

The English Class System

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Abstract. English language education in India is being commonly regarded as a contributor to India's recent economic progress. This paper undertakes a preliminary analysis between economic status and medium of education in different countries to examine whether this common assumption is grounded in fact. The paper distinguishes between learning English as a second or third language and using it as a medium of communication versus the use of English as the primary *medium* of education. The preliminary findings indicate that the correlation of the spread of English-medium education and economic progress is suspect and this issue needs to be examined more vigorously.

1. English-Medium Education and Economic Good

The language policy debate in India has centered on two issues—of a common national language or link language and of the language formula to be adopted in primary and secondary education. The debate about the common national language has often split between those that advocate Hindi and those that support English as this common language. The Hindi advocates base their plea on cultural and nationalistic reasons while the English supporters base their stance on pragmatism – arguing for the economic necessity and global inevitability of English use.

Two aspects of English adoption and usage have, however, not received sufficient academic attention. While mounds of printed material have been produced on caste hierarchy in India; the English language class hierarchy, commonly encountered in everyday urban India, has hardly merited academic attention. The relative scarcity of studies of the sociology of the English-based Class System in India—social stratification based on knowledge of English and spoken English “accents”—with corresponding social differentiation and discrimination—is striking.

Secondly, while English medium education has been vaguely related to economic good there is little scientific research that actually establishes the causality of English medium education and economic good. For instance, does the spread of English-medium education in India help or hinder GDP growth? While there are numerous studies that attempt to relate literacy rates and universal primary education with economic good, there are scarcely any that

specifically look at the medium of instruction and its relationship to other economic data.

This article makes some preliminary observations on these two aspects of English-education in India with the hope that it may be a catalyst for more rigorous appraisals of these questions.

1.1 The Economics of Language

When English becomes the official language of a country, does it help or hinder economic progress? To study how economics impacts language, we compared countries by GNP and official language – and came up with some surprising results. Let us take a look at the top and bottom countries in the world by GNP per capita and examine its correlation with official language. In using per capita measures countries with a very small population may lead to less meaningful results, so we filtered out countries with populations less than 5 million. Then, we sorted the results by per capita GNP and looked at the top 20 and the bottom 20 countries.

The twenty richest

The mass language(s) in Table 1 is/are the identified first language of the most numerous groupings of people. There is a wide variety of languages found in this list, dominated by European languages. More pertinently, in *none* of the top 20 richest countries is the language of official business (and the primary medium of education at all levels) different than the native language used by the general population. In cases like Switzerland, which has multiple common languages, the medium of primary education follows the dominant linguistic group on a per-canton level with multiple official languages reflecting the major linguistic groups, without an inherent class structure privileging a colonial language. Also, in all of the countries above, the highest level of education is available in the mass languages. The pursuit of higher studies proceeds perfectly well in a large number of non-English native languages, *since only 4 out of the top 20 countries of the world ranked by GNP per capita have English-based systems*. The top 20 are also not restricted to European languages alone – Japan and Korea have done perfectly well economically by using their native languages as the medium of education, including in the sciences, over choosing a non-mass language such as English. Switzerland and Israel are both multi-lingual countries, but different significantly from India in that they do not suffer from a similar class system and perceived superiority of a foreign language, spoken only by a minority of people. The case of Israel's choice of language is particularly illuminating and we shall look at it in greater detail further on.

Table 1 Richest Countries by GNP per capita*

Rank	Country	GNP per capita (\$)	Mass Language(s)	Official Language(s)
1	Switzerland	38,380	German/French/Italian	German/French/Italian
2	Denmark	32,050	Danish	Danish
3	Japan	32,030	Japanese	Japanese
4	United States	31,910	English	English
5	Sweden	26,750	Swedish	Swedish
6	Germany	25,620	German	German
7	Austria	25,430	German	German
8	Netherlands, The	25,140	Dutch	Dutch
9	Finland	24,730	Finnish	Finnish
10	Belgium	24,650	Dutch/French	Dutch/French
11	France	24,170	French	French
12	United Kingdom	23,590	English	English
13	Australia	20,950	English	English
14	Italy	20,170	Italian	Italian
15	Canada	20,140	English/French	English/French
16	Israel	16,310	Hebrew	Hebrew
17	Spain	14,800	Spanish	Spanish
18	Greece	12,110	Greek	Greek
19	Portugal	11,030	Portugese	Portugese
20	South Korea	8,490	Korean	Korean

