Language Policy of the East India Company, 1600–1857

A Case Study in Interdisciplinary Research

SHREESH CHAUDHARY
Indian Institute of Technology
Madras

Unlike in sciences and engineering, multidisciplinary studies in humanities and social sciences seem rare. In the present article I will like to share some of my experiences and observations in this concern with reference to a project of study I have been engaged in for some years.

While researching for a paper on testing spoken English some years ago, I had this curiosity about the past—how was spoken English taught and tested while the British were still here in India. And then one question led to another and I found myself besieged with a whole lot of them concerning the use of foreign languages in India as well as concerning the foreigners' use of Indian languages in India. Some of these questions, for example, are given below:

> Other than the British, who were the first users of English in India?
> What language did the British use with the Indians and others in India?
> Who were the first teachers of English in India?
> Why did the Indians need to learn English in the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries?
> What teaching and testing methods and materials were used by the first teachers and learners of English in India?

How similar or dissimilar was the English used by Indians to that used by the British in India, especially in pronunciation, syntax and pragmatics?

I had many other questions of a similar kind.

I had little doubt even then that the answers to many of these questions could not be found in only one place, or even in only

Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences, Vol. IX, No. 2, Winter 2002, pp. 65-77.

one area of history or linguistics. Some six years later I realize that much of this may be beyond the capacity of one researcher past his middle age and without much support. I also had doubts about the relevance of such a study - if such an enquiry is in deed worth the time and money it would take. There were other doubts and hesitations.

English is not the only language which is and which has in the past been used as a language of communication by and with non-native speakers. Many languages of the world have had this distinction. Still surviving among the once colonizing languages are Arabic, Chinese, Dutch, French, Greek, Hebrew, Latin, Oriya, Persian, Pali, Portuguese, Prakrit, Sanskrit, and Spanish. But within the recorded history of mankind no other language has spread among as many people in as many domains and as fast as English has done in India. This unique socio-linguistic spread, unprecedented in the history of civilization, calls for a systematic appraisal of reasons.

There also is a practical reason for such an investigation. History is not just a bag of used artifacts. It is a repository of community's experiments and experiences in learning. As Maley (2001) says, there are at least four reasons for us to consider about history:

- When we look at our past, it becomes clear that many of the current ideas which we think of as being so innovative have, in fact, been around for a long time.
- A second reason for cultivating a sense of history is that it gives us perspective. There is a sense in which we can not know where we are going without an appreciation of where we have been.
- ... much of our current effort is expended on innovation: more new ideas, more new materials, more new research. It could be that much of this frenzied effort is misdirected and even counter-productive.
- Finally, the past offers us a rich source for generating new ideas. We can use it as a stimulus for our own present thinking.

In this project of research I have tried doing just as Maley, cited above, says – making an appraisal of where we have been vis-a-vis use and teaching of English and some other foreign languages in India, and the use of Indian languages by foreigners.

There was hardly an Indian who used any English in the early seventeenth century. A hundred years later there was hardly a leading business house in India where someone did not know any

English at all. A hundred years still later the number of Indians who knew and could use English for business stood in hundreds of thousands. And a further hundred years later, i.e. at the beginning of the twentieth century English became the language of millions of Indians from different parts of the subcontinent congregating to demand freedom. Perhaps the only language common to these freedom-fighters was English.

Such a growth in about three hundred years seems to have been the result of a strong motivation to learn, and of some significant exposure to the language to be learnt. In the beginning the Indians obviously had limited exposure to English, from their limited contact with the British who spoke hardly any English with the Indians. But as the commerce between the Indians and the British grew the extent of the use of English grew too, thanks largely to the motivation it gave the learners. English soon became a passport to profit and position.

Earlier the British had done business in the Portuguese language and official work with the Indians in the Arabic and/or Persian. But by the end of the eighteenth century the use of English was clearly on the rise. Many merchants, middlemen, agents and *moonshies* of the British knew by heart many wordlists pertaining to their specific merchandise. So English for Specific Purposes (ESP) does not seem to be all that new. Special word lists had started appearing, and there were Indians working as *Dubash* in many big cities and port towns of India then. When John Fryer landed in Masulipatnam in 1668, he was surprised to have been greeted in English by an Indian at the port (Fryer,1698). These were the self-taught Indians who used English to enhance their opportunities and earnings. This was what I feel like calling the age of self-teaching, and it continued until the first quarter of the nineteenth century.

