

From Elite to Subaltern:

Stages in the adoption of the English language in India

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Abstract:

Probal Dasgupta, in his book, *The Otherness of English*, posits that “the communication matrix of India identifies for English-in-India the role of an “auntie” who is around, but not one of us.” Despite early reservations about the adaptability of the English language to Indian sensibilities, and continuing antagonism against the imposition of the hegemony of English over India in some pockets, the notion that the English language is an “other” in India could not seem more far-fetched in this day and age – at a time when critics have been speculating that the way English is spoken in India may imminently dictate how English is going to be spoken as a global language. In this paper, I analyse the evolution of the English language in postcolonial India, from its status as a legacy of colonialism, to becoming India’s very own representative. I argue that the process is temporally marked by three stages, and that three different classes of Indians have adopted and appropriated the English language to make it truly pan-Indian.

KEYWORDS: *postcolonial India, English language, class, caste*

In an address he gave at the University of Oxford on 8 July 2005 the Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, thanked England for the bestowal of the English language upon India. He was quoted as saying:

Of all the legacies of the Raj, none is more important than the English language and the modern school system [...] Of course, people here may not recognise the language we speak, but let me assure you that it is English! In indigenising English, as so many people have done in so many nations across the world, we have made the language our own. Our choice of prepositions may not always be the Queen’s English; we might occasionally split the infinitive; and we may drop and article here and add an extra one there. I am sure everyone will agree, however, that English has been enriched by Indian creativity as well and we have given you

R. K. Narayan and Salman Rushdie. Today, English in India is seen as just another Indian language.¹

Speaking in his capacity as the head of the Indian government, Singh's statement was, no doubt, a calculated political step – especially since he was addressing a gathering at the University of Oxford (arguably the epitomic English seat of learning – since Oxford is, notoriously, the oldest university in the English-speaking world). In many ways, the statement can be interpreted as an almost passive-aggressive vindication of the capability of India, the ex-colony, to write back to the former Empire – and surpass it at its own game: 'I am sure everyone will agree, however, that English has been enriched by Indian creativity as well and we have given you R. K. Narayan and Salman Rushdie.'² Singh's *you* speaks volumes. It resonates of his pride in how this alien language of conquest, which came to India piggy-backing on colonisation, was adopted and nurtured by the natives to such an extent that the adopted is now in a position to stand up to the *natal* parent as an enhanced version of its original self – and, presumably, as more representative of the adopted parent, for there is a marked tendency in contemporary Indian literary discourse to treat the English language as having been bangalored to postcolonial India.³ G. J. V. Prasad, for instance, surmises that:

Of course, they have gifted it [the English language] away to us! How many of us know any new British writers? We know so many Indian English writers, there are so many of them now that you could be sitting next to one on a bus [...] Indians now, Hindus and Sikhs and Muslims, have gone and settled in other countries and having said our prayers, our Sri Ganeshas or whatever, begun to write with a vengeance in what was once their language – English, the language that has become Indian.⁴

David Crystal, author of the *Cambridge Encyclopaedia of the English Language*, pushes this further by conjecturing that, given India's economic ascent and its utter population, the way India speaks English is likely to become the norm – rather than the quirky exception. 'If 100 million Indians pronounce an English word in a certain way, this is more than Britain's population – so it's the only way to pronounce it', Crystal notes.⁵

While the implications that the adoption of the English language by India is at the expense of its ownership by Britain is, obviously, contestable, there is no doubt that, at least by now within India, the English language is not harnessed to the Empire.⁶ Despite lingering debates about whether English will

1 Manmohan Singh, Address at the University of Oxford on 8 July 2005, reproduced in *The Hindu*, accessed on 25 June 2012, <<http://www.hindu.com/nic/0046/pmspeech.htm>>.

2 Ibid. My emphasis.

3 The term 'bangalorisation' refers way in which multinational companies outsourced their operations to Indian cities.

4 G. J. V. Prasad, *Writing India, Writing English* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2011) p. 75.

5 David Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of the English Language*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) p. 258.

6 The statements by Singh and Prasad, especially, skim over the politics of the wider Anglophone world – including the United States of America – whose English came to define the new prototype of the English language, due to its political and economic preponderance in

'kill' bhasha languages by rendering them redundant that still go on in academic and political circles, there is noticeably less tendency to dwell on the symbolic import of the English language as entailing a degree of intellectual slavery to the English, and concentrate more on its functional aspect instead.⁷ And, in practice, English is indeed equally *Indian*.