*Population greater than 5 million only! Raw Data Source: Encarta Encyclopedia

The twenty poorest

Let us look now at Table 2 which shows the 20 poorest countries in the world. We find many of the same European languages as in Table 1. The difference, of course, is obvious. In over half of these twenty countries, the common languages used by the people are not even recognized as official languages. Even when they are officially recognized, such as Chichewa is in Malawi,

official business and higher education is often conducted in the colonial language. For instance, The University of Malawi is the foremost university in Malawi among the total of just four major universities in the country. On its website it lists the requirements for the University Entrance examination that is “used to examine the students’ aptitude for university work.”³ The first criterion it lists is “Language skills”, explaining that this is used to “measure students’ aptitude in English Language Skills.” Apparently university aptitude can only be demonstrated by knowledge of English—those fluent in Chichewa, the “official” language of the country and that of the common people, need not apply. The University of Malawi website does not even mention Chichewa anywhere in its contents.

Table 2 Poorest countries by GNP per capita*

Rank	Country	GNP per capita (\$)	Mass Language(s)	Official Language(s)
1	Congo (DRC)	100	Lingala, Kingwana	French
2	Ethiopia	100	Amharic	Amharic
3	Burundi	120	Kirundi, Swahili	French, Kirundi
4	Sierra Leone	130	Mende, Temne, Krio	English
5	Malawi	180	Chichewa	English/Chichewa
6	Niger	190	Hausa, Djerma	French
7	Chad	210	Sara, Arabic	French/Arabic
8	Mozambique	220	Emakhuwa, Xichangana	Portugese
9	Nepal	220	Nepali	Nepali
10	Mali	240	Bambara	French
11	Burkina Faso	240	Sudanic languages	French
12	Rwanda	250	Kinyarwanda	Kinyarwanda/French/English
13	Madagascar	250	Malagasy	French/Malagasy
14	Cambodia	260	Khmer	Khmer/French
15	Tanzania	260	Swahili	English/Swahili
16	Nigeria	260	Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo	English
17	Angola	270	Bantu	Portugese
18	Laos	290	Lao	Lao/French/English
19	Togo	310	Ewe, Mina, Kabiye, Dagomba	French
20	Uganda	320	Ganda, Luganda	English
*Population greater than 5 million only ²				
Raw Data Source: Encarta Encyclopedia, World Fact book				

By contrast, Technion, in Israel is one of the foremost technical institutes in the world. Its website clearly states⁴:

“The *lingua franca* of the country is *Hebrew* and this is also the language of instruction at the Technion. ... *Visiting Students* accepted for Winter or Spring teaching semester programs should attend the Technion’s intensive five week Hebrew language course (*‘Ulpan’*) before they begin their studies.” (emphasis in original)

Technion is a world-class institute of technology, yet it strongly promotes Hebrew medium education. Israel is one of the top twenty countries in per capita GNP and a leading technology state. Yet the poorest countries have internalized this fallacious notion that English, and English alone, is the path to development.

The vast majority of the list of the poorest countries in this table has a class system similar to the one in India, where the language and culture of the colonial masters is considered superior to the native languages. Much of higher education, business, government and judiciary are transacted in this colonial language, often different from the languages spoken inside the home by the majority of people. The elite attend “colonial-medium” schools and use those terms and concepts to understand their own experience and those of the “natives” that they look down upon.

Note that there are 6 countries in this list of poorest 20 countries which have their official language—and that of higher education—as English, while this was the case only in 4 among the richest.

What does this data say?

We are not suggesting that all these countries are poor simply because of this language class-separation. Correlation does not establish causality. To look at the direct causality we may not need to look far -- 19 out of these 20 poorest countries were colonies of exploitation by European powers, the 20th being a protectorate. That is undoubtedly one of the important casual factors.