Raja Ram Mohun Roy can perhaps be said to be one of the best and most successful learners of English during this age. He started learning English after he was twenty-three and already proficient in Bengali, Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian. He was then the Diwan of Mr Digby, the Collector of Bhagalpur, and so he was exposed to some English in the spoken form and plenty of it in print and writing as he had access to all the newspapers and the correspondence of Digby. From these alone in about five years Roy learnt enough English as we may see in his forceful representation to Lord Amherst (see Mahmood, 1895: 29), the then Governor General of Fort William at Calcutta,

against the opening of a new Sanskrit College and for starting a new college for 'European sciences in the English language' (Ganguly, 1934).

The phase of formal learning, such as at schools, seems to have begun only in the late eighteenth century and because it was quite expensive not many people had the means to go for it. Books were not yet available in the sufficient quantity. Neither was there a tradition of teaching and learning the English language from which the teachers and students could draw according to their need. It was clearly an age of learning from mistakes. People like Pandit Ram Narain, the *dubash* of William Carey of Serampore fame, had perhaps learnt his English in this manner.

Traditions of teaching and public examination were yet to be formed. All that came in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Teaching English with printed books for grammar, translation and reading came about only in the early nineteenth century. The book societies and the school societies that were formed in major presidency towns and cities did seminal work in this area. By the middle of the 19th century many teaching methods were being tried, tested and perfected. By then plenty of English books were being produced, sold and bought in India (Ayyar, 1987).

Grammar-translation method had immense popularity. It taught words and structures quickly. But because it taught all that out of context, it led to hilarious uses. English in India became bookish and a subject of fun. For some examples of this written and bookish variety of Indian English we can see Wright (1891).

Pronunciation teaching remained neglected, but writing skills were overemphasized. The Earl of Dufferin, the then Viceroy of India, complained that English was being taught in India like a dead language so that there were many Indians who could write the language reasonably correctly but could hardly speak or understand it (Sherring, 1897).

The British seem to have had very sound reasons to promote teaching of writing at the cost of everything else. Trading in a country thousands of miles away from home and masters, the East India Company men had to report every transaction to their masters at home. They also sought permissions and clarifications, and made submissions on many subjects within and beyond their territory. So a great deal of business and other parts of the Company's work was done through pen and paper.

And of much that the British wrote, they also made several

copies. Two copies were kept in India, one at the place of origin and the other in one of the two other presidencies, and two copies were sent home by two different vessels, perhaps in the hope that at least one of them would survive storms, running aground, pirates, other colonizers, unpredictabilities of a long and uncertain voyage, disease and death. After all, the British also lost many men and vessels to the sea. Close to 20% of all the British that came to India died in the course of the voyage(Hobbs, 1938).

The British were also sticklers for writing. Even with the Indian princes and other Europeans they entered into transaction mostly only after written agreements, pacts, treaties or memoranda of understanding. So did they do with their Indian clients, customers, clerks, *diwans* or agents and *moonshies* too. In perhaps the most controversial case in the British Indian history, Raja Nundkumar had to die under a verdict of the court after he had been found guilty of forging the signature of Warren Hastings.

So the British had voluminous correspondence with the Indians too, and the British used nearly all major languages in formal use in India then – Arabic, Bengali, English, Dutch, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Marathi, Persian, Portuguese, Pushtoo, Sanskrit, Telugu and Tamil. They therefore required an army of copyists, known as writers then, and translators who could translate from Indian languages into English and vice versa.

