

# Rise of English: Conjunction of Hegemonic Agendas

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The introduction of English education in India has been controversial and widely divergent interpretations have been offered from contrasting ideological perspectives. While there have been prior accounts tracing the historiography of British colonial education in India and the Commonwealth nations, Alok K Mukherjee locates this historiographical account within the conjunction of the hegemonic agendas of the British and the Hindu elite in facilitating the rise of English education in India.

Like Gauri Vishwanathan's influential study on the relation between literature and conquest in India and its profound implications for a variety of intersecting fields and disciplines (*Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*, reviewed by Mehta 1994: 1309-10), Mukherjee also seeks to find answers to similar questions on the future of English literary and language studies and draws attention to the increasing demands of a rising minority community and a progressive, anti-imperialist, feminist academic community, who are seeking to broaden the scope of English studies curriculum in India today.

He traces the social, historical and political background of colonial education through early debates, initial curricula and first-hand accounts of two students from the 19th and 20th centuries to show that the questions regarding English education in India are rooted in a Gramscian contest for alternative hegemonies. Elaborating further on Marx's observations that "the ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class", Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony emphasises the role of the "superstructure" as more than a pale reflection of socio-economic organisation (Bates 1975). He does not denounce the significance of the socio-economic roots of the intelligentsia but seeks instead a simultaneous analysis of the "base" and the "superstructure".

Drawing from this understanding, Mukherjee notes that this project of

## **This Gift of English: English Education and the Formation of Alternative Hegemonies in India**

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constructing a "minimal hegemony" could not have materialised without the support of a section of the native elite who had internalised the superiority of European knowledge and culture over their own and who understood that English could be used as a tool of power and domination – individually for them and collectively for the groups to which they belonged. They saw English as providing them and other members of their groups the social, cultural and economic capitals to maintain their domination and effectively perform the "gatekeeping" role in a society deeply segregated by caste, class and gender.

The author draws the concept of "capital" (social, cultural, economic) from Pierre Bourdieu's theories of social and cultural reproduction. Bourdieu's concept of mode of reproduction, privileging symbolic capital, is intended to provide a powerful means of investigating systems of cultural reproduction. Societies and social groups, according to him, are engaged strategically in a continual competition for real and symbolic profit for the benefit of present and future generations (Nash 1990).

While upper-caste Hindu males remained prominent in this project of "minimal hegemony", some Hindu "lower" caste and non-Hindu males also gained membership into the dominant group, through what M N Srinivas describes as the process of "sanskritisation" where lesser groups claimed higher status for themselves by assuming the customs, manners and taboos of groups traditionally superior to them.

## **Colonial vs Revivalist Hegemony**

The author examines the rise of a revivalist hegemony among a section of the Hindu elite through prominent Orientalist discourses that proposed a common racial origin. The

theory of the Aryan race became endemic to the reconstruction of Indian history and provided the colonised, most notably the upper-caste Hindus, with status and self-esteem, arguing that they were linguistically and racially of the same stock as the colonisers (Thapar 1996).

Mukherjee discusses this revivalist agenda through a textual interpretation of passages from *Anandmath* by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay where the protagonist is advised by a spiritual healer on the necessity of English rule to resurrect the glory of "Aryadharm". However, the discussion remains somewhat inadequate because he does not examine other counter viewpoints to the Aryan race theory such as those espoused by Jyotiba Phule. Phule's radicalisation of the theory was popular among the lower castes and became central to many non-brahmin movements in other parts of peninsular India (*ibid*).

Views on a common racial origin coincided with the emergence of nationalism in the late 19th century in India, articulated mainly by the middle class, which was drawn from the upper caste and was seeking both legitimacy and an identity from the past. It thus effectively excluded not only the lower castes but also the non-Hindus, even those of some social standing (*ibid*).

A prominent section of the book is devoted to the Orientalist-Anglicist debate. Here, Mukherjee does not revisit the debate in its entirety but examines some of the key interventions by British and Indian proponents of English education in the period between 1813, when the British House of Commons gave its directive, and 1839, when the governor general, Auckland, putting the debate to rest, made the introduction of English education in India a reality.

He draws on *The Great Indian Education Debate: Documents Relating to the Orientalist-Anglicist Controversy, 1781-1843* edited by Lynn Zastoupil and Martin Moir to convincingly analyse the complex polyphony in which Indian groups not only reacted to imperial policy but also initiated action and influenced British opinion.

In this long course of events that led to the British privileging the Anglicists' position, Mukherjee focuses on the interventions by evangelicals Charles Grant and Charles Trevelyan, utilitarians like James

Mill and most importantly “high” caste Hindus such as Raja Rammohun Roy.

The climax of the Orientalist-Anglicist controversy – Thomas Macaulay’s (in)famous “Minute” – is brought into a larger context of the events that had preceded it or were occurring in Macaulay’s time to emphasise that Macaulay was not pronouncing anything particularly remarkable or new. It is only when the document is read ahistorically and decontextually that the text comes across as an amalgam of racist and prejudiced opinions and an exemplar of the colonial-imperial mindset.