Proof of how the adopted has now become one's own is discernible in the various official endorsements of the language at national level. *The Indian Constitution* – symbol of India's freedom from the English – sanctions English as the 'associate official language,' a pedestal it occupies alongside Hindi.⁸ India does not actually have a national language (posited as the strategic marker of national identity, and an emblem of loyalty to the nation, in much nationalist discourse).⁹ English, therefore, enjoys a greater privileged position than the 21 other official bhasha languages at national level.¹⁰ This is because the influence and prevalence of these 21 bhasha languages is usually restricted within narrower geographical expanses (for example, Tamil in Tamil Nadu, Oriya in Orissa), while the impact of English is not regionally bound. Furthermore, 6 of the 28 Indian states have English as an official state language (usually along with another language, but, in the case of Nagaland and Meghalaya, as the only one). After Hindi, English is also the language that is spoken by most Indians. 125 million Indians, according to the data collected in the 2001 national census, spoke English as a primary or subsidiary

the 20th century. They also fail to take into account the linguistic environment in former English colonies, where English still survives as a daily language.

- 7 Mark Tully, 'Will English kill off India's languages?' *BBC* 29 Nov. 2011, accessed on 25 June 2012 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-15635553>>.
- 8 The Constitution of India was itself drafted in the English language, and to this day, it remains the authorised version, with no other version with legal standing in any *bhasha* language. English is also the juridical and legal lynchpin at national level, as specified in the Constitution, in Article 348.
- 9 Though the space of this work does not allow me to go into this debate in depth, I should, at this point, say something about the significance of national language in India. The country is no less than a polyglossic explosion (following Mikhail Bakhtin's understanding of 'polyglossia' as 'the simultaneous presence of two or more national languages interacting within a single cultural system'). As per the 2001 census, 122 languages (which further break down into 234 mother-tongues) are registered in India. And yet, India is not able to boast of the unity and strength provided through a shared common national language, which, according to much nationalist discourse, is a prerequisite for nationhood. 19th century Romantic European nationalism, for instance, primed a national language for nationhood. Following the First World War, new national frontiers within Europe were also largely negotiated along linguistic lines. Within India too, there was much lobbying for a common national language, during the nationalist and post-independence phase. For example, the *Report of the Linguistic Provinces Commission*, in 1948, stressed that 'in order to secure [...] stability and integration, India should have a strong Centre and a national language,' and expressed great concern over the fact that 'India [was] about to experiment under the new Constitution with autonomous states and adult franchise without the cementing force of a national language to take the place of English.' *Report of the Linguistic Provinces Commission* (Delhi: Govt. Of India Press, 1948) p. 182.
- 10 All the languages listed in the 8th Schedule in the Constitution, except for Hindi.

language, with 226,449 speakers actually claiming it as their 'mother tongue'.¹¹ Within this 125-million figure, there is also the non-researched category of speakers who, like the young Vikram Seth, represent the India for whom their 'mother tongue' – in the sense in which the term is exploited to designate one's ethno- and socio-linguistic identity – is Hindi, or another bhasha language, but whose "mother's tongue" (in the sense of it being the language imparted by the mother to her child) is in fact English.¹²

And though in the earlier days of its adoption even Indian literary practitioners in the English language questioned its adaptability to Indian sensibilities, today this anxiety has considerably lessened. Among those who initially felt culpable for writing in the English language was the writer Raja Rao, who, in the foreword to his 1938 novel, *Kanthapura*, bewailed the void created when '[o]ne has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language.'¹³ It is Salman Rushdie (often cursed for, seemingly, obliterating the generations of Indian English writers who came before him) who is largely responsible for rendering this anxiety obsolete.¹⁴ The celebration of the creative possibilities of the varieties of English spoken in India, and the ensuing exculpating success of his 1981 novel, *Midnight's Children*, on an international scale (including the triple endorsement of the Booker Prize), propelled a series of Indian English writers to pick up their craft guiltlessly.¹⁵ Though the space of this work does not allow me to explore the extent to which the credit assigned to Rushdie is deserved, it is true that, since Rushdie, there has been less need to come up with bellicose defence of one's writing medium – like previous generations often had to. R. K. Narayan, for instance, who wrote the following essay during the anti-English agitations in the 1960s in which he personalised the English language and had it militate for its right to stay in India:

I will stay here, whatever may be the rank and status you may assign me – as the first language, or the second language, or the thousandth. You may banish me from the classrooms, but I can always find other places where I can stay [...] I am more Indian than you can ever be. You are probably fifty, sixty or seventy of age, but I've actually been in this country for two hundred years.¹⁶

Nor is there any need for the blessings of *Bapu* (i.e. Mahatma Gandhi) – or another evidently Indian figure – to exonerate the Indian writer from the sins

11 Census of India 2001, accessed on 25 June 2012 <http://censusindia.gov.in/Census_Data_2001/Census_Data_Online/Language/Statement1.htm>.