These writers, translators and copyists, therefore, had to be good in the skill of writing. Good handwriting was emphasized. Enough emphasis was also laid upon correct spelling, punctuation, correct use of lower and upper case letters and other conventions of punctuation and good writing. As a result even today most Indians seem capable of writing better English than most other users of this language – native or non-native. They do not make mistakes of spelling and punctuation and in the use of capital and small letters. Surprisingly, a mistake in the pronunciation of English hardly attracts attention whereas a mistake in its spelling does not go unnoticed. This is the legacy of teaching English for a kind of employer who needed and cared for only a particular skill among the employees.

That the times have changed and it would be right also to teach other skills in at least equal measure, if not more or less, and that such changes are yet to be recognized is the burden of history we have to decide what to do with. But these and other lessons are there.

Now such a study may not ordinarily be possible with the tenets and taboos of only one discipline. It would at least require a comprehensive study of history and historical linguistics. And then it would need a good study of governmental, private and public records on education, census, travels, diaries and journals, correspondence and letters of the British and others from and into India, memoirs, biographies and autobiographies, travelogues, literature, translations, etc.

But each of these disciplines while excelling in one kind of information betray gaps in many others. Let us take examples one each from writings in Linguistics and in History, two major sources of these studies.

A really large number of even serious linguists who cannot be accused of deliberate distortion of facts have concluded that English was imposed upon India by the British, in particular through the machinations of the duo of Governor General William Bentinck and the Law Member of his Council, Thomas Babbit Macaulay. Agnihotri and Khanna (1997: 20-1), for instance, observe:

> In view of the finding of the Corpus of research on English literary studies in the colonial and the post-colonial period ..., there is very little doubt that the grand design of imperial forces to intervene in the educational system of India was to destroy its traditional institutions and to instrumentalize the use of English for their own ends. In this process, it was inevitable that English became associated with the elite and languages of underprivileged got neglected and stigmatized... English started in India as the language of the elite and has been kept so ever since.

In a very widely sold book, called *Linguistic Imperialism*, Phillipson (1992: 8,17) counts India among countries upon which English was imposed in the colonial times. Many other studies in recent times, both in India and elsewhere, have come to a similar conclusion.

Such conclusions, it seems, are due mostly to the exclusive attention to the policies followed by the East India Company's administration in India from the time of Governor General William Bentinck until 1947. These conclusions also betray a regrettable ignorance of the pre-nineteenth century history of India. A study of evidence since the seventeenth century shows that the British until about the mid-nineteenth century pursued a policy favourable to the use and growth of Indian languages and culture. It is a major reason why their commerce and politics succeeded where those

of the other colonizers from Europe failed, though they all had comparable military might. British were actually hostile to any missionary activity on their territory and not until 1813 did they allow any missionary to travel on their vessels or to work in their territory in India (see Chaudhary, 2001a, 2001b, 2002 and forthcoming).

Opinion within the Company regarding the teaching of English in India and regarding the British role in it was divided. The Company dragged its feet on this issue until about the late 1850s. There was a large section of Indians in nearly all the presidencies governed by the EIC where a significant body of Indians requested teaching of English. One example from the merchants of Calcutta in the late eighteenth century is reproduced below.

> ...We humbly beseech any gentlemen will be so good as to take the trouble of making a Bengali grammar and dictionary in which we hope to find all the common Bengali country words made into English. By this means we will be able to recommend ourselves to the English government and understand their orders . This favour will be greatly remembered by us and ourposterity for ever,...(Carey, 1801: 228).

The best-known example of such a demand for the teaching of English in India is the letter that Raja Ram Mohun Roy wrote in 1823 to the then Governor General Lord Amherst protesting against the establishment of another Sanskrit College and requesting the use of these funds for the teaching of European sciences and the English language. The letter is too well-known to require reprinting here. That the sentiments expressed by Raja Ram Mohun Roy were also expressed in the other parts of the country may not be so well-known.

