where verily no shot was fired. However, as a result of it the Company was able to capture political ascendancy in Bengal, placing large number of Indian natives, both Muslims and Hindus under their command. In this backdrop, to consolidate the British power in India the colonial government thought it necessary to spread English education in the newly acquired colonies, projecting it as a goodwill gesture to civilize the people there; while their hidden agenda was to create a loyal, docile and literate lot, which while subscribing to the English language and ways faithfully, could also work as writers and interpreters under the colonial government. To run the administration effectively, now the need was earnestly felt that there ought to be greater interaction between the local masses and the East India Company. At this juncture, the British colonial government also needed the services of the experts to work as interpreters to translate the oriental language into English and the vice versa, both written and spoken. It was therefore thought imperative to teach English to the Indians selected from both the major communities, Hindus and Muslims, who were well versed in one or more oriental languages, Sanskrit or Persian, so that they could interpret the respective laws before the British judges to help them deliver justice to the Indians. Nevertheless, under this scheme the key posts of the administration were still to be assigned to the English men and only the subordinate posts were to be filled by the educated Indians.

However, the expansion of English was done in phases rather than en *block*, as at the outset it was deemed worthwhile to teach it to the Indian youths from both the major communities along with some oriental language of their choice and convenience, based on their family backgrounds. Accordingly, in 1781 Governor General Warren Hastings established the Calcutta Madarasa to prepare Mohammedan youths to hold responsible and lucrative offices in the state. The subjects taught in the Madarasas were as varied as to include theology, logic, rhetoric, grammar, law, natural philosophy, astronomy, geometry and arithmetic. On the same pattern, in 1792 he also started Sanskrit Schools at Benares to prepare Hindus for the preservation of the traditional law, literature and religion of the nation as also for supplying qualified assistants to the European judges. Meanwhile, Sir William Jones, an Indologist, with the approval of the Governor General established the Bengal Asiatic Society in 1785 to promote historical researches through English medium. Interestingly, Sir William Jones himself learnt the Indian languages, particularly Sanskrit and even translated some important works of Kalidasa into English, thereby generating an interest in the British intelligentsia towards the vast literary heritage of India. A few years later Charles Grant, one of the directors of the company, submitted a memorandum asking the company to make



arrangements for imparting the knowledge of English language to Indians so that it could serve for them as a key to new world ideas. In 1811 Governor General Lord Minto regretted the neglect of literature and science in India and emphasized upon the need of establishing more colleges for the purpose. As a result of this a Minute was issued consisting of many valuable suggestions for the improvement of education in India. Accordingly, in 1813 the Charter Act was passed, under which a sum not less than of one hundred thousand rupees each year was allotted to promote education among the Indian masses, allowing them to open academic institutions anywhere anytime for the revival and improvement of literature as also the promotion of knowledge of sciences among the inhabitants of the British territories in India. However, the amount allocated as such could not be spent for want of a decision about its proper investment and the same got accumulated for more than two decades. Meanwhile, some Indian social zealots like Raja Ram Mohan Roy also came forward and formed an association to see the establishment of an institution where the Hindus could receive instruction in European languages and sciences, as a result of which the Hindu College, Calcutta was founded in 1817. Later, Mount Stuart Elphinstone, a Scottish statesman and historian was appointed as the Governor of Bombay, who in his Minute of 1823 urged for the establishment of schools for teaching English and European sciences. He proposed to establish a school at Bombay where English might be taught 'classically' and where instructions on history, geography and science might be given in English. As a result, the famous Elphinstone College of Bombay came into being in 1834, the purpose of which was to train "a class of persons qualified by their intelligence and morality for their employment in the civil administration of India." (Zaheer, 1996: 202 ff)

