

## Subversion of Identity through English

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**Abstract:**

*In country like India, language is not just a medium of communication but a perpetrator of pervasive culture too. The language plays a pivotal role in manifesting the hierarchy internalized by the people, community and society alike. It binds itself closely with the internal politics, formation of identity, negotiation of popular stereotypes in regard of caste, class, race and culture. To put it in nutshell, a dominant discourse is generated through the tool primarily identified as medium of communication. The discourse is insidious enough to silence the counter reading of it. When looked back, the historical legacy of language lays its claims on its capacity to bridge the gap by facilitating communication. On the contrary to its proclamation, the language contestations and the debates surrounding the language dominance contradicts the claim to bridging the distance. English as a language has been the child of controversies since its inception in the colonized India. A political discourse generated by the language is far from denial. The stratified India with its hierarchy in various aspects of the nation found another one in English. English created a hierarchy among the speakers and non-speakers. However, the paper intends on throwing light at the inherent capacity of the English to bring the people in the margin to the center.*

**Key words:** *Language, politics, colonial rule, culture and discourse*

English remains a language of contestation in the postcolonial times, nevertheless viewed as neo-colonial times too. The referencing as ‘neo-colonial’ is on account of the colonial experience we carry despite the physical expulsion of the colonizing powers in the 1950s, the date cited going by the chronological history of India produced by the academic intelligentsia. The history of India, thus documented, has churned antagonism at the colonial powers for the exploitation of the land and human resources alike. A lot has been talked about the harm done to the native land during the imperial rule, an unanticipated development post the trade relationship established with the colonizing powers. It’s however clear that the footing in land was supported by the native intelligentsia who viewed monetary gains in the trading enterprise with this lesser known colonial powers. The natives in India were keen on making monetary profits with this newly discovered trading relation and consequently rendering themselves susceptible to be exploited materially and physically. The gullibility of the natives is lesser spoken about; the shrewd colonial powers are strongly detested and held responsible for the deprived state – of – being in the postcolonial times. The reading of the narratives that fall categorically as post colonial narratives guides us increasingly towards a major discourse that detests and disapproves the colonial regime, the colonizer’s legacy and the colonizer’s language alike. The knowledge that the Western educated Indian elite brought home further strengthened the discourse.

English being the colonizer’s language is no exception. Despite the acceptance of English as one of the administrative languages of the nation in the 1950s, the contestation surrounding the same continues even on date. The ‘*bhashas*’ group or regional language speakers are loud about the

apprehensions in regard to the alarmingly popular position English enjoys as the highly sought for common medium of communication and reasoning the extinction of the former.

Going by the history of English in India, it's surprising that there are a lot of controversies about the administrative capacity ascribed to English over the regional dialects in India on date too. When the East India Company in India were negotiating for the medium of instruction towards educating the natives in India, the progressives then had assented to English being the medium. English for education was supported by the social reformers. It was the Western educated social reformers who backed English as the medium of instruction. The Indian education channeled by Lord Babington Macaulay replaced Sanskrit with English. Heedless of Macaulay's infamous statement pertaining to the Sanskrit books, one may perceive that the following argument drives home the support lent by the learned elites in India for English education.

*"I have conversed, both here and at home, with men distinguished by their proficiency in the Eastern tongue. I am quite ready to take the oriental learning at the valuation of the orientalist themselves. I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. The intrinsic superiority of the Western literature is indeed fully admitted by those members of the committee who support the oriental plan of education."*

The superiority of English language and the administrative power that it lends to the speaker was well-understood by the Western educated Indians and hence supported the implementation of the same to empower themselves and overthrow the dominant. The language received was appropriated and adapted to articulate the voiceless subjugation that they were put through

during the colonial rule. The power thus gained through the English education was deployed and guided the nation to overthrow the foreign rule. In the heyday of Indian Independence, the Western educated elite class enjoyed the superior status while the subaltern class remained crippled and deprived of rights despite being in Independent India. Sooner or later, the 'subaltern' class sensed the amount of power that English as a language harbored in itself. Language is not just a medium of communication but also carries a persisting culture in it. It holds true for all the languages. The regional dialects or 'bhashas' contain a culture that sustain and substantiate the dominant class and their attitudes. Such invasive power of language, in reference to culture, is best deployed in cultural politics by supporting a hierarchical world view. The subaltern groups of people have always been kept at bay.

One cannot ignore the power of discourse which a language brings in. For example, the status of Sanskrit in India then created a discourse that let the rich upper caste man be treated Godly and messiah of God. The scholarly works in Sanskrit were ascribed the status of canonical texts and the culture conveyed in it as threateningly truthful account of an ideal way of life. The status of the lower strata was unquestioningly accepted by the upper and lower classes alike. Necessarily the subaltern class remained aloof from Sanskrit, for the language being the language of Gods and sacrosanct.

