



English: Personal Experiences

Vatsala Vedantam

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My parents came from the state of Tamil Nadu, their mother tongue is Tamil. I grew up in Karnataka so I spoke Kannada, I married a man from Andhra he spoke Telugu. So my children heard grandparents talking in Tamil, a mother talking in Kannada, a father talking in Telugu all under one roof. So we're not multi-lingual in a small way, we're multi-lingual in individuals, among individuals, among families, among the states, in the whole country. And so that is where English always came in as a very useful thing. So the children couldn't possibly talk in Tamil, Kannada and Telugu to three sets of relations under one roof.

So they switched over to English which was taught in their schools. So people don't have to go to any school to study these languages. We are all multi-lingual from birth and automatically we learn about three or four languages simultaneously.

Unfortunately even though I can talk a number of Indian languages, I can't read and write all those languages. So I feel I have missed out on a lot of good literature. Because we belonged to the colonial times.

Our parents belonged to the colonial times and so they sent us to English schools and we grew up with English language, English literature. To me it is a language of Keats and Shakespeare.

It's the language of Shelley and Milton. Because I am familiar with English literature, I have taught English literature in the University for 20 years. I am a professor of English in the university.

Afterwards I worked in an English newspaper. So my affiliation to English, as many people of my generation, is a very close affiliation. And we like the language. I don't feel apologetic because I talk in English. As many Indians want to do now, they are all the people who came after independence, they say, "Look, why are you talking an alien language?" I tell them I don't think it's alien at all. It's the language with which I could tie up with my own family, I can tie up with my friends. I can communicate with people in other states.

How do I travel from here to Tamil Nadu? How do I go to Delhi? I can't talk Punjabi. So English is the language which has seen me through so many crisis. I go to the hospital now, all the doctors are talking in English, they don't necessarily talk in Kannada. In an emergency, whom do I talk to? I ring up an ambulance, I ring up, I look at the directory, I see the number, I have to talk to somebody in English and say, "Can you please send an ambulance home?" So I don't think it's an alien language. I think it's ridiculous. In fact, even taking a pot of tar and blackening all the English names out, I'm totally against it. Because that is our history. I don't want to wipe out my history.