Nonetheless in this study of colonization, studying the slavery of language, with its resultant class-separation and long-term economic and social consequences, is clearly an important issue. This language-based class separation hurts the people in multiple ways: (1) It privileges a foreign culture over the native culture, thus eroding self-esteem and a basic belief in people. (2) It disconnects the intellectual and policy discourse of the country, often carried out in the colonial language using a colonial worldview, from broad participation by the people. (3) It imposes the cost of re-education of an entire population into a different language for the purpose of higher studies, thus creating a glass ceiling for progress for those educated in the native languages, and it hold up the colonized elite classes as the standards for the rest to aspire to.

What is more remarkable, however, is the paucity of analysis on this subject. There is a sense of *inevitability* among the elite regarding the adoption of English. Even India's recent economic growth and the success of its software industry have often been linked to the adoption of English.

1.1 Are Business and Professional Success Linked to English?

English-medium education is often touted as one of India's competitive advantages and a reason for its recent economic progress. These pronouncements parade as obvious truths, so obvious that no study need be done to establish their basis in fact.

Is global business success linked to the knowledge of English? Hardly. If the economic tables presented earlier do not raise serious doubt on this account, let us examine a few specific examples.

The major East Asian economies—Japan, South Korea, Taiwan—are all non-English speaking. Business schools, just like other higher education in these countries, are conducted in Japanese, Korean and Chinese, not in English. Yet these countries have produced global multi-nationals in everything from automobiles to consumer electronics---Honda, Toyota, Sony, Samsung and numerous others. Of the top 1000 companies in Asia 792 are from these 3 countries (India has 20) with combined sales of nearly 4.5 trillion dollars (India's combined total is not even 2% of these).

A child from a village in Japan, South Korea or Taiwan can aspire to be a doctor, an engineer or a business leader without having a debilitating forced language medium shift for higher education. This allows the talents of the entire nation to be harnessed, unlike in countries with a high degree of language-class separation. In a recent study of village schools in India, we found a school in the village of Khandodra in Haryana where nearly 33% of the children in the school scored above the 90th percentile on the intelligence test that we administered. The children were all studying in Hindi medium. The principal of that school described the debilitating effects of the transition to English based higher education on these talented kids. He spoke about the issues of language – “Hamara grameen kshetra hai – agar higher education se touch hai tab hi baccha safal ho payega. Jab vo 8th class pass karta hai, 10th tak jata hai, usme English ki aisi ek heen bhavana aa jati hai, ki upar jata hai—competition mein bhi English medium hai.” (Ours is a rural area; to succeed these children need to be in touch with higher education. However when the child passes 8th class, goes into 10th, he experiences a feeling of inferiority in dealing with English; to go higher the competition is in English).

Similarly, the idea that India's software success is due to the knowledge of English bears examining. If it were true, then English-speaking countries must display this advantage consistently. In particular, countries like Kenya, with comparable histories to India of colonization, an English-based colonial class

system and a large English work force, must also be disproportionately successful in software. This turns out to not be the case. Furthermore, this theory also fails to explain why Israel, which follows largely Hebrew and Arabic-medium schooling, is a notable software success.

People in Israel migrated from all parts of the world in the twentieth century. These people spoke many different languages, yet Israel chose Hebrew, not English as their official language, reviving for modern times what had been declared a “dead” or classical language. This would be the equivalent of India choosing Sanskrit as its official and link language, instead of the colonial choice of English.

For all its heralded software India’s software exports totaled \$6.5 billion (2001 figures). Israel, a country with a population less than a hundredth of India (in fact, less than half of New Delhi’s population) had software exports of over \$2.5 billion in the same period. It is worth noting that Technion, one of the world’s premier engineering institutions is Hebrew medium. When I visited the Microsoft campus in Haifa, Israel I was surprised to find that they used Hebrew-based keyboards and used Hebrew as the language of communication within the Microsoft office.

As a software manager for Microsoft, I often flew in and interviewed candidates from across the world in an unending quest for talent. Some of the people I sought out were flown in from Russia—and they were certainly not hired for the knowledge of English. In many cases, their knowledge of English was so rudimentary that I arranged for a Russian speaker to interview them. They turned out to be some of the best software engineers I hired.

