

Decolonisation and Cultural *Swaraj*: A Gandhian Critique

Nishtha Saxena,* Anshuman**

I don't want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the culture of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any. I refuse to live in other people's houses as an interloper, a beggar or a slave. I refuse to put the unnecessary strain of learning English upon my sisters for the sake of false pride or questionable social advantage. I would have our young men and women with literary tastes to learn as much of English and other world languages as they like, and then expect them to give the benefits of their learning to India and to the world, like a Bose, a Roy or the Poet himself.

(M. K. Gandhi, *Young India*: June 1, 1921)

The quote above is an excerpt from important conversations between M. K. Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore on the interconnectedness of language, literature and sanskriti leading to India's *swaraj*, in terms of its cultural freedom from the colonisation of the Indian mind during British rule. The present essay has been termed 'A Gandhian Critique' primarily because it discusses the significance of not only the views of Gandhi but also of other very important Indian writers, thinkers and activists like Tagore, Munshi Premchand, Rammanohar Lohia, Dharampal, G. N. Devy etc. The above quote may well be read as an extended metaphor constructed through the imagery of 'house,' 'walls,' 'windows,' 'winds,' 'other people's houses,' 'interloper,' 'beggar,' 'slave.' In other words, the very ecology of Gandhi's metaphors emanates from his vision of cultural *swaraj*—an inseparable aspect of dharma or morality in the Indian context that also lies at the core of social, political and economic *swaraj* or

freedom.¹ Accordingly, what may be termed as a tentative decoding of Gandhi's metaphors is as follows:

House = India with cultural *swaraj*.

Walls = parochial or narrow linguistic/cultural nationalism.

Windows = means of communication of ideas with the outside world.

Winds = ethically enabling constructive ideas coming from the outside world.

Other people's houses = other cultures

Interloper = a mentally colonised westernised Indian who thinks that she/he belongs to colonising culture.

Beggar = westernised Indians having no wealth of ideas and hence they are parasitically dependent on the west for their empowerment.

Slave = the victims of the dominance of western/colonial modernity or culture who are almost cut off from their native roots.

We may well begin with a narrative of dominance of the English language at a pan-Indian level, its poor sociological basis notwithstanding. Even after more than seven decades of attaining independence, the moment one enters a small town, one is greeted by innumerable hoardings that advertise IELTS coaching classes meant only to improve English speaking and to hone one's communication skills (soft skills) in English—tempting millions of Indian aspirants to linguistically empower themselves in order to migrate overseas (especially to the USA, UK, Canada and Australia). On the other hand, one is shocked to see the absence of coaching institutions (government or private) imparting the learning of any of the twenty-two Indian languages, such as Bengali, Tamil, Kannada, Marathi etc. duly listed in the Constitution of India in accordance with Gandhi's vision of cultural *swaraj* for India. English is no longer a language limited to urban population; it is permeating the very heart of

*Assistant Professor, Deptt of English, DAV College, Sector 10, Chandigarh. nishthasaxena90@gmail.com

** Anshuman, Independent Researcher, PG Diploma in Rural Development, NIRD, Hyderabad. anshumansaxena1993@gmail.com

the nation, India's villages, to become one of the most sought after courses so as to improve one's career prospects. One naturally wonders as to how deep this obsession with learning English in India is? On the one hand, English for many people has already become a means to success and high status, on the other hand, the rest of the people are busy making every effort to learn this foreign (?) tongue in order to become affluent and prosperous. One can easily witness a scene wherein a person who speaks one's mother tongue is branded illiterate and ignorant in social circles, whereas the one who speaks fluent English (whether it makes sense or not) is considered educated and well-informed. It cannot be gainsaid that the knowledge of English language has become the sole criteria of judging the worth of modern Indian education system. Another fact that portrays the low cultural prestige attached to Indian languages is that while Indians who wish to settle in the United States of America, Australia, Canada, United Kingdom, France or Germany have to show their proficiency in English/French/ German, any foreign student wishes to come to India for academic purposes, is under no obligation to acquire even the slightest understanding of a single Indian language!

