

Sanjaya Baru: English & India

India gained independence from the British but prosperity with English

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At Oxford in 1931 Mahatma Gandhi was asked, "How far would you cut India off from the Empire?" He replied: "From the Empire, completely; from the British nation not at all, if I want India to gain and not to grieve."

India's struggle for freedom, which was also a "national" movement for the creation of an Indian Republic on the Indian subcontinent, sought the end of British rule, but not the end of the use of the English language.

No language spoken by the pre-European inhabitants of this vast subcontinent could become the language of communication and governance across the length and breadth of India. So English survived and thrived. To be sure, the English language – or the many variants of it – that is spoken in India, through many and varied tongues, is not the English language that the British left behind. It is not a language that many would easily comprehend in England!

Yet, like Australian English, American English and Singaporean English, there is an Indian English. Indeed, a Bengali English, a Tamil, Telugu, Malayali, Punjabi and many other variants of English that would often require translation when two Indians converse. Every Bengali would know what exactly "pheesh" means, but no Malayali would "zimbly" understand it! I knew exactly what my English teacher meant when he said "Jed", but would you?

In what manner did Gandhiji believe India would "gain" from a continued association with Britain? Clearly, Gandhiji had a good appreciation of what was happening in the world and what was likely to happen as the 20th century progressed. He, like Jawaharlal Nehru and many other leaders of the Indian national movement, had benefitted personally in terms of his own professional training in various institutions in Britain. Gandhiji had grasped the essence of an idea that Sir Winston Churchill was to articulate much later when the latter said, "the empires of the future are the empires of the mind."

Over the years, even though Britain vacated India's "land", it has succeeded in capturing the Indian "mind" thanks to the continued and, indeed, growing popularity of the English language.

The rise of India's service sector and its knowledge-based economy, especially software, software services, information technology and IT-enabled services, has stepped up sharply the demand for English language education. Studies have shown that a growing number of Indians, from across the subcontinent, attach value to some basic understanding of English as a means of securing good employment. Consequently, the demand for English language education has increased sharply across the country.

This fact has been clearly established by a detailed study conducted by Mehtabul Azam (World Bank), Aimee Chin (University of Houston and National Bureau of Economic Research) and Nishith Prakash (Dartmouth College and Centre for Research and Analysis of Migration, University College, London), on "The Returns to English-Language Skills in India" (available at www.econ.ucl.ac.uk/cream/pages/CDP/CDP_02_10.pdf).

The authors conclude, from their analysis of data collected for the India Human

Development Survey, 2005 conducted by researchers at the National Council for Applied Economic Research, New Delhi, and the University of Maryland, USA, that: "... being fluent in English (compared to not speaking any English) increases hourly wages of men by 34%, which is as much as the return to completing secondary school and half as much as the return to completing a Bachelor's degree. Being able to speak a little English significantly increases male hourly wages 13%... More experienced and more educated workers receive higher returns to English. The complementarity between English skills and education appears to have strengthened over time."

The study also shows that wages are on average 32 per cent higher for men who speak fluent English and 13 per cent higher for men who speak a little English relative to men who speak no English. For women, the average returns are 22 per cent for fluent English and 10 per cent for a little English.

One consequence of this preference for English language skills in the market is that it has encouraged migration of English-speaking students from regions that have good teaching institutions, at the school and college level, but where local employment opportunities may not be easily available owing to inadequate development, to regions where the demand is high but local skills are inadequate.

Thus, for example, the north-eastern states of India, especially Mizoram, Nagaland and Manipur, have good English-language teaching capabilities, but inadequate employment opportunity in the services or manufacturing sector. Consequently, a lot of young people from the north-east region have migrated to cities like New Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai, Chennai, Bangalore and Hyderabad securing employment in the services sector, especially in the hospitality sector where knowledge of English language is a must. Many hotels and fancy restaurants in these cities employ smart young men and women from the north-east.

The last bastion of political resistance to English was the Hindi heartland. In the mid-1990s when I wrote an editorial comment in The Times of India titled "English is an Indian Language", Mulayam Singh Yadav and many other north Indian politicians remonstrated about it. Merely a decade later the use of English is spreading rapidly through the entire heartland.

Language shapes attitudes. The accessibility of English and its growing popular use at home have embedded India firmly in the world of the English-speaking people. To add to this, the growing prosperity of overseas Indians and people of Indian origin living across the English-speaking world and their emotional and economic re-integration into a rising India have helped create a global diaspora of the English-speaking India. Writers like Amitav Ghosh self-consciously reach out to this audience by writing novels in English which tug at the emotions that bind a global community of Indians.

Six decades ago, the sun did set on the British empire. Six decades later, it seems, the sun will never set on the world of the English-speaking people, of whom Indians and people of Indian origin will constitute the largest group.