

Research Article

English in India: From Borrowed Tongue to Native Voice

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A B S T R A C T

The history of the English language in India is a complex and fascinating journey, marked by its transition from an imposed colonial tool to a multifaceted and deeply rooted native voice. This article traces this evolution, arguing that English in India has transcended its origins as a “borrowed tongue” to become a “native voice”, a powerful medium for cultural expression, national identity, and social mobility. Initially introduced by the British for administrative and educational purposes, English was a symbol of power and a marker of a select elite. However, over the decades, it has been indigenised, appropriated, and transformed by millions of Indians, giving rise to distinct Indian Englishes, each with its own unique phonology, grammar, and vocabulary. This transformation is not merely linguistic; it is a profound act of cultural reclamation. This article explores how Indian writers, filmmakers, and thinkers have used English to articulate postcolonial experiences, challenge colonial narratives, and represent the rich diversity of a multilingual nation. It examines the socio-economic and cultural factors that have solidified English’s position as a crucial lingua franca and a language of aspiration in contemporary India. This article posits that the “nativisation” of English is a testament to the resilience and creative genius of the Indian people, who have moulded a foreign language to express their unique cultural realities and global aspirations.

Keywords: Indian English, Postcolonial Literature, Linguistic Nativization, Code-Switching, Lingua Franca, Cultural Hybridity, English Language Education, Indian Diaspora, Linguistic Politics, English In India

Introduction

The English language arrived on the Indian subcontinent as an instrument of empire, a means to govern, educate, and control. Its history in India, beginning with the East India Company and formalised by Thomas Macaulay’s Minute on Indian Education in 1835, was intended to create a class of Indians “Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.” Yet, over the course of nearly two centuries, this colonial legacy has undergone a

remarkable and unforeseen transformation. English in India today is no longer a mere borrowed tongue but a vibrant, living language with a distinct “native voice”. This article will explore this journey, from its utilitarian beginnings to its current status as a language of creative expression and national identity. It will argue that this evolution is not simply a passive process but an active, creative act of linguistic appropriation and cultural indigenisation. This process of nativisation has allowed English to become a repository of Indian experiences, a bridge between a

pre-colonial past and a postcolonial future. This article will examine the various stages and dimensions of this transformation, from the early writings of pioneers to the diverse forms of English spoken and written across the country today, ultimately demonstrating how a language that once symbolised oppression has been reclaimed and made uniquely Indian.

- **The Colonial Imposition and Early Indigenization:** The introduction of English into India was a deliberate political and ideological project, most famously articulated in Thomas Macaulay's 1835 "Minute on Indian Education". Macaulay's vision was not to empower the masses but to cultivate a class of educated Indians who would act as cultural and administrative intermediaries between the British rulers and the vast Indian populace. This top-down imposition meant that for many decades, English remained a symbol of elite status, confined to the corridors of power, bureaucracy, and a few exclusive educational institutions. It was, for all intents and purposes, a language of the coloniser, a tool of social and intellectual control. However, even in these early stages, the process of indigenisation began almost immediately. Indians who adopted the language did not simply replicate it; they adapted it to their own cultural and linguistic contexts. They found ways to express Indian social realities, concepts, and relationships that had no direct equivalent in English. This subtle and often subconscious process of appropriation laid the groundwork for the more profound transformations that would follow, as English began to be bent to the will of a new people. The very act of learning and using the language, even for pragmatic reasons, was a form of silent subversion. It was the first step in a long journey of linguistic reclamation. To quote Gauri Viswanathan, -----

*"The English language, imposed by the colonial administration, was meant to create a new class of intermediaries, but it also, ironically, provided the very tools for Indians to articulate their resistance and assert their identity."*¹

- **The Role of Indian Writers: Articulating the National Spirit:** With the rise of Indian nationalism and the independence movement, English found a new, more powerful purpose in the hands of Indian writers. Pioneers like Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, and Raja Rao, often referred to as the "big three", took the "borrowed tongue" and forged it into a powerful instrument for expressing the national spirit and the complex tapestry of Indian life. They moved beyond mere mimicry of British literary forms and began to infuse their work with local idioms, cultural nuances, and philosophical depth. R.K. Narayan, for example,

created the fictional town of Malgudi, a microcosm of Indian life, using a simple, unadorned English prose that felt distinctly Indian. His language was not the florid, high-minded English of the coloniser but a straightforward, intimate voice that captured the rhythms of everyday life. Similarly, Raja Rao in *Kanthapura* and *The Serpent and the Rope* pushed the boundaries of English to accommodate ancient Indian narrative structures and metaphysical concepts. These writers demonstrated that English could be a vehicle for authentic Indian expression, allowing them to explore themes of identity, tradition, and postcolonial realities on their own terms. Through their literary genius, English began its transformation from a foreign language into a legitimate and essential part of the Indian literary landscape. To quote Meenakshi Mukherjee, ----

*"R. K. Narayan's English, for instance, is not the English of Oxford or Cambridge, but a simple, elegant prose that is subtly inflected with the rhythms and cadences of his native Tamil, giving his characters and stories a uniquely authentic Indian flavour."*²