Of particular significance in this analysis is the counter-proposal by John Stuart Mill to Macaulay’s Minute. He opposed the complete withdrawal of support for traditional learning as proposed by Macaulay and sought an education policy that would bridge the gap among the Orientalists, the Vernacularists and the Anglicists. John Stuart Mill went on to sketch a programme of “genera” or “liberal” education, which would combine the teaching of ancient and modern literature, languages and modern science. As the author notes, J S Mill’s proposal was dismissed by John Cam Hobhouse, successor to Charles Grant as president of the Board of Control, due to rising pressures from raj officials in India who were hostile towards any sort of reversal to the decision already taken in favour of English education.

While Mukherjee clearly states that he seeks to examine key interventions by British and Indian proponents of English education, his account seems somewhat imbalanced without an adequate examination of the Orientalists and the Vernacularists accounts. The author notes that Macaulay’s Minute draws from Charles Trevelyan’s *Treatise on the Means of Communicating the Learning and Civilisation of Europe to India* but does not examine Trevelyan’s views with a greater depth. As the brother-in-law and close associate of Macaulay, Trevelyan did not disagree with Macaulay on any major point in Indian education. However, it must be noted that Trevelyan did entirely support education in the vernacular, insofar as it was possible. He favoured making compulsory the study of the vernaculars at Haileybury College (the college in England for training Indian Civil Servants), while the Orientalist Wilson

was advocating their elimination (Sirkin and Sirkin 1971). The dismissive approach of the Indian participants in the education debate towards the potential of mass languages as vehicles for popular education underscores their own elite status and perspective, and who they saw to be the beneficiaries of the education that they were fighting for. Mukherjee does not, however, examine in detail the role of non-Hindus, notably the Muslims.

An important argument made by Mukherjee in this discussion is that both Macaulay and Raja Rammohun Roy were conscious of the possibility that the governance of India may pass from British hands. He notes that Macaulay envisioned an empire of the mind – an empire that he called “imperishable”, one that would continue to exist through the lasting impact of British arts, literature, and moral and legal ideas.

### Setting the Stage

Mukherjee discusses the course of curriculum development in India amidst the backdrop of educational reforms in England. He shows how these debates and developments in England were replicated in the early teaching of English in India. However, “the difference was that, whereas in England, the trajectory of English education cut across class, in India it intersected race as well as class” (p 177).

The implicit goal of the British texts was to achieve “cultural hegemony”. There was near complete absence of topics, texts and authors from India, contemporary Europe outside Britain and religious traditions other than Protestantism. Literary history presented British literature within a universalistic framework and language, grammar and rhetoric followed Greek and Latin models.

An important point in this context is that the curriculum of higher English education in India was not conceptualised keeping in mind the lower orders of Indian society, including the peasantry, which constituted the overwhelming majority of India’s population, and the lesser sections of urban society. It was clearly a programme of study meant for children of the elite, or, at the most, the urban and small town upper to middle classes.

Mukherjee makes an incisive analysis of how education involved a dual and complex process of alienation and internalisation

through an examination of students’ answers in the senior scholarship examination. Moving from a dissection of answers, he examines the performative side of hegemony through an examination of two texts, a diary by Amar Singh, an officer in the British army and the scion of an aristocratic family, and an autobiography by C D Narasimhaiah who hailed from a “low” caste poor family in south India and became one of post-independence India’s first professors of English.

### The New Arena of Contestation

From the colonial project of “minimal hegemony” to the construction of an “alternative hegemony” by the Hindu elite class, Mukherjee progresses towards analysing the hegemonic contest of the dalits who visualise possibilities of emancipation through the study of English and hence access to western knowledge. He critically analyses the case for English education articulated by dalit intellectuals such as Chandra Bhan Prasad and others to show that the basis of their argument for English education is actually similar to the arguments put forward by the early Indian advocates for English education such as Raja Rammohun Roy.

Like them, dalit intellectuals have constructed the west as a repository of knowledge, culture, civilisational values, liberatory ideas and economic success. He counters Bhan’s unilateral representation of Ambedkar as being closer to western culture to show that although Ambedkar demonstrated a western sensibility in his personal lifestyle, rationalism and political vision, nowhere in his pronouncements or personal life does he follow an uncritical and unquestioning acceptance of all things western.

The author notes that after independence, through deliberate institutional and systemic strategies, English language and literary study became, for the most part, either a depoliticised, conservative, aesthetic activity to support a particular kind of breeding or sensibility, or the pragmatic means to acquire a practical tool in the pursuit of material advancement at the national and individual levels. In this context, he sees the rising demands of women, dalits and minorities as important developments that seek to challenge an elite class determined to preserve and perpetuate the status quo, thereby valourising the role,

importance and ascendancy of English over Indian languages and literatures.

An important cause for the changing economy of English studies in India, he believes, is the movement of the “high” caste middle class male towards the more lucrative pastures of the IITs and the IIMS and the vacated field being rapidly populated by members of scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, Other Backward Castes, children of the poor urban and rural families, and women. He locates these arguments within the larger discourse of political India that is increasingly seeking to be a player and a partner in the globalised economy and the rising aspirations of a burgeoning, affluent and essentially conservative middle class that is seeking greater mobility. This middle class wants an education that equips it for material and

social success internationally and sees English as the conduit to that success.

Through an analysis of past debates that dominated the introduction of English education in the country to the present contests over the disciplinary space of English studies, the author seeks to find an answer to an important underlying question – is the present curriculum, which continues to valorise the language and literary productions of Anglo-America, consistent with the espoused democratic values or the social, cultural and economic needs of the majority? The control of the institutional space within which this transformational agenda can be realised is a consideration that requires serious attention.

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