With India’s fixation on English-based higher education, it is able to leverage the talent of a far smaller percentage of its population. Thus India acts like a country with a talent pool which is less than a tenth of its population. The bright children from the village of Khandodra in Haryana, invariably hit against the glass ceiling of English in their quest for technical and professional education in India. This is not because of some kind of professional inevitability of English use, but a direct result of official state policy.

The Common Admission Tests for entrance to the Indian Institutes of Management is not only in English medium but English language verbal ability and reading comprehension form a significant proportion of the test. English is mandatory to be a lawyer or judge in the state High Courts or the Supreme Court in India. To become a doctor or an engineer, the best state-funded institutions remain exclusively English medium. English remains a mandatory qualifying subject for the Civil Service Examinations that selects India’s bureaucrats.

Thus the English Class System exists not only in the social domain but as state policy. The message is clear and consistent. Indian languages are “lower”, English is “higher”. You can practice in lower courts in Indian languages, but

high courts require English. You can become an ordinary soldier or jawan in the army by giving the test in an Indian language. To become an officer, the test is in English.

The colonial mindset and discourse transforms officially sanctioned discrimination and the class hierarchy of language into narratives of the global “inevitability” and the natural superiority of English. To argue otherwise would be to argue for backwardness over progress; for trenchant nationalism (or regionalism) over obvious economic good. Yet this economic good is far from obvious. Imposing a mandatory language shift for higher education for the vast majority of Indians has significant economic costs—it fails to develop the talent of vast numbers of Indians for the new economy and becomes a severe axis of discrimination and continued impoverishment. English, then, can be more accurately identified as the language of India’s backwardness rather than as its progress.

1.2 Conclusion

English adoption has often been decried for its cultural costs in the extermination of native languages. However its use has often been justified on pragmatic economic grounds. Quite apart from the cultural devastation in the wide-spread adoption of a foreign language, the economic basis of the argument for English education needs to be examined with greater skepticism.

The advocacy of English often relies on arguments of the “inevitability” of its adoption for development and progress. Part II of this essay examines the relationship of these arguments of inevitability to the hierarchical English Class System prevalent in Indian society as well as its historical origins.

2. English in India: The Colonial Mind

“In schools and universities our Kenyan languages – that is the languages of the many nationalities that make up Kenya – we associated with negative qualities of backwardness, under-development, humiliation and punishment. We who went through that school system were meant to graduate with a hatred of the people and the culture and the values of the language of our daily humiliation and punishment”. Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, **Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature.**

The Indian intellectual elites and bureaucracy, often schooled in English-medium schools and colleges, are taken by the “obvious inevitability” of English-medium professional and higher education. The facts enumerated in the previous sections are not hard to find. Yet, the very idea that someone would become a competent doctor, engineer or business professional studying

in Hindi or Tamil medium just as they can in Japanese, Hebrew or even Turkish seems somewhat inconceivable in contemporary Indian discourse.

This notion of the superiority of English also holds sway in Indian social interactions where the “accent” of spoken English has become a key marker in the social hierarchy. “Convent-school” English accent is the highest in this totem pole, followed by “less-refined” private or government school English, down to those that are uncomfortable in the English idiom—and are easily condemned as uncivilized or illiterate. College graduates without “convent-school” English that I interviewed complained of this bias in the job market; even though they may be quite competent in performing the required job. Not surprisingly then, there is a spiraling demand for English and “convent” education. As we discussed in Part I, at least some of this demand is unnaturally created—with explicit bias in state policy in favor of English language higher education.

To be clear the issue is not about learning English or even speaking it well. The problem arises when medium of education itself is switched from the common mass-languages to English; when spoken English accents become a marker of class hierarchy; and where pervasive bias exists in professional and higher education as well as in the job market against the mass languages. While the Japanese may queue up to learn English as a second or third language for the sake of business or travel or to feed their fascination with America, English speaking does not become a social class marker in interaction *within* Japanese society; nor do they turn English learning into a whole-scale shift of higher and professional education into English medium.