It is far from denial that the power of pen is more pernicious than the sword and the subjugation of a particular group sounds more tenable in the former to the latter. The lower strata of the society or the subaltern class were distanced from education on account of their supposedly inferior status, but in truth to keep the hierarchy intact. However, subjugation of a class for eternity is next to impossible. The changing times homes the chances of dismantling the pre-

existing hierarchies built on the established realities. The aforementioned eventually crept into the subaltern class. The unquestioning hierarchy was sensed to be unfaithful and based on biased narratives. The educated subaltern started pondering over the pervasive power of the regional languages that functioned as a discourse. It dawned on them that the languages that they spoke, despite being theirs, never was theirs. The language seemed alien to them on account of the experience that the language carried. None of the languages bore their experience; the subaltern section saw them the 'other' in the indigenous language too. Language is not merely a medium of communication but a carrier of culture too. When the debates surrounding the introduction of English as against the indigenous language Telugu were in prevalence, noted writer Kancha Ilaiah asserts that Telugu and English are equally alien to the person of subaltern class and thus welcomes English over the native tongue.

Kancha Ilaiah says,

*“...That is because neither of these languages reflects our cultural context. Neither of them was structure to engage with issues that are central to our lives. Both languages are alien to us, and the alienness is equally striking in both the cases. None of the skills we have, nothing of the knowledge we possess, have my place in the system. Worse still, our knowledge is rendered non-existent. Our linguistic skills and our vocabulary become invisible. We have been sitting in hostile anglicized and brahminical classrooms that had been built only by extracting the surplus generated by our own parents.”*

Writers and thinkers like Kancha Ilaiah started sensing the discourse the language was creating. The assertion for the use of native language to resist the colonial effect with complete disregard

for the English tongue blinded the readers in post colonial times about the discourse the indigenous languages harbored in itself. However, few thinkers like Savitribai Phule comprehended the power they attained through the appropriation of English language. The fresher perspective of viewing the colonial intervention ignited an altogether different discourse that enabled to view the subtle but pervasive power of the indigenous languages necessarily voicing the decolonisation. The post colonial discourse was one such that the colonized natives only viewed the colonizing powers as the malice to the nation over the rest of the destructive infects within the nation. The detrimental discourse with its powerful manifestation of pre-existing hierarchies was making its way silently through the use of native languages. The knowledge lent a re-orientation for an altogether different postcolonial discourse which speaks less about the material exploitation but more about the inadvertent contribution of the colonial legacy in a country like India, especially for the otherwise powerless groups. Hence, it doesn't come in as surprise when Savitribai envisioned in English the redeeming force to empower the marginalized Dalits. Chandra Bhan Prasad, an intellectual celebrates Macaulay's birthday on 25 March 2006. Such welcoming gesture at the introduction of English in acts as a counter – discourse to English being treated a colonial burden. Their studies support the power of English in the emancipatory struggles of the marginalized. And thus, this new discourse facilitates an understanding in regard to the assertion for use of indigenous languages over the coloniser's language. The popularity of Savitribai Phule, Dr. B R Ambedkar in itself evidences the power of English which has aided them in earning the position they enjoy in the otherwise caste-ridden society. The language holds the potential for emancipation, progress and mobility. English education was liberal in nature and promoted fostering and spreading the concept of equality and

democracy along with the spirit of nationalism. Macaulay's 'men' were expected to pass the newly acquired knowledge to the uneducated masses. However, the learned elite did not accede to what Macaulay envisioned. The new knowledge was kept aloof from the downtrodden; instead they were left to feed on the pre-existing ideologies. The failure of Macaulay's men is ambiguously unknown. But the prospective future which English contained within it soon dawned on the marginalized. The marginalized section felt it was a purposeful action by the learned elite to keep them in dark and consequently hold on to the reins of the nation. English as a language was increasingly viewed as a tool for liberation by the underprivileged in the caste and class infected society. English housed a counter – narrative to the languages that were laden with discriminatory attitudes. English as a language, just like other languages, would have culture of the domain it belongs to. But the appropriation of the same not just liberates us from the clutches of the home culture; it contains the indigenous culture one prides in. So the language despite not being ours, communicates our culture by appropriation. The alienation in the alien language is thus far - felt. The language not just voices the suppressed but lets the suppressed articulate the pride in their culture. The language being the link language in the global economy provides immediate connect to the cosmopolitan culture with no intervention. The global accessibility is automatically informed by the economic and technological supremacy.

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