12 Vikram Seth's mother, Leila Seth, narrates, an incident whereby the young Seth, on being asked what his mother tongue is, responds: '(M)y mother tongue is Hindi – but my mother's tongue is English.' Seth, *On Balance* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2007) p. 10.

13 Raja Rao, Foreword, *Kanthapura* (Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1970) p. 5.

14 For instance by Pankaj Mishra in 'The Emperor's new clothes,' *New Statesman and Society* 128, (9 Apr. 1999), pp. 42-5, at p. 43.

15 Booker Prize (1981); Booker of Bookers (1993); Best of the Booker (2008).

16 R. K. Narayan, 'To a Hindi Enthusiast,' *A Writer's Nightmare* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1988) p. 15.

of writing in the foreign English language. G. J. V. Prasad records how, at the peak of Gandhi's anti-English protests, preceding independence, Mulk Raj Anand, another Indian English writer of great renown, sought the absolution of Gandhi to be reassured that, since the message of his stories was greater than the medium, the choice of the English language could be glossed over. Anand writes that when he could not publish in Urdu 'because there was no honest publisher I knew of in that language', he asked Bapu Gandhi 'whether it was wrong of me to write in the English language.' Gandhi replied: 'The purpose of writing is to communicate, isn't it? If so, say your say in any language that comes to hand. Only say it quickly. There is no time to lose.'¹⁷

Tellingly, Gandhi otherwise perceived English as the language of humiliation. He laments, in *Hind Swaraj*:

Is it not a sad commentary that we should have to speak of Home Rule in a foreign tongue? [...] Our best thoughts are expressed in English; the proceedings of our Congress are conducted in English; our best newspapers are printed in English. If this state of things continues for a long time, posterity will – it is my firm opinion – condemn and curse us [...].¹⁸

English has survived the antagonism of the *Angrezi Hatao* (Remove the English Language) campaigns, under its various avatars, since Gandhi's resistance to it.¹⁹ It has undergone several layers of naturalisation to become India's language of pride and prestige – not only in terms of the reverence in which it is held within the country, but also in the way that India's status as an English-literate nation is now believed to give the country a comparative advantage on the international scale.²⁰ Significantly, former Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee (himself a fervent participant in Rammanohar Lohia's *Angrezi Hatao* campaign in the 1950s–60s) flagged up India's more widespread adoption of the English language as part of the national achievements under his governance, celebrated in his 'India Shining' campaign in the early 2000s. Non-Indian observers too seem to agree that the way the adopted English language has percolated among Indians gives India a cutting edge over rival countries, such as China, in the race for super-power status. Bill Emmott, for example, claims that 'if you compare India with China, India comes up short on almost every measure except for that ability to use English.'²¹

¹⁷ Prasad, p. 84.

¹⁸ M. K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) p. 103.

¹⁹ Gandhi's anti-English language stance, dating from the nationalist movement, has had various revivals since. In the late 1950s, Hindi activists, such as Lohia, launched the *Angrezi Hatao* campaign to counter the proposal of preserving the English language constitutionally, as a link language, for 15 years. *Angrezi Hatao* was kept alive, in the 1990s and 2000s, by nativist politicians, such as Mulayam Singh Yadav, the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, who continues to militate against the spread of – and dependence on – the English language in India.

²⁰ English is, almost uniquely, the language of tertiary education. It is also the marker of success on the literary scene, for even *bhasha* writers are only deemed 'successful' when they are translated into the English language.

²¹ Bill Emmott, *Rivals* (New York: Penguin, 2008) p. 149.

Having said that, critics have often, aptly, pointed out that, though it may be all very well that relatively more people speak English in India than in some primarily Anglophone countries (such as Australia, for example), English is yet a very elite preserve in India. As a language mostly restricted to cosmopolitan and urban spaces (such as the world of writers and artists, universities and research institutes, politics, international commerce, and the internet), it does not really concern, or reach, the 72% of India that still dwells in villages – not to mention the shocking percentage of the population still steeped in illiteracy.²² And yet, while conceding that there is a certain degree of elitism and hegemony attached to the language itself (no fame, no money, no larger platform without English), I want to spend the rest of this article in analysing how, over the years, the groups who have adopted and appropriated the English language in India have been less and less elitist. I propose that the English language has gone from being an exclusively elite privilege in newly postcolonial India, to a torchbearer for more subaltern communities.