2.1 The “Masks of Conquest”

Historically, India had very well developed systems of education and written and oral literatures in Indian languages. In pre and early British times, according to data painstakingly collected from colonial sources by Dharampal in his book, “The Beautiful Tree”, primary, secondary and higher education were widely prevalent in India. Based on a detailed examination of early British records available for Madras, for instance, Dharampal(1995: 20) concludes that “School attendance especially in the districts of the Madras Presidency, even in the decayed state of the period 1822-25, was proportionately far higher than the numbers in all varieties of schools in England in 1800. The conditions in which teaching took place in the Indian schools were less dingy and more natural; and, it was observed, the teachers in the Indian schools were generally more dedicated and sober than in the English versions.” Colleges used regional languages as well as Sanskrit and Persian; higher education included studies in subjects such as Medical Sciences, Astronomy and Law.

How then did we come to acquire a picture of our educational backwardness and the backwardness and unsuitability of Indian languages for higher and professional education? Gauri Vishwanathan of Columbia University, in her book “Masks of Conquest”, has done a study of the establishment of English language and literature in India. The establishment of the English-speaking elite in India took a 3-pronged approach:

1. The destruction and/or denigration of native education
2. The requirement of English for becoming part of the governing elite
3. The establishment of English only, i.e. English medium schools, along with the cessation of teaching English as a language in native-language schools.

The languages and literature of a nation is a major carrier of its culture. In turning a nation away from their languages and literature, the colonial encounter bred ignorance and contempt of the native experience, while placing the idea of the “perfect” Englishman, carried through the English literature, on the native pedestal. This created a class of native “brown sahibs” more comfortable with the English idiom and values than with their own and the establishment of a literary and cultural elite that identified with the English and looked down upon the non-English speaking “natives” as Englishmen would.

“Charles Trevelyan, brother-in-law of Macaulay and one-time president of the General Council of Public Instruction, proudly exclaimed that the educated Indians “speak purer English than we speak ourselves, for they take it from the purest models, they speak the language of the Spectator, such English as is never spoken in England.” If Calcutta citizens spoke the language of the Spectator, it was by no means accidental, for editors of Calcutta journals and newspapers deliberately wrote in an Addisonian style under names like “Candidus,” “Verax,” “Oneiropolos,” and “Flaccus” and on subjects having not the remotest bearing on Indian life, such as the fashions of the day in England, and on imagination, etiquette and morality.”(Viswanathan, 1998:115)

The same slavishness, in different form and degrees is to be observed amongst the “convent-educated” classes and English-language writers in India today. When many English-language writers present the Indian experience, it is often presented like exotic anthropology, looking down from above on native customs, completing the slavery of the mind.

The aim of English education was manifold – one was to secure a “buffer zone” of trained bureaucrats who could be controlled and who would rule over the masses, and further more to use education as a means of establishing intellectual hegemony over this class by a mix of denigrating and exoticizing the native culture – more importantly, to have this elite class identify with the values of the conquerors rather than the conquered.

The extent to which this mission succeeded in the formation of the present-day elite makes for a fascinating study. Some “Orientalists” protested against the extinction of native state literatures, and the explicit creation of a language-based caste-hierarchy, based on state policy:

“By annihilating native literature, by sweeping away from all sources of pride and pleasure in their own mental efforts, by rendering a whole people dependent upon a remote and unknown country for all their ideas and for the very words in which to clothe them, we should degrade their character, depress their energies and render them incapable of aspiring to any intellectual distinction.”⁵

Nonetheless, the Orientalists, despite their professed study of Indian literature were equally complicit in establishing British hegemony. According to Vishwanathan(1998:167), “... a curriculum may incorporate systems of learning of a sub-ordinate population and still be an instrument of hegemonic activity... both the Anglicist and the Orientalist factions were equally complicit in the project of domination, British Indian education having been conceived in India as part and parcel of the act of securing and consolidating power.”

Note that British administrators forbade the teaching of English as a language outside of English-*medium* schools. By the 1835 English Education act, the teaching of English was taken out of native language schools – because learning English as a language, while retaining the native medium of education would allow the natives to understand the British *on their own (native) terms*. This is because a native brought up thinking in their own language and merely learning English as a foreign language, would be able to objectively study the British, outside of the colonial framework presented to them as objective and neutral. Thus the change of *medium*, and the establishment in the native mind of an English based class structure, was a necessary part of the colonizing mission.