However, with the increasing demand of English the study of Sanskrit and Arabic went on the back foot, giving rise to a controversy between the Orientalists and the Anglicists. Meanwhile, John Adam, who succeeded Lord Hastings for the time being, appointed a Committee of Public Instruction in 1823 to find out the best way for the utilization of the grant sanctioned for the promotion of education lying accumulated for years. The committee was steeply divided between the above two rival groups, in which the Orientalists were led by Dr. Wilson and the Anglicists by Macaulay. Eventually the argument of Macaulay that "The Government ought to employ its public funds in teaching what is worth knowing... English is better worth knowing than Arabic or Sanskrit for a single sheet of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia" and that "the Government cannot reasonably and decently bribe men to waste their youth in learning how they are to purify themselves after touching an ass or what text of the Vedas they are to repeat to expiate the crime of killing the goat. (Macaulay, 2nd February 1835) However, the controversy having persisted for more than a decade (1823-1835), eventually the viewpoint of Macaulay found favour with Governor General Lord Bentinck who appointed him the president of the Committee of Public Instruction. It was following this that Macaulay succeeded in preparing a resolution on 7<sup>th</sup> March 1835, popularly known as Macaulay's Minute, which forcefully



advocated the promotion of European literature and science amongst the natives. Visualizing the idea behind it, Sir John Coming states:

*(That) the boys thus taught would, when they grew up, serve as interpreters of the new knowledge to the people at large and thus in time India would become occidentalized. The study of the Indian classics should not be positively discouraged, but was a minor and comparatively unimportant matter. The great purpose of Macaulay and his supporters was to establish the English language and literature at Calcutta in the predominant position which the Greek and Latin classics enjoyed at Oxford and Cambridge. In this way, they expected (that) a class of men would arise, (which is) Indian in blood and colour, but English in ideas and culture” (Coming, 1968: 25-26).*

Governor General Lord William Bentinck accepted the Macaulay proposal in toto, as he found it expedient for the smooth running of the administration. However, the proposal invited strong criticism from those who did not reconcile with the idea that the native wisdom should in anyway be accorded a shabby deal, alleging:

*Though Lord Macaulay’s Minutes were a masterpiece of English literary style, yet they exhibited a colossal ignorance of oriental culture and learning. The issue between the Orientalists and the Anglicists was, however, decided not by merit but by practical considerations, which were before the Governor General at the time. The production of Indians who were to be Indians in blood and skin but English in language and customs to suit adequately and appropriately the needs of the company was the primary concern of the British. And this need it beautifully met (Kapoor, 1973: 605).*

However, the authors of the resolution and the Governor General in office who accepted it failed to appreciate that in the long run the promotion of English among the natives might prove counter productive and might not augur well with the over all health of the British Empire in India. For, it was as a result of this that an anti inner-current was generated for the revival of the old glory of the Indian culture and philosophy and the western scholars like Sir William Jones, Marshall, Maxmuller, and a host of others, conducted studies on Vedas, Upanishads, Epics and other classical literature of India, exposing the ancient Indian wisdom. Meanwhile, Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1774-1833), a Bengali intellectual well versed in Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic, as well as English took up the cause of the eradication of social and religious evils rampant in the Indian society. In 1828 he founded a socio-religious institution called the Brahma Samaj to bring about an awakening in the confused Hindus, exhorting them to adopt modern ways, while remaining loyal to their own roots. Dwarkanath Tagore, the grandfather of Rabindranath, was also closely associated with the activities of Brahma



Samaj and after the death of Raja Ram Mohan Roy even assumed the responsibility of leading it. However, it was under the stewardship of his son Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905) that the Brahmo Samaj was established on a firm footing, as he stemmed the tide of conversion by exposing the knowledge of the Vedas and the Upanishads to the masses. Consequently, many more Bengali intellectuals like Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-1831), Akshay Kumar Datta (1820-1826), Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar (1820-91), Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838-94), Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), Sharat Chandra Chatterji (1876-1938), Dina Bandhu Mitra (1829-1873) and a host of others also came forward with a reformist's zeal to save the Indian society from being assailed by the British culture. Commenting on the long list of such enlightened personages, associated with the Bengal Renaissance, R.C. Dutt is quoted to have remarked, "Nowhere in the annals of Bengali literature are so many and so bright names found crowded together in the limited space of one century..." (cf. Sengupta, 2008: 211-12)