Macaulay's Children (1947-1960s)

At the time of independence, Rammanohar Lohia advanced: 'Out of 40 crores, English has touched a fringe of 40 lakhs Indians only. The government has its eyes set on this privileged class of 40 lakhs.'²³ This early association of the English language with privilege could not be contested. Indians during the colonial times spoke English either because they needed it for professional or social interaction with the English (and sometimes the world outside India), or simply because they could afford the luxury of learning it. Either way, they fell on the same side of the class divide. As put by the University Education Commission, in 1949:

Use of English as such divides the people into two nations, the few who govern and the many who are governed, the one unable to talk the language of the other and mutually incomprehending.²⁴

Even the first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru – who was in favour of retaining the English language and disseminating it among Indians after independence – conceded that

Some people imagine that English has served as [a common all-India medium of communication], and to some extent English has served as such for our upper classes and for all-India political

22 According to a report released by the UNESCO, India 'has the largest number of illiterate adults in the world.' *Deccan Herald* 19 Jan. 2010, accessed on 25 June 2012 <<http://www.deccanherald.com/content/47788/india-still-home-largest-illiterate.html>>.

23 Rammanohar Lohia, in Ramchandra Guha, *Makers of Modern India* (Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 2011) p. 365. My emphasis.

24 *Report of the University Education Commission* Dec. 1948-Aug. 1949 (Delhi: Govt. Of India Press, 1950) p. 276.

purposes. But this is manifestly impossible if we think in terms of the masses.²⁵

Class, therefore, almost single-handedly dictated who had access to the English language in the early post-independence days. The root of this divide is, as expected, traceable back to colonial interventions. Thomas Babington Macaulay, serving on the Supreme Council of India, is often cursed for perpetuating this language-based class divide, especially since he was aware, when he argued for the institutionalisation of the English language as the medium for tertiary level education, in his (in)famous 1835 *Minute on Indian Education*, that, already by that time '(i)n India, English is the language spoken by the ruling class. It is spoken by the higher class of natives at the seats of Government.'²⁶

His dream that 'we [i.e., the English in India] must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern – a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect' saw the naissance of a medley of such natives within the coming years.²⁷ As well as the Indian mimics of Englishmen who imbued the ideology of the English, along with the language, and were sympathetic to the Empire, English language education also produced nationalist figures, such as Nehru and Mohammed Ali Jinnah, who may have been 'English in tastes' but were entirely opposed to the Empire.²⁸ English language education also produced notable nationalist figures, such as Gandhi, who would go on to categorically reject the English language education they had acquired. The latter, however, still belonged to the upper echelons of society – through means of the power and influence they commanded. One thing was therefore undeniable: English language, at that stage, was able to transcend nationalist sympathies, but not class.

Vikram Seth's novel *A Suitable Boy*, set in the early 1950s, aptly demonstrates the different faces of these children of Macaulay. One of Seth's protagonists, Arun Mehra, emblematises the first prototype: the 'brown sahib,' a close relative of the *whitened* "Negro of the Antilles," whom Frantz Fanon describes in his *Black Skins, White Masks*. Fanon writes that:

Every colonised people – in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality – finds itself face to face with the language of the civilising nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonised is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother coun-

25 Jawaharlal Nehru, 'Question of language,' *The Unity of India*, 2nd ed. (London: Lindsey Drummond, 1942) p. 244.

26 T. B. Macaulay, 'Minute in Education,' *Imperialism*, ed. Philip Curtin (New York: Harper and Row, 1971): pp. 181-191, at p. 184.