The role of the contemporary Indian University System

The establishment by the British of colleges and universities, organized on the lines of the London University, for training an intellectual class in the colonizer’s worldview was very much part of the colonizing mission. Macaulay’s successor, Charles Cameron who campaigned vigorously for a centralized university system, “went so far as to call for the total exclusion of the classical languages of India—Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian—on the grounds that they were inextricably bound with system of ‘pagan theology’.”(Viswanathan, 1998:113)

Even when studies of classical Indian languages and texts were carried out under “Oriental studies” this was part of maintaining a hegemony of power and control. While the Orientalist Horace Wilson argued for the preservation of native languages, he recommended co-opting the maulvis and the pundits as

teachers and translators of Western tests. Viswanathan(1998:113) suggests, “Wilson refined the ‘Trojan horse’ strategy of destruction from within, to urge that the traditional men of learning of India also be co-opted as ‘additional instruments in our power’.” Even while accepting Wilson’s arguments up to a point, “under no circumstances was the Bentinck administration or any other administration following his willingness to support Oriental learning if it meant the perpetuation of Oriental languages and literature as the source of intellectual values, morals and religion.”

Along with the destruction of native literatures, “an increasing number of British administrators ... discovered a wholly unexpected ally in English literature to maintain control of their subjects under the guise of a liberal education.” (Viswanathan, 1998: 85)

The success of the systematic efforts of the British administrators in creating an elite English class in these universities who trace their intellectual roots solely in the Western civilization can easily be observed today. Having internalized the negative stereotypes about their own roots, their only psychological defense remains to distance themselves from these roots as much as possible by attacking them as their conquerors taught. When the colonized identify with the mental worldview of the colonizer, the slavery of their mind is complete. This attitude of the mind, above everything else, is what we speak of in talking about the “colonized.” This experience is not limited to India, of course—so let us take a trip to Africa for additional perspective.

3. Ngugi waThiong’o: Decolonizing the Mind

World history that is taught in Indian schools usually limits itself to European or American histories. To shed light on the contemporary Indian experience, it may be far more useful for us to study the histories of Africa and South America and their experiences with colonization, than to study the history of Europe. African intellectual Ngugi Wa Thiong’o decided to break out of the colonial mold in Kenya.

Thiong’o is a popular Kenyan writer, who started off writing in English, but realized the impact of what he called the “culture bomb” and decided to switch to writing exclusively in his native language Gikuyu. “Decolonizing the Mind” is one of the last books he wrote in English, in which he describes the “culture bomb”:

“The biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed ... is the culture bomb. The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with

that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance, with other people's languages than their own."(Thiongo, 1986)

Thiong'o (1986:7) describes the "acceptance of 'the fatalistic logic of the unassailable position of English in our literature'" – a logic that immures an entire class of people from reading nothing other than the colonial literature, and writing in none other than the colonial language. Even when the "native" culture is included, it is done with the aim of presenting to the conquerors for approval or for shock as exotic museum pieces, in much of the genre that goes by Indian writing in English. Thus native culture is used for the pleasure of the colonial master, either as a symbol of contempt or as an exotic amusement that will not deeply challenge the master's worldview. As Thiong'o emphasizes, writing in English enriches the language and literature of the English world, not of the native languages. This literature thus continues to steal from the native culture to enrich the masters', symptomatic of what Thiong'o calls "demands that the dependent sing hymns of praise with the constant refrain: 'Theft is holy'."

Thiong'o (1986: 28) describes his schooling in English-medium schools and universities in Kenya, where the mother tongues of the children were literally beaten out of them – children would be punished for speaking anything other than English:

"In schools and universities or Kenyan languages – that is the languages of the many nationalities that make up Kenya – we associated with negative qualities of backwardness, under-development, humiliation and punishment. We who went through that school system were meant to graduate with a hatred of the people and the culture and the values of the language of our daily humiliation and punishment."