An instance from the presidency of Madras is given below. In their educational petition of November, 1839, circulated in English, Tamil and Telugu and supported by over 30,000 signatures, the gentry of Madras declared:

> My lord, *we are the people* of this country, inheriting this land for thousands of generations. From our industry its wealth is supplied. By our arms it is defended from foreign foes. By our loyal obedience to the established Government its peace and safety are maintained. If diffusion of education be among the highest benefits and duties of a Government , we, the people, petition for our share. (Frykenberg, 1988: 310)

Like Raja Rammohun Roy, though not so well-known, there had

been Vennelacunty Soob Row who rose from a clerk to a minor English official at Guntur in 1799 to the Chief Marathi Translator of the High Court in Madras Presidency. Like Raja Rammohun Roy he had no formal education in English either, though he pleaded and worked for it fervently too. But most sociolinguistic histories of English in India seem to be totally unaware of such an important aspect of this history.

How is the state of knowledge in the field of History of India? It appears to be no better. Many historians have written about the British interaction with people in India. Some have even wrongly reported that they generally got very enthusiastic welcome in India. But none seems to have bothered even to mention what language they spoke with whom, and how they generally managed their affairs in India without a link language. Writing the history of Jahangir, for instance, Prasad (1962: 230) observes,

> ... He (i.e. Sir Thomas Roe) was received with great favour and courtesy by the emperor who often talked to him about things European. He forthwith addressed himself to the real object of his mission – the negotiation of a commercial treaty between England and Hindostan...

This does not appear to be a correct account of the way Sir Thomas was received. By his own account Roe had to wait for months, and then he had to resist very humiliating conditions suggested to him for a meeting with the emperor. Finally he also had to bribe the relatives of Noorjahan, the empress. For details see Roe's own account of his embassy to Jahangir edited by Foster (1899). Not that all historical accounts of such momentous events are as incorrect as this, but few record details of interests other than that of politics and chronology. For instance, I am yet to find in a book of history any account of the language or languages used by Jahangir for conversation with Roe.

Roe had his interpreter, and Jahangir had a multilingual court too. Speakers of at least 28 different languages were there in his court. He had Jesuits who could speak many European and Indian languages. Jahangir himself spoke Hindi/Urdu, Arabic, Persian, and Turkish. In the months that Roe had to wait for a meeting with him, Jahangir had also found out that Roe knew some Turkish too. And so finally when they met, Jahangir and Roe had some conversation in Turkish before they were joined by interpreters and others.

The point I wish to make is the following. Neither of the two

disciplines, history or linguistics, as we know it now, appears to be capable of giving a complete and correct answer to the questions I raised at the beginning of this article. An interdisciplinary approach, therefore, must be promoted to get these answers.

There are two other problems in an investigation of this kind.

First, a good deal of source material to reconstruct this history is permanently lost; and, secondly, the remainder is scattered all over the world.

Let us first form an idea of what is lost. When the marauding forces of Muhammad Ghori of Ghazanavi set fire to the massive collection of manuscripts at the Buddhist monastery of Nalanada in the present day Bihar at about the beginning of the last millennium, they also burnt the vast treasures of knowledge leading to this and many other subjects. Similarly the great floods of Calcutta in 1731destroyed much of the archives at Fort William. These archives were again burnt in 1756 by Nawab Sirajuddowlah of Murshidabad when he captured Fort William (Wheeler in Dutta, 1959).

Of the copies of these papers that had been shipped to London during the 250 years of the East India Company's contact with India, hundreds of tons were burnt in 1858 by the keepers of the records at the India House in London themselves. Birdwood (1891: 71fn) says:

> When the (East India) Company's business was taken over by the Imperial parliament in 1858, one of the first acts of the new masters of the India House in Leadenhall Street was to make a great sweep out of the old records that from 1726 had been preserved there with scrupulous solicitude. They swept 800 tons of these records out to the Messers Spicer's ... to be boiled, bleached and bashed into low class paper pulp...

And, finally, during the four months of Lord Mountbatten's viceroyalty in India, a section of his office burnt and authorized the burning all over India of a good deal of papers for weeks before the transfer of power in 1947 (Collins & Lapierre, 1975: 150-52).

These are, of course, recorded instances of destruction. One can only speculate about how much in and about India has been destroyed without a record. In the absence of these records much of the past remains at the best only a speculation rather than history.