27 Macaulay, p. 188.

28 Nehru once called himself 'the last Englishman to rule India,' and much has also been written on Jinnah's upper-class English lifestyle.

try's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle.²⁹

To renounce his 'Indianness' in order to adopt 'Englishness,' through its language, seems to be exactly the logic that Arun tries to follow. After his English missionary-school education, Arun lands himself a job in a Calcutta-based English company, Bentsen Pryce. His colleagues and larger social circle are all English expatriates, or Indians of the upper class (such as Billy Irani and Bishwanath Bhaduri) who "lead" their lives in the English language more than in bhashas. The spaces where Arun operates (such as the Calcutta Club, the nightclubs such as Firpos and Golden Slipper, or the "exclusively European" Tollygunge Race Club – where he is admitted as a guest of his English colleagues) are not only elitist, but also primarily – if not exclusively – English-speaking.³⁰

Tellingly, Arun, in his 'native-proof casing' hesitates to converse in anything but the English language.³¹ In a scene set in the Calcutta Club, he lowers his voice when using two words in Hindi, while conversing with an Indian businessman he is half-ashamed to be seen associating with. Arun also sees himself as being liable to give verdicts on other people's use of the English language – presumably by dint of setting himself as a parameter, due to his sense of his ownership of the English language. He writes of Haresh Khanna's English:

Despite his having studied English at St Stephen's and having lived in England for two years, his use of the English language leaves a great deal to be desired [...] This is not merely a question of his accent, which immediately betrays the fact that English is very far from being his first language; it is a question of his idiom and diction, of his very sense, sometimes, of what is being said.³²

All in all, Arun fits the mould of the arriviste middle-class Indian in post-colonial India, still enamoured by the Empire and its grandeur, who set himself up as the most deserving candidate for being the adoptive parent of the English language. The English language was, in many ways, for Arun's ilk an inheritance left behind by the English, and he therefore also acts as its gatekeeper. Arun's use of language in the novel sets him up as being the perfect Indian heir of the colonial mindset that Macaulay sought to impart via language.

A different face of Macaulay's children is introduced in the novel through Amit Chatterji. Amit studied at the University of Oxford, and is a writer of the English language – but he is markedly unlike the Fanonian 'Negro,' returning to his country, from the 'mother country,' with expectations of being hailed

29 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto, 1986) p. 18.

30 Vikram Seth, *A Suitable Boy* (New Delhi: Viking-Penguin, 1993) p. 440.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 1025.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 1223.

as a 'demigod'.³³ His approach to the English language and its culture is a lot less reverential. When confronted about his choice of writing medium, Amit responds:

It wasn't a question of choice. Someone who had been trained all his life to play the sitar could become a sarangi player because his ideology or his conscience told him to.³⁴

Amit is as dependent on the English language as Arun, but unlike Arun, Amit divorces the language with its symbolical association with the English. It is clearly stated in the novel that Amit risks being arrested by the British for his involvement in student politics against the British, at the time when the freedom movement was at its peak, and his attachment to the English language does not therefore translate as his attachment to the Empire (even if Amit is not belligerently nationalist either).³⁵

A more markedly nationalist figure fluent in the English language is portrayed in the novel via the character of the Purva Pradesh-based politician, the Revenue Minister, Mahesh Kapoor. He is yet another child of Macaulay (however unlikely the link between him and Arun may seem). Nehruvian to the core, Mahesh Kapoor's use of the English language is, again, for practical, rather than symbolic purposes. Seth specifies that Mahesh Kapoor is in fact more literate in the English language and Urdu than in Hindi (which, at the time, was being put forth as the symbolic rival of the hegemony represented in the English language, by nativist nationalists such as Lohia, among others):

The English speeches he could of course read without difficulty. But he tended to skip the Hindi ones, as they made him struggle.³⁶

As a manager in an English company, a poet of the English language, and a minister in liberated India respectively, Arun, Amit and Mahesh Kapoor might seem like an unlikely mix. But though their ideologies differ, all these characters are firmly placed in a position of relative privilege. In this way, Seth is explicit in showing how, in the 1950s, speaking English entailed a specific social standing.

The BPO generation (1990s-2000)

So when, if at all, did the ownership of English change hands in India? I would like to posit that it was in the 1990s. According to the data collected in the 2001 census, between 1991 and 2001, the number of speakers who listed English as their mother tongue alone went up by 26.79%, with a total of 226,449 people (in comparison to the 178,598 of the decade before).³⁷ Given the romantic investment usually implicated in the term 'mother tongue' in India, it is

33 Fanon, p. 19.

34 Seth, p. 1253.

35 Ibid., p. 468.

36 Ibid., p. 327.

37 Census of India 2001, 'Abstract of speakers' strength of language and mother tongues,' accessed on 25 June 2012 <http://censusindia.gov.in/Census_Data_2001/Census_Data_Online/Language/Statement8.htm>.