Thiong'o speaks of the relationship between culture and language. Language serves two roles—as a means of communication and as a carrier of culture. While English can serve as a means of communication, it is not the primary carrier of native culture. This is something that was keenly realized by the British administrators in India as well when they noted, for instance, that English education was "replete with Christian references" just as the vocabulary of Indian languages was imbued with their basis in Indian philosophical and religious thought. Edward Thornton, British parliamentarian went as far as to say – "As soon as [the Indians] become first-rate European scholars, they must cease to be Hindoos."⁶ While Indian culture is still struggling with this bold assertion, the efficacy of this cultural denigration and destruction is evident in academic, journalistic and fictional India writing in English.

No surprise, since, as Thiong'o (pg 15) continues, language is an image-forming agent in the mind of the child. "Language as culture is thus mediating between me and my own self; between my own self and other selves; between

me and my nature.” While language is universal, the particularity of a language and the sounds and symbols it chooses, reflects the particularity of a cultural experience. “Thus a specific culture is not transmitted through language in its universality but in its particularity as the language of a specific community with a specific history.”

A colonial child is forced to live the dichotomy between their outer and inner worlds – the language spoken at school and at home, the language of spoken expression and the language of external writing, till the child slowly and surely starts to think and perceive his world through the eyes of the colonizer. As Thiong’o (pg 17) states “*For a colonial child, the harmony existing between the three aspects of language as communication was irrevocably broken.* This resulted in the disassociation of the sensibility of that child from his natural and social environment, what we might call colonial alienation. The alienation became reinforced in the teaching of history, geography, music, where ... Europe was always at the center of the universe.”

Thiong’o (pg 28) suggests that the ultimate impact of using a foreign medium as the primary medium for study is a deep colonial alienation on a personal and societal level.

“Colonial alienation takes two interlinked forms; an active (or passive) distancing of oneself from the reality around; and an active (or passive) identification with that which is most external to one’s environment. It starts with a deliberate disassociation of the language of conceptualization, of thinking, of formal education, of mental development, from the language of daily interaction in the home and in the community. It is like separating the mind from the body so that they are occupying two unrelated linguistic spheres in the same person. On a larger social scale it is like producing a society of bodiless heads and headless bodies.”

It is perhaps due to this dissociation that multitudes of bureaucrats and academics can write volumes about “social problems” in India; but those social problems remain forever incorrigible. In practice the academics are completely dissociated from the society in their study. When they do study the society, they do this under colonial categories from a colonial viewpoint, disconnected from an authentic personal experience. These studies are often used to craft government policies, administered by bureaucrats in a colonial setup, and by misguided activists and NGO’s, leading to persistent despair about the “problems of Indian society and its backwardness”, where the problems may well lie in the gaze—the way the society is viewed and problematized and the particular mindset that crafts the solutions to these problems.

Thiong’o (pg 28) succinctly captures the current attitudes of the colonized elite class with regards to colonial institutions and languages, summarizing that “it is the final triumph of a system of domination when the dominated start singing its virtues.” This indeed is the case in India, where everything of value

is automatically attributed to the “civilizing force” of the European conquerors, just as economic success is to English; while all the problems are decried and caricaturized as resulting from the indigenous culture—forever the source of shameful backwardness.

India still lacks a Thiong’o—a popular writer in English who switched to doing his entire writing in his native tongue. At a recent event in Seattle for the release of his new book “Wizard of the Crow”, Thiong’o mentioned that the best three words in his book was the inscription in the beginning “translated from Gikuyu.”

3.1 De-colonizing the Indian mind

Even though this essay is about the impact of English education, we do not intend to imply that English-language elite education is the sole reason for the class divide or the only source of the class divide. Nor will we automatically connect with our cultural roots simply by switching the language and translating the educational material currently written in English into Indian languages.

There is a critical distinction between the learning of English as a language for external communication to using English as a primary language in elite schools and higher education. While learning English as a language subject can today be an empowering tool and needs to be encouraged, when it is turned into the primary medium of elite education its destructive effects in the creation of a disconnected elite class far outweigh any putative benefits.