Besides, the Christian Missionaries also contributed immensely to the growth of English in India, thereby supplementing the efforts of the government in this direction, who to begin with opened two charity schools in Madras as early as in 1717, followed by similar institutions being opened in due course in other parts of the country. How meticulous the Missionaries were in their endeavour is vouched for by the fact that they even opened an institution to train the teachers for the purpose. However, their effort to launch vigorous campaign to spread western education in the country was directed by the fact that it would serve as an effective tool to spread the message of the Lord among the natives. The Missionaries also founded institutions to impart higher education in western style, in the process of which Wilson College, Bombay; Christian College, Madras; St. John's College, Agra were established. Similar institutions were also established in Masaulipattam and Nagpur, wherein holding of the Bible classes was made compulsory. However, whatever selfish the motive of the Missionaries was, their contribution to the growth of English in India was great. However, the promotion of English among the natives by the over-enthusiasm of the European Christian Missionaries, who also tempted the Indians to join their faith, accelerated the process of conversion of Bengali Hindus to Christianity. In this regard, the examples of Lalbihari De, Kalicharan Banerji, Krishnamohan Banerji, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Govin Chandra Dutt, the father of poetess Aru Dutt and Toru Dutt, and a host of others, can be cited, who embraced Christianity (Chandran, 2014). But despite this, the English education undoubtedly "did much good to the Indians, because it completely revolutionized their minds. It extremely influenced their intellectual growth and sufficiently helped them in the consolidation of their national opinion" (Kapoor, 1973: 606).

Thus, in the long run the introduction of English proved disastrous to the British rule in India, but it is not fair to hold anybody of those, who helped introduce it, responsible for its anti-Raj ramifications, as Kapoor remarks, "to accredit William Bentinck or Macaulay with all that



subsequently flowed from English language and about which they never knew anything is hardly justifiable. William Bentinck was in particular moved by the exigencies of the company and could hardly predict at this stage the boons that the English language was ultimately to confer on the people of India” (Kapoor, 1973: 606). At the same time, it is also wrong to presume that those like Macaulay were totally oblivious of its negative consequences on the British Empire. In this context Macaulay’s speech in the House of Commons is worthy to note, wherein he apprehended that Indians would soon outmatch the British in literary scholarship, alleging:

*Consider too, Sir, how rapidly the public mind of India is advancing, how much attention is already paid by the higher classes of the natives to those intellectual pursuits on the cultivation of which the superiority of European race principally depends. Surely, in such circumstances from motives of selfish policy, if from no higher motive, we ought to fill the magistracies of our Eastern Empire with the men who may do honour to our country, with men who may represent the best part of the English nation (Devy, 1995:50).*

Nevertheless, under Lord Hardinge the cause of western education through English was further strengthened, who passed a resolution in 1844, forbidding those, who did not possess the knowledge of English from entering the government service. Lord Auckland even earlier had resolved that “I would make it my principal aim to communicate through the means of English language a complete education in European literature, philosophy and science to the greatest number of students who may be ready to accept it” (Kapoor, 1973:607). As a result, English was soon spread throughout the nook and corner of the country and being the language of the victors it also became very popular. Besides, the government also took care of the vernaculars in the country and appointed a parliamentary committee to suggest measures to ensure that while popularizing English vernacular languages were not neglected. It was on the recommendation of this committee that Sir Charles Wood, the then president of the Board of Control, drafted a scheme of education and dispatched the same to Court of Directors for consideration. This dispatch, popularly known as Wood’s Dispatch (1854), is described as the “Magna Charta of pre-independence education in India” (Maheshwari & Maheshwari, January 22, 2014) As per the arrangements made under this document, universities on the model of the London University were established at Calcutta and Bombay with adequate provision of establishing in due course such universities at some other places like Madras, Allahabad, etc.. Besides universities, colleges and schools were also established to widen the scope of the percolation of English in the remote corners of the country. Though the Wood’s Dispatch is regarded as a landmark in the history of education in India, it suffered from some inherent weaknesses, namely:





*(It) hardly stands the test of reason ... and is also incomplete in many respects. For instance, it laid down no solid scheme to run the schools as contemplated by the scheme. Another flaw in the scheme was that it made the universities as mere examining bodies and not the teaching bodies. The native language as such could not receive due encouragement. Even private enterprise did not stand bright prospects for the future. The Dispatch was also incomplete because most of its recommendations were not implemented by the government (Kapoor, 1973: 608-609).*

Nevertheless, a rapid expansion in the field of higher education took place between 1854 and 1882, during which, besides the establishment of universities at the important headquarters, Colleges, High Schools and Middle Schools with English as medium of instruction were established throughout the country, though there still remained a lot to be done for the betterment of education in the country. Working in that direction Lord Ripon appointed an Education Commission in 1882, headed by W.W. Hunter “to enquire into the manner in which the effect had been given to the principles of the Dispatch of 1854 and to suggest such measures as it may think desirable in order to the further carrying out of the policies laid down therein” (Kapoor, 1973: 609). The chief object of the Commission was to find out measures for the expansion and improvement of the elementary education hitherto neglected by the British government. The recommendations of the Hunter Commission indeed constitute a very significant document prepared by the British government for the spread of education in India. The success of the recommendation can be gauged by the fact that between 1886 and 1891 the number of college students rose from 11201 to 23009, secondary students from 429093 to 633728. Expenditure on education also went up from Rs. 132.82 hundred thousand in 1885 to 1770.04 in 1901. Further, at the time of Lord Curzon, Universities Act of 1904 was passed through which the government sought to extend its power on the functioning of the universities with the result that “practically nothing was henceforth to be done without the approval of the government” (Kapoor, 1973: 611).

Thus, the British government took calculated steps from time to time to ensure the growth of English in India, as per which universities, colleges including technical and medical colleges, and schools were established across the country, to which the Missionaries and private entrepreneurs also made significant contributions. As a result, English became the main language of the intelligentsia of the country, wherefore the Indians were also able to qualify even the highest civil service of the country and to occupy important administrative positions under the British government at par with the British officers. Besides, the Indians were also able to make useful contributions to the growth of English literature, in which the contribution of the Bengali intelligentsia was superb. However, the introduction and expansion of English had far wide repercussions on the British Empire, as it among others paved the way for the growth of nationalism in India. Accordingly, English educated Indians



like Raja Ram Mohan, Vivekananda, Gokhale, Dadabhai Naroji, Feroz Shah Mehta, Surendra Nath Banerjee, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and a host of others came forward and led the social, religious and political movements in India, contributing their bits to the freedom movement and eventually succeeded in driving the British out of India. (For more details vide Anand, *History Discussion*)

To sum up, the British in their heyday arrogance thought that English was superior to all other world languages, particularly those spoken by their foreign subjects and that it is the Whiteman's burden to civilize them by imparting the knowledge of English. But while doing so they failed to appreciate that no language is inferior to the other, is inadequate as a means of communication and is too archaic and tough to learn easily, and that all languages being governed by different signs and symbols and rules of grammar and phonetics have their own peculiarities. Nevertheless, the introduction and promotion of English by the colonial government among the Indian natives was not actuated by the motive of civilizing the people there, but by the political, administrative and economic exigencies of the government, which in due course though eventually turned out to be one of the most powerful catalysts of the Indian National Movement. In fact, being the language of the ruling class English became very popular among the natives, particularly those aspiring for a position in the British administration. It also became the status symbol and those well-off made it a point to educate their children abroad thereby providing them the opportunity to learn the system and the institutions of the British. It eventually inculcated the sense of patriotism in these Indians, who coming back home championed the cause of the freedom of the country and fought against the mighty British Empire using their own weapon against them. Thus, English, which was introduced by the Colonial Government as a political tool to serve their sectarian purposes, became an effective medium for the Indians not only to get entry into the public services, but it also opened the floodgate of knowledge to them to get acquainted with the liberal and democratic ideas of the west. Thus, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the idea of independence and nationalism that swept across the country was the outcome of the spread of English education in the country and that while introducing English the British conveniently ignored that it would hugely embarrass their position and would eventually contribute to their exit from India.

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