Another problem for an investigation of this kind lies in the way source materials are scattered. Many travellers, traders and invaders

took away not only silk, jewellery, furniture and gold from India, they also took works of arts, crafts and books away. Here is, for instance, a record of what Hiuen-Tsiang took away from India at the end of his travels in the spring of 645 A D:

1. One hundred and fifty particles of flesh *sariras* of the Tathagat.
2. One golden statue of Buddha (*according to the pattern of*) the shadow left in the Dragon cave of the Pragbodhi Mountain in the kingdom of Magadha ; also a glittering pedestal 3 ft 3 in. high...

The list goes on like that and finally says that 'He also deposited in this temple the books of the Great Vehicle, which he had brought from the West, including 224 Sutras, 192 Sastras, 15 Works of the Sthavira school, ... altogether 520 fasciculi, comprising 657 distinct volumes, carried upon twenty horses' (Li, 1911/1914).

So if that was the kind of cargo Hiuen-Tsiang could carry at a time when transportation was only as safe and fast as a horse's temper and the speed of the cart, one can easily imagine the kind of cargo later travellers did possibly cart away from India . Many British officials carried away bundles of valuable documents as private papers. Some of these are now available with the British Library and with other public collections. But many others are still beyond the reach of the public at large.

They are scattered in many well-known, not-so-well-known and unknown public and private collections virtually all over the world, and many of even the well-known collections have policies that do not encourage easy access of copying of the material. Much of the pre-nineteenth century material in the British Library collection, for instance, can be seen only in their reading room in London. So is it with the Bodleian Library of the University of Oxford, The Library of Congress, The Library of the University of Heidelberg, and many others. Copying in many libraries in Europe is awfully expensive.

Missionaries from many European countries have also carted a great deal of materials away to a number of libraries in east and central Europe.

Materials are also scattered all over India. Many of the erstwhile native princes had their own libraries, archives and record rooms for proper keeping of records and books. But after the abolition of their estates these personal libraries lost their only means of survival and are languishing for funds . A very good case in the point is the erstwhile Raj Library at Darbhanga. Now this library is a part of the L.N. Mithila University library at Darbhanga in Bihar and is, like much else in Bihar, in a truly pathetic shape.

The library began as a personal library of the Maharaja Lakshmishwar Singh Bahadur of Darbhanga. The Maharaja had had the advantage of a liberal British education and there is no aspect of the Indian nationalist life to which he did not contribute. His cash donations saw the founding of the Indian Society for the Cultivation of Science, Indian National Congress, Indian Industrial Congress, universities at many places in India, and equally generous contributions for temples and religious charitable trusts (Jha, 1972).

His own seat of power, Darbhanga, a small sleepy town with a population then of about 50,000 people became a seat of many national events. It also became a seat of a medical college, and, of a good library. But after independence the Raj Library found itself left with about 76,000 volumes of books, and a long collection of all issues of some journals in the arts, sciences, business, medicine, law and technology, over 500 rare scripts and other documents but no money, not even for maintenance and salary payments. Hence, in 1976, after the creation of a general university at Darbhanga , the Raj Library, as it is known locally, was gifted to the university.

But even that does not seem to have any effect for better upon the library either. There is even now no budget for the modernization and maintenance of the library. Its old catalogues are lost, new and modern catalogues are yet to come in, most furniture from reading halls have been removed; shelves survive, but no routine cleaning or dusting, fumigation, etc. is ever done. There is no light, fan, water or any other convenience for the reader, and as a result, or perhaps, as the cause, there is no reader there either. The whole thing is decaying and desolate. The only good thing that has happened has been for the few employees of the library who are on the university's pay rolls, and receive their salaries, many for no work, oftener.

Like this many a princely family of the erstwhile British India had their own archives, their own record rooms and collections of books and documents. They are scattered all over the country and abroad, and each of this mass may be a valuable source for the reconstruction of this history, for the absence of each of this the writing of this history may remain incomplete. We might do well to begin at least thinking of networking all of these vast resources through a central catalogue managed by a national-level body such as the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla. That will be the true beginning of the convergence of divergence, and of the so

called interdisciplinary research in the stream of humanities and social sciences.

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