



Postcolonial English

English in Post colonial India

Narrator

Nearly two hundred years of British colonial rule of India ended in 1947. Perhaps the most lasting legacy is the English language, which continues to play a central role in many areas of Indian life.

However, at the time of Independence there was a feeling among some groups in India that English should be rejected as the language of the coloniser.

Vatsala

The associate language would also control in power. As long as the colonial rule was there, their intention was to throw out English along with the English rulers because they associated the English language with those rulers. Of course that's a very short sighted policy now. Now if they tried to throw English out, it's like throwing the baby out with the bath water.

Narrator

The attempt in 1947 to establish Hindi as the principal language was highly controversial and in many parts of southern India like here in Bangalore Hindi was regarded as the language of the north.

Chitra

In the constitution of India we don't have a national language defined. You know it is stated that both Hindi and Hindi will be the official language of the Union and English will be used as the associate official language for the Union. And it was also decided that English will continue in India for at least fifteen years, before the parliament decides you know to phase it out if there is the possibility of Hindi emerging as a major language.

Chitra

But in 1964 when you know these things which are being thought about it was also discovered that English cannot go that easily. It was decided that every state will be given the freedom to legislate on what its official language should be. So it was as if English never left India.

Narrator

One of the areas of Indian life which is still dominated by the English language is the legal system. All legal writings and most court proceedings are in English.

Anant

Now we are saying that they do not have title therefore they could not have filed the present suit. What is their answer to that in the objections?

Amit

Nothing. Nothing.

Anant

Excellent.

Narrator

At this legal practice in Bangalore, even though the local language is Kannada, English is the language in which they work.

Amit

The legacy of colonialism is very important in the legal system. English language is a very important factor because in India you have different states that speak different languages and each of these languages have different dialects in there. Now if I were to go to the Supreme Court with a case and argue it in my vernacular language, the Justice sitting up there wouldn't understand what I was speaking of, therefore now it, what English does is it unifies us, brings in a uniform system of language by which all of us address the court.

B/G Conversation

Anant

Everything is in English. The citations are in English, we argue in English language. We did not develop any law on our own, we simply adapted what the English introduced to us for over a period of more than two hundred years they ruled here. So those were the laws which were continued, in fact our constitution, it was first drafted in English. The constitution of India is drafted in English. So right from the beginning and like I said you know I am, I am not very fluent because of my medium of education was English when I was a kid. In college I studied in English so if you ask me to argue a case in Hindi, I can't do it for more than a minute. Because I think in English, my thought is in English because it's my mother tongue, virtually my mother tongue now.

Amit

I would say personally I am more confident conversing with people in English than conversing with people in Kannada being my vernacular language. In fact my friends state that my vernacular language is really lousy.

Narrator

Although these lawyers are fluent in the English language, many of their clients are not which puts them at a serious disadvantage if they have to go to court.

Ujwala

I have basically from all strata's of the society the clients visit me so there are certain clients who, it depends basically on their education also to an extent. So when they have studied in the local schools here and they are from the mediocre families, they speak in the local language and, but then whatever the proceedings we do in the court, regarding them they are in English, which I have to then explain to them. I'm talking of people who have not studied more than higher, who were not going above a school level.

Amit

Yes it is a challenge when it comes to dealing with cross examinations or arguments that are addressed in vernacular languages and then, then are translated into English or where arguments and cross examinations are given in English and then translated into vernacular languages. When all these are used at the stage of final arguments and when someone's trying to explain to the Judge as to how it was elicited. It becomes really difficult to explain to the judge as to what the real meaning was, because I could say what the meaning truly meant and my learned friend across the table would say no it did not and there are a lot of case laws in recording and in judiciary which deal only with this aspect of translation.

Narrator

English also plays an important role in the Indian press.

English language newspapers first established under colonial rule are widely read today.

Tilak

Deccan Herald was started in 1948 by my grandfather Mr K. N. Guruswamy, he started two newspapers and one is the Deccan Herald and the other is the Indian language Kannada paper called Prajavani. The English paper at that time was a prestigious thing to start, just after Independence and it was a language of, of the British's at that time and upper class Indians.