- **English as a Lingua Franca and a Language of Unity:** After India gained independence in 1947, the question of a national language became a contentious issue. With hundreds of languages and dialects, no single Indian language could be universally accepted without causing significant friction. Hindi was designated the official language, but English was retained as an "associate" official language for a transitional period. This temporary arrangement has, in effect, become permanent, as English proved to be an indispensable tool for national unity and administration. It serves as a crucial lingua franca, allowing people from different states with different mother tongues to communicate effectively in government, business, and education. A doctor from Kerala and a scientist from West Bengal can share ideas and collaborate using English, which provides a neutral common ground. Furthermore, the Indian Constitution, legal system, and higher education are all predominantly conducted in English, solidifying its institutional authority. This pragmatic acceptance of English as a necessary tool for national functioning has been a key factor in its entrenchment. It has moved beyond a symbol of colonial power to become a practical language of convenience and cohesion, binding a linguistically diverse nation together. To quote Braj B. Kachru, -----

"English in India has emerged as a crucial link language, bridging the vast linguistic gaps between states and communities. It provides a common platform for political discourse, administrative functioning, and intellectual

exchange, making it indispensable for national cohesion.”³

- **The Phenomenon of Code-Switching and Code-Mixing:** A powerful indicator of English’s nativisation in India is the widespread phenomenon of code-switching and code-mixing. This involves the effortless and often unconscious blending of English words, phrases, and even entire sentences with Indian languages like Hindi, Tamil, or Bengali. This practice, often derided by purists as a sign of linguistic corruption, is, in fact, a hallmark of a language that has been fully internalized and made a part of a speaker’s linguistic repertoire. The “Hinglish” spoken in cities and the “Tamlish” heard in Chennai are not signs of poor English but of a rich, creative, and bilingual linguistic identity. For example, a speaker might say, “Let’s go for a movie, but I have to finish this kaam first,” or “This is my bhai.” These instances are not random; they are governed by specific social and communicative rules. This blending reflects a hybrid culture where the speakers are constantly navigating between different linguistic worlds. It demonstrates that English is no longer a separate, isolated language but has been woven into the very fabric of daily communication. The result is a dynamic, living language that mirrors the complex, multilingual reality of contemporary India, and it is a powerful statement of linguistic ownership. To quote S. N. Sridhar, -----

“Code-switching between English and Indian languages is not a sign of linguistic deficiency but a pragmatic and sociolinguistically meaningful strategy that reflects a speaker’s bicultural identity and social relationships.”⁴

- **The Evolution of Indian English and its Distinctive Features:** English in India has not only been adopted but has also been systematically transformed, developing its own unique features that distinguish it from British or American English. This process, known as linguistic nativisation, has created a legitimate and vibrant variety called Indian English. This is evident in its distinct phonology, where sounds from Indian languages are carried over into English pronunciation. The most noticeable features, however, are lexical and syntactic. Many words have been borrowed or coined to express uniquely Indian concepts, such as ‘chai’ (tea), ‘dhaba’ (roadside eatery), or ‘jugaad’ (a clever improvisation). English vocabulary has also been expanded with neologisms like “prepone” (the opposite of postpone), “do the needful” (do what is required), and “co-brother” (your wife’s sister’s husband). Syntactically, Indian English often follows the sentence structure of Indian languages, such as dropping articles or using a different word order. These features are not errors but a natural evolution of a language in

a new cultural and linguistic environment. They are the linguistic fingerprints of India on a language that once belonged to another country. Indian English is a testament to the creative genius of the speakers who have made it their own. To quote Rajend Mesthrie,

“Indian English is a legitimate and distinct variety of the English language, characterized by its own set of lexical innovations, syntactic preferences, and prosodic features, which have evolved in response to a unique set of sociocultural and communicative needs.”⁵

- **English as a Language of Aspiration and Social Mobility:** In post-independence India, English has solidified its position not just as a language of the elite but as a powerful tool for social and economic mobility. While it was once a barrier to entry, it is now widely seen as a key that unlocks doors to better jobs, higher education, and a more prosperous life. This has led to a massive, nationwide demand for English language education, particularly from families in rural and semi-urban areas who see it as a means to break the cycle of poverty and social stagnation. Parents often make enormous sacrifices to send their children to English-medium schools, even if it is a financial strain, because they believe it is the only way to secure a future for them. This shift in perception from a language of the oppressor to a language of opportunity is profound. English proficiency is a prerequisite for many jobs in the burgeoning IT, BPO, and service sectors, which have become major economic drivers. It is the language of the internet, global commerce, and international collaboration. This widespread desire to master the language demonstrates its deep integration into the social psyche of India, making it a language of aspiration for millions of people across all social strata. To quote Alok Rai, -----

“English has become the language of opportunity in India. It is no longer a symbol of colonial rule but a passport to a better life, a means to break free from the constraints of class and caste, and a key to accessing the globalized world.”⁶