This state of affairs has been brought about as a result of conscious state policy, and thus conscious state policy is required to remedy this. Colonization is perpetuated through the state-supported institutions that are the legacy of British rule and it is these institutions that will need to be changed to remedy its effects. While it is not in the scope of his essay to examine a comprehensive new language policy, we explore here some ideas for discussion.

Recent models of switching state institutions and the medium of education out of English, such as the example of Malaysia can be a useful study. Changes must begin as a “pull”—where access is increased for Indian languages, rather than as a “push” where people are forced to learn Indian languages while access, into higher and professional education and jobs, continues to be denied to them.

In the pull model a comprehensive study can be done of examinations, such as that for selections of officers into the Indian armed forces and IIM entrance examinations that perpetuate the English bias. Similarly, Malaysia implemented a wholesale change of its court system away from English. In India the High Courts remain English-based, rendering those with fluency in Indian languages unable to practice in them. The compulsory qualifying English paper in the Civil Services examination can be dropped—to the extent English proficiency

is a job requirement it can be part of the post-qualification training for civil servants (similarly for army officers).

Management, engineering, medical and other professional education needs to be made available at the highest level in Indian languages. The barrier to entry to professional and higher education is a major reason why demand for English education at the primary and secondary level is growing. Unless the problem in higher education is fixed—again a situation largely perpetuated by the state—forcing Indian languages at the primary level is going to do little good.

A further step would a requirement for converting all English-medium schools into, at the very least, dual-medium schools, through changes at the central board level in CBSE and ICSE. In particular, there is very little reason that social sciences need to be studied in English. This will allow writing proficiency to develop in Indian languages that will increase demand for written materials in native languages.

Many of these steps may be seen as “going backwards” by the elite Indians. As this essay has argued, this backwardness is in the mind. The issue, instead, is of going forward by creating broad-based access to the modern economy from all sections of society and through all languages and unleashing the creative potential of many rather than the few. While incessant attention has been paid to the issue of caste-based access in India; relatively little has been paid to linguistic access that may, in fact, be the bigger determiner of social and economic class in India today and a bigger barrier to broad-based societal access and prosperity. The obsession with caste as the problem to access is itself a result of the colonial gaze—the same gaze that fails to study the problems of the English-based class system and of linguistic barriers and prejudice. Participating in the modern global economy does not require English-medium education. Rather the requirements of English-medium, imposed by state policies and private prejudices, create a barrier to participation in this economy for the vast majority of Indians.

The study of humanities and social sciences in Indian languages, particularly in higher education, also needs to be systematically privileged. The departments of humanities and social sciences in colleges and universities in India are the refuse of colonial policies, and have had little, if any, measurable positive contribution to Indian society, other than in producing new generations of disconnected neo-colonized who exhibit contempt and disdain for indigenous culture and traditions. As a result there is very little net value being created in these studies in Indian universities. The state should examine current funding to these institutions and knock down a few ivory towers. In particular, Indian language and Indian classics study requirements need to be made part of any advanced degrees in social sciences. State funding for higher education in social sciences needs to be examined for its efficacy and positive impact on real-world social issues. At the same time, scholarships should be made

available to those who choose to pursue these studies, and write their dissertation in Indian languages and that draw from Indic roots.

Distinguishing a language learnt as a communication tool from a foreign language that usurps the role of a primary medium, a suitable language policy should support the teaching of English as a 2nd language while eroding its influence as a primary language.. In particular, jobs for teaching English as a 2nd and 3rd language should be created in rural communities. This would provide employment to the multitudes of English-language teachers, while serving to break down the debilitating institutional elite class-structure that has been created by privileging the knowledge of English in India.

Notes

1. Raw language, GNP and population data from Microsoft Encarta®, 2002.
2. Raw language, GNP and population data from Microsoft Encarta®, 2002.
3. <http://www.unima.mw/n-requirements.html#uee>
4. <http://www.technion.ac.il/technion/studies/exchange/hebrew.html>
5. From Horace Wilson, "Education of the natives of India," Asiatic Journal (1836). Quoted from Viswanathan (1998:41).
6. Edward Thornton, Parliamentary papers, 1852-53. Quoted from Viswanathan (1998:23)

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