Subrahmanya

You know during British time you had English newspapers produced for them and produced for the elite that depended on them you know. That elite which sustained the colonial rule in this country so you know basically English language and newspapers were for them, not for the masses yet. So you know obviously during the British period, you know vernacular language newspapers had not encouraged but if it had been encouraged, if there had been circulation, education you know education. Probably British would have found it difficult to sustain their rule until to 1947.

Tilak

We have a story on British Prime Minister coming to India, to Bangalore today, tomorrow, today... I think we should cover it. Well, tomorrow in the afternoon...

Narrator

English language newspapers reflect a social divide and they may even reinforce it. They are mainly read in urban areas and cater for an English speaking elite. Their style of reporting is different from the vernacular press which tends to focus more on local news.

Tilak

The English language paper is a bigger paper in terms of pagination and we have more reports from all over this, all over the country and the readers of the English newspapers are more educated and they expect better content. The English language papers right across the country are, are mainly the big cities. In the rural areas it's the Indian languages and a lot in there, it's Hindi and other places it's a local, in Bengal it's Bengali, Tamil Nadu it's Tamil and most, all the language papers are more local.

Narrator

In India English has been long established as a result of the country's Colonial past. But this is a multilingual country and English is just one of the many languages spoken here.

Male 1

I speak English, Hindi and Punjabi, that is my mother tongue.

Female 1

I can speak English, Hindi, Marathi, Bengali.

Male 2

I speak English, Telugu, Hindi.

Male 3

I speak English, Hindi, Tamil.

Female 2

My mother tongue is like Urdu, Hindi and I speak English and Hindi with my friends.

Male 1

You see when I speak my mother tongue I am, I get emotionally attached to people so I speak my mother tongue. If I find somebody who, who's from my native, so I, to connect them I use my mother tongue. But when I'm in my office environment or I have to take it, what you call professional decisions then English comes into the picture. Yeah so when I am rational I have to be in English. So when I'm, I use the mother tongue, only when I'm emotionally connected to people. Yeah.

Narrator

Mixing languages is common place but not everyone approves of this practice.

Female 1

If we start mixing first of all the impression is bad. Second thing is we'll not be able to communicate the right thing. It's important to speak in pure English. That's what I feel. It's very important.

Male 1

We use English in our Hindi also, we call it Hinglish, Hindi plus English in Hinglish.

Female 1

When I'm talking in English I won't mix any other language but when, when I'm talking in Hindi or when I'm talking in my mother tongue I use lot of English words. That happens.

Narrator

English is widely spoken especially in southern cities like Bangalore.

Male 3

Actually I use English whenever it's difficult to converse with the local people here. Because the local language is Kannada here. Most of the parts in south, in South India we use English because it's very difficult to converse in Hindi.

Male 1

English to me it's a part of our life now. Without English it's difficult to survive, in the work environment we are living today. Difficult to survive in Karnataka, in this part of the country. I came from northern part of the India so this is more in Bangalore at least. So people communicate more in English, Kerala, Vigula, anybody you go, they understand English better. Then, then Hindi, the national language.

Female 2

Most of the time I speak English is when I go to college and when I speak to my friends and most of the times. And when we go for shopping people, most of them speak, like in the malls English, yeah every time.

Narrator

English is also now seen as the language of opportunity. And it has shed its negative associations with colonialism.

Chitra Panikkar

There is a realisation that you need English, you know, to better yourself. And that way there is no confusion. All this confusion existed some time ago. But I think in a way that is resolved. Everybody wants to have better chances, better opportunities and they know that it's forthcoming only through English.

Narrator

In India British English rather than American English is dominant.

Male 3

The proper form of English would be like people use slang also sometimes but best one would be like the British accent. Whether you, where it usually originated or something.

Female 1

In India most of the people talk in British English.

Male 1

See we are influenced definitely by movies. So we pick up from the movie slangs, when while chatting with friends and all. But in office we use office English, you know. In documentation we use British English I believe, yeah.

Narrator

But some academics believe there is little real concern in India about speaking British English.

Chitra Panikkar

It is not strictly British English that people are standing for. Actually they don't, they won't make a distinction between the coloniser's English or the non-coloniser's English. Any variety of English will be OK for them.