clear that the increase in people willing to list English as their mother tongue meant that more people had actually adopted the language as their own, and no longer just viewed it as an ornamental luxury, or a tool of convenience.³⁸ India's new economic policies had a large role to play in this. The opening of the portals to foreign investors, and the boom in Business Process Outsourcing Services that followed swiftly in its trail, meant that, in the early 1990s, the English language swept through India in a way it never had before. Susan Sontag suggested that this rapidly expanded practice of business outsourcing had created conditions where the adopted English language had become a more elemental and 'real' part of the life of many Indians than the organic bhashas. This group of Indians was not the erstwhile elite, but from a much lower stratum. In the 1990s, English became the perquisite of the young, IT-conversant crowd, who were strategically positioned between India and the world outside only virtually (for they could not boast of the physical international mobility that the elite could afford). And yet the young, non-elite Indians working in call centres, and doing desk jobs in Indian branches of multinational companies, sensed a closer proximity to this virtual life, to which they were connected through the English language:

They have been assigned American names and little biographies of their American identities: place and date of birth, parents' occupation, number of siblings, religious denomination (almost always Protestant), high school, favourite sport, favourite kind of music, marital status, and the like. If asked where they are, they have a reply [...] Letting on that they are in Bangalore, India, would get pretend-Nancy or pretend-Bill instantly fired [...] And of course virtually none of these young people has ever left home [...] Would 'Nancy' and 'Bill' prefer to be a real Nancy and a real Bill? Almost all say – there have been interviews – that they would. Would they want to come to America, where it would be normal to speak English all the time with an American accent? Of course they would.³⁹

Chetan Bhagat's *One Night @ the Call Centre* is an apt portrayal of this new generation, who had assumed ownership of the English language. At the very beginning of the novel, a young woman confronts the writer, Bhagat, about his claim of writing about the 'youth' of India:

So you wrote a book on IT. A place where so few people get to go.

You think that represents the entire youth?⁴⁰

This sets the tone for *One Night @ the Call Centre*. The privileged group who could make it into elite institutions like the Indian Institute of Technology could not represent the entire youth culture of India. A bigger representa-

38 Anyone familiar with India's popular and literary culture will know how 'mothers' are much revered figures in the Indian – and especially Hindu – life-world.

39 Susan Sontag, 'The World as India,' St Jerome Lecture on Literary Translation, July 2007, accessed on 25 June 2012 <<http://www.susansontag.com/prize/onTranslation.shtml>>. My emphasis.

40 Chetan Bhagat, *One Night @ the Call Centre* (New Delhi: Rupa, 2005) p. 8.

tive of Indian youth culture belonged to the lower strata, the group, for instance, who had joined the bandwagon when India's economy was liberalised in the early 1990s: young, lower middle-class people, who aspired to social and economic mobility. Shyam (or Sam) and his colleagues at the call centre (who include an aspiring model, Esha, and a woman married in an orthodox Hindu family, Radhika), in *One Night @ the Call Centre*, form the spectrum of the 1990s adopters of the English language. Fluidity and versatility – and not class privilege – were the markers of the new adopters of the English language. As well as their articulateness in catering to the problems of their American callers, these new adopters of English were also comfortable to talk about their daily, India-based, life in the English language.⁴¹ One minute, Radhika, under the pseudonym of Regina, is answering calls about the functionalities of electric appliances, with a perfect approximation of the American accent (which makes a customer tell her that she sounds like his daughter), and in the next minute, she bewails her marital problems (which belong to the sphere of the domestic):

'Anuj is in Kolkata on tour. He called home and my mother-in-law told him 'Radhika made a face when I told her to crush the almonds a bit finer.'⁴²

Interestingly, in *A Suitable Boy*, characters would often veer to bhasha languages when talking about emotionalised or familial topics. For example, in the middle of a dictation being given in the English language, Justice Chatterji is irked by an inadvertent comment made by his clerk, and he rebukes him in Bengali:

'I'm not taking it, Biswas Babu,' said Mr Chatterji, very sharply, and in Bengali.

So shocked was his clerk that he quite forgot himself. 'Why not Sir?' he replied, also in Bengali.⁴³

This dichotomy, which Rao demarcated as the separation between Indians' emotional and intellectual make up, does not survive in the 1990s.⁴⁴ The fluidity and versatility of the call centre crowd, who are able to vacillate between answering queries about "WA 100 model oven," on the one hand, and complain about having to crush almonds finer to mix with milk, on the other hand, are the second set of English's adoptive parents in India.

Dalit-Bahujan (2000s-now)

At the very beginning of his novel, *The White Tiger*, Aravind Adiga has his protagonist (a Dalit character who has risen from his despondent existence to

41 Their work generally involves assisting American companies in the sales, service and maintenance of their operations, whereby the calls to these companies get diverted to India to be dealt with.