- **English in Indian Popular Culture: Bollywood and Beyond:** The nativisation of English is also vividly apparent in Indian popular culture, where it has moved beyond the confines of intellectual discourse and permeated the very fabric of entertainment. Bollywood, for instance, has long used English words, phrases, and song lyrics to add a modern, cosmopolitan flavour to its films. Actors effortlessly switch between Hindi and English, reflecting the bilingual nature of urban Indian society. This is not seen as an unnatural or foreign intrusion but as a creative and authentic representation

of life. Similarly, in the music industry, many Indian pop and rock bands write lyrics in English, not for an international audience but to express themselves to a domestic one. This is because English is now a language of creative expression for a large segment of the population. Advertisements also frequently use English slogans and text, often mixed with Indian languages, to appeal to a young, aspirational audience. This seamless integration into popular culture demonstrates that English is no longer an alien language but is now fully at home, a natural part of India's cultural and creative landscape, mirroring the hybridity that defines modern India. To quote Shobha Tharoor Srinivasan, -----

*"Bollywood's use of English is a perfect example of linguistic globalization, where a global language is localized to reflect the specificities of Indian social life. It is not an imitation but a creative integration that mirrors the lived realities of a cosmopolitan Indian society."*⁷

- **The English Language as a Tool for Postcolonial Critique:** A powerful and paradoxical aspect of English's journey in India is its use as a tool for postcolonial critique. For many postcolonial writers, including Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, and Amitav Ghosh, English is not just a language of expression but a strategic weapon to challenge the very power structures that imposed it. By appropriating the language of the coloniser, they are able to "write back" to the empire, correcting historical narratives, giving voice to the colonised, and deconstructing the myths of Western superiority. Salman Rushdie famously stated that "the English language has been decolonised" and that "the most important literary work is being done in the ex-colonies." This is a powerful act of linguistic reclamation. These writers have taken a language that was once meant to make them more English and instead used it to make them more Indian, filling it with the sounds, stories, and struggles of their homeland. They demonstrate that the language is no longer the property of Britain but has been made a part of a new, hybrid identity, a tool of liberation rather than a marker of subjugation. To quote Homi K. Bhabha, -----

*"For the postcolonial writer, English is both a burden and a powerful weapon. It is the language of the colonizer, but by appropriating it and infusing it with indigenous sensibilities, they make it their own, turning a tool of dominance into a vehicle for liberation."*⁸

- **The Digital Revolution and the Democratization of English:** The advent of the digital revolution has accelerated the nativisation of English in India on an unprecedented scale. The internet, social media platforms, and smartphones have fundamentally democratised access to the language, taking it from

the urban, educated elite to a much broader populace. Millions of Indians now use English for communication, information, and entertainment in online spaces. This has given rise to a new, informal, and more fluid form of English, often characterised by texting abbreviations, a playful attitude toward grammar, and the free-form blending with regional languages. A young person in a small town might not speak perfect, formal English, but they can communicate effectively with friends and family using a form of English that is uniquely theirs. This is a crucial step in the nativisation process, as it moves English from a language of formal authority to a language of casual, everyday use. The internet has not only provided a platform for English but has also allowed a multitude of "Indian Englishes" to emerge and thrive, reflecting the diverse linguistic landscapes of the country. To quote Divya Singh, -----

*"The digital age has fundamentally altered the role of English in India. It has moved from being a language of the privileged to a language of the masses, primarily through the informal, democratized spaces of social media and online communication."*⁹

- **The Future of English in India: A Pluralistic and Native Voice:** The future of English in India is not a question of whether it will survive, but how it will continue to evolve. It is clear that English is not a passing phenomenon but a deeply integrated part of the Indian linguistic ecosystem. It is not destined to replace the rich and ancient Indian languages but will continue to coexist and thrive alongside them. The future is a pluralistic one, where a multitude of regional "Indian Englishes" will reflect the diverse cultural identities of the subcontinent. As India's global influence grows, so too will the influence of its English, adding its own unique flavour to the global linguistic tapestry. English in India today is not the stiff, formal language of the coloniser; it is a fluid, expressive, and vital tool for communication, creation, and cultural expression. It is a language of protest and aspiration, of pop culture and philosophy. It has been absorbed and transformed, and in this process, it has truly become a native voice of India. To quote S. R. Sharma, -----

*"The trajectory of English in India suggests a future where it will not only coexist with regional languages but will also become a more deeply integrated part of the Indian linguistic ecosystem, functioning as one of many native voices in a multilingual tapestry."*¹⁰

Conclusion

The journey of English in India is a remarkable story of linguistic and cultural transformation. From its origins as a colonial tool for administration and control, it has

been actively reclaimed, repurposed, and remade by the Indian people. What began as a borrowed tongue has been infused with the rhythms, ideas, and unique spirit of India, giving rise to a native voice that is at once globally connected and deeply rooted in local realities. The linguistic innovations, the vibrant literary tradition, and the role of English as a language of aspiration and unity all attest to its successful nativisation. This process of transformation is a testament to the resilience and adaptability of Indian culture, which has consistently absorbed foreign influences and made them its own. As India continues to evolve on the global stage, English will undoubtedly continue to play a crucial role, not as a remnant of a colonial past, but as an indispensable part of its multilingual, multicultural present and future.

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