42 Bhagat, pp. 24, 55.

43 Seth, p. 473.

44 Presented through *bhashas* and the English language respectively.

a life of wealth and ease) write a letter to the Premier of China, which starts as follows:

Sir.

Neither you nor I speak English, but there are some things that can only be said in English.⁴⁵

Some things can only be said in English because English is considered a language that allows a certain degree of liberty to be taken. Within the first few pages of his letter to Wen Jiabao, Balram, the protagonist, owns up to this liberty allowed to him by the English language by including the sentence 'What a fucking joke' in his letter.⁴⁶ Writing the term *fucking* when addressing the Premier of China, according to Balram, is permissible, because the word is in the English language – and some things “can only be said in English.” English is also the language of possibility. Despite not knowing the language himself, and being aware that neither does Wen Jiabao (presumably), Balram still composes his letter in English, because of the possibility of its reach. And English is, of course, also the language that opens up opportunities. In a significant episode, Balram buys himself a T-shirt, ‘all white, with a small word in English in the centre’ – to enable his entry in a posh Delhi shopping mall, where he was previously denied entry due to his unsophisticated appearance (earlier, Balram wore a richly coloured t-shirt, ‘very colourful, with lots of words and designs on it. Better value for the money.’)⁴⁷ The plain, one English-lettered T-shirt, however, proves to be the passport to entry into the world of the affluent and influential, and the security guards at the gates of the mall do not question him when he seeks entry into the mall with the latter T-shirt. It is, precisely, because of these liberties, possibilities, opportunities enabled by the English language that the language gained a third set of adoptive parents.

This third group is one that, historically, has been at the lowest echelon of the Indian social stratification. This is the subaltern Dalit-Bahujan group, formerly known as outcastes, or untouchables, placed at the very bottom of the Hindu caste system. The adoption of the English language by this particular group is motivated by the fact that, as put by Kancha Illiah, English – the ‘common language of the (sic.) global science and technology market and the overall economy,’ ‘empowers.’⁴⁸ The adoption of the English language thus presumably entails the possibility of access to the wide stores of knowledge preserved within the English language. English is perceived as the ladder that will assist Dalits in their social and economic ascension. Babasaheb Ambedkar, the Dalit who rose from the confines of his caste to become a highly respected figure in Indian politics – and was, significantly, Chair of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution, which granted equal rights to Dalits in free India – is often hailed as the model to follow.

45 Aravind Adiga, *White Tiger* (New York, Free Press, 2008) p. 5.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 150.

48 Kancha Illiah, ‘English empowers,’ *Tehelka* 05 May 2007, accessed on 25 June 2012 <http://www.tehelka.com/story_main29.asp?filename=opo50507English_empowers.asp>.

His access to the English language is made to seem key to his success and the power that he subsequently came to command – due to which he was able to construct a powerful platform to militate for the emancipation of Dalits in India. As put by Eash Kumar Gaganiya, in his message to propagate the English language among Dalits:

Had Ambedkar not learned English, he would not have gone abroad ... and had he not gone abroad, he would not have become Babasaheb for us [...] If you learn English, you too can scale the heights Babasaheb did.⁴⁹

Furthermore, as well as being empowering, the English language is also projected as granting Dalits the mobility that can carry them across caste-prescribed boundaries, which is not allowed to them via bhasha languages, which are usually caste-marked. G. J. V. Prasad, for instance, testifies about his experience of speaking Tamil in a multi-caste arrangement:

Our school had Tamil students from all strata of society – children of road workers, construction labourers and maidservants as well as children of upper-middle-class families. This meant a difference in caste and a difference in the kind of Tamil we spoke, since Tamil is a caste- and region-marked language [...] To speak mainly in Tamil was to give in to the hierarchisation implicit in the language as well as its tensions and prejudices [...].⁵⁰

Since the English language is not entrenched in such constructs, it is believed to be “context free,” and therefore becomes the arch-social equaliser.⁵¹ English homogenises. It is democratic, for it erases the hierarchies implicit in bhashas. The new adopters of the English language overrule even its former class-specificity. Indeed, in an ironic reversal of situation, Macaulay’s birthday, on the 25th of October, is actually celebrated as a Dalit festival, “English Day,” started by Chandra Bhan Prasad. Macaulay’s ‘Minute’ is argued to be the door that opened possibilities for anyone who adopts and masters the language to be modernised and cast aside the stranglehold of Brahmanic (upper-caste) languages, such as Sanskrit, or classical languages, such as Arabic and Persian – all prerogatives of the elite, which had thus far been the gatekeepers of Indian education. As reported by Prasad, the speakers on English Day celebrations invariably expressed their gratitude to Macaulay:

Dr Jadhav spoke at length detailing as how Lord Macaulay’s ground breaking initiative facilitated Dalits’ entry into school-rooms. ‘Under Gurukula system, Dalits had a zero chance of entering the indigenous school system [...]’. Prof. Bibek Debroy [...] spoke on the life and works of Lord Macaulay. ‘It was Lord Macaulay who brought all Indians equal before Law by drafting Indian Penal Code and Cr. PC.’ He added, ‘Macaulay never mar-

49 Eash Kumar Gaganiya, in ‘D is for Dalits,’ *Times of India* 9 May 2010, accessed on 25 June 2012 <http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2010-05-09/special-report/28295913_1_english-medium-chandra-bhan-prasad-dalits>.

50 Prasad, p. 32.

51 A. K. Ramanujan in ‘Is there an Indian way of thinking?’

ried. As far as I know, he had no children. But, let me tell you, we all gathered here this evening, are Children of Macaulay.⁵²

But perhaps the most ostensible marker of how the English language is now the Dalits' own is reflected in the fact that this group has deified the English language. There is now a temple constructed in honour of the "Dalit goddess," the English language. (Significantly, this temple was inaugurated on Macaulay's birthday).⁵³ This goddess is modelled on the Statue of Liberty, with a few adjustments: she holds a pen (a mark of literacy) in her right hand, and meaningfully, the Indian Constitution (whose association with the English language and Dalits I already discussed above) in the left one. She is dressed in robes and a hat – instead of the traditional saree that Hindu goddesses are usually clad in – presumably as a sign of her 'modernisation.' Furthermore, her pedestal is a computer – another potent marker of her emancipation. Prasad calls her the 'goddess of Hope' and attests that 'she is a symbol of Dalit renaissance.'⁵⁴ The deification of the English language leaves a sense that, not only have Dalits adopted English as their own, but they also feel adopted by the English language – this powerful goddess who will watch over them and oversee them on the path to a better existence.

* * * * *

Analysing the complex relationship that exists between the language of the coloniser and the people who are colonised, Fanon postulates: 'To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture.'⁵⁵ The adoption of the English language in India has, however, over the course of time, resulted less in an embracing of English culture, and more in the "indianisation" of the English language, at various levels. The way in which the English language has percolated among different social groups further suggests that the adoption of the language has been openhearted, not grudging or imposed. For very long, discussion of the English language in India – even when it was not being ruded for being despotic or hegemonic – has overflowed with the jargon of warfare and occupation: Ashis Nandy, for instance, calls the English language India's "intimate enemy," to refer to the way in which the language has – in turn, though sometimes also at once – been resisted, as well as aspired to. There is much talk of how the English language enabled a "reversal of the power equation" – as put, for instance, by Rushdie, who claims that 'the process of making ourselves completely free' was completed by 'conquering English.'⁵⁶

52 Chandra Bhan Prasad, 'English Day today,' *English Day, English Temple Now*, accessed on 25 June 2012 <<http://chandrabhanprasad.com/frnEnglishDay.aspx>>.

53 Geeta Pandey, 'An "English goddess" for India's down-trodden,' *BBC* 15 Feb. 2011 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12355740>>.

54 *Ibid.*

55 Fanon, p. 38.

56 Salman Rushdie, 'Imaginary Homelands,' *Imaginary Homelands* (New York: Granta, 1991) p. 17.

Discussing the process through which the colonial language survives in the ex-colony, Bill Ashcroft et al write that postcolonial writing defines itself by seizing the language of the centre and replacing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonised place. There are two distinct processes by which it does this. The first, the abrogation or denial of the privilege of 'English' involves a rejection of the metropolitan power over the means of communication. The second, the appropriation and reconstitution of the language of the centre, the process of capturing and remoulding the language to new usages, marks a separation from the site of colonial privilege.⁵⁷

Words like *enemy*, *conquering*, *subjects-masters*, "capturing and remoulding," that abound, all connote a certain forcefulness, which does not entirely do justice to the process through which the English language continues to exist in postcolonial India. A better evaluation is therefore possible by acknowledging that the English language remained because of its various adoptive parents, who have constantly remoulded and refashioned it as their own.

⁵⁷ Ashcroft *et al.*, p. 37.