Moreover, statistically speaking, the native speakers of English are not more than two lakhs seventy thousands (till 2008). On the other hand, more than thirty-four crore people speak only Hindi in India as their first language. More than five crore people speak Punjabi in India. The speakers of Tamil, Bengali, Malayalam, Kannada, Oriya, Telugu, Assamese and other Indian languages far outnumber the speakers of English in India. The question to be addressed is—how and why has the English language become the language of power, promoting an elitism and exclusionary cultural politics? Even after seventy-four years of independence and some 200 years of learning the English language, most Indian students at school, college and University levels fail in the subject of English. Besides, what can be more shocking in a nation like ours, which boasts of having twenty-two official languages, than the fact that students of private schools who dare to speak in their mother tongues have to pay a fine on a per word basis!² There couldn't have been a more deliberate travesty of Gandhi or Tagore's vision of a free India, than one where students who speak English are promised a brighter future as compared to others.

Another startling fact is that the average donation amount at the time of admission demanded by certain English-medium private schools ranges from a few thousands to lacs. One naturally wonders as to what will happen to the future of those children whose parents can't afford such hefty donations!³

Therefore, this paper aims at highlighting how English acts as a language of power under the guise of being a means to one's empowerment. It will be discussed how the hegemony of the English language gradually uproots one from one's cultural roots and renders one amnesiac towards one's local heritage. Further, the perspectives of some key Indian thinkers regarding the transformation that needs to be brought about in the Indian education system have been foregrounded. It has also been emphasised that learning through one's mother tongue is a major means to strengthen children's creative and professional prospects.

Historical Evidence of English Language as the Language of Power

Centuries ago, during the British occupation of India, T. B. Macaulay in his famous *Minute on Education* (1835) laid the foundation of English language teaching in India. In his speech, he argued that in order to govern Indian natives, it is no longer profitable to learn the language of the masses i.e. Sanskrit and Arabic, rather, teaching English language to Indians would form a bridge between the rulers (the British) and the ruled (the Indians). He makes the assumption (without any prior knowledge of Sanskrit or Arabic) that the languages of India are not worth learning as they impart little knowledge and are of low academic value as compared to European tongues, especially English, that are the sole means to know science, rationality, metaphysics and logic. He states rather haughtily that 'a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.' That is why, in order to establish British authority over the Indian mind, it was decided to produce a class of Indians who would be 'Indian in blood and colour but English in tastes, in opinion, in morals and in intellect.' They would act as 'interpreters' between the rulers and the ruled so that Western education could penetrate the Indian socio-cultural psyche. Interestingly, he also mentions that a small number of Indians have shown their keenness in learning English and also speak it remarkably well as compared to the other subjects of the British empire. Therefore, teaching English to Indians would be more convenient as compared to the learning of Indian languages by the British.

As a result, the English Education Act was passed in 1835, under the leadership of William Bentick, which institutionalised English as the language of formal education in India. It was seen as a major 'reform' that would overhaul the education system of India. Consequently, three major universities—Madras, Kolkata and Mumbai—were formed in 1857 with the specific purpose of promoting western education through the

medium of English language. It is a paradox that English was institutionalised as a formal language of learning in Indian universities way before it was accorded this status in its native country, England!

Moreover, it is also interesting to note that before Macaulay formulated his *Minute on Education* in 1835, Raja Rammohan Roy, a key figure of Bengali Renaissance, in his letter to Lord Amherst, in 1823, expresses his displeasure at the opening of a Sanskrit college in Calcutta as it would plunge the Indians into further darkness. He wrote,

The Sanskrit language, so difficult that almost a lifetime is necessary for its acquisition, is well known to have been for ages a lamentable check on the diffusion of knowledge; and the learning concealed under this almost impervious veil is far from sufficient to reward the labour of acquiring it. (Singh, p. 55)

He was in favour of promoting western education through the medium of English in order to inculcate a spirit of reasoning, progress and science among Indian people. What is to be noted is that it was the English-educated Indians who were keen on changing the traditional education system of India which they thought had become obsolete and needed rejuvenation.

Dharampal, an eminent critic and a freedom fighter, in his book *The Beautiful Tree* (1981), presents an altogether different picture of the Indian education system prior to British occupation of India. He proves it with ample statistical evidence that the Indian education system was in fact in a better condition as compared to the education system of Britain. He further says that the indigenous education system, in the form of *madarsas* and *pathshalas*, enabled common citizens to become aware and educated and participate in larger social events. But after the arrival of the British, 'it is this destruction along with similar damage in the economic sphere which led to great deterioration in the status and socio-economic conditions...who are now known as scheduled castes....'

The Situation today

Centuries have gone by, since the changes introduced by the British in Indian education system took place. These days, instead of the colonial pressure, it is the neo-imperialistic ideology which manifests itself in the influence of the United States and the prevailing fascination to settle in first world countries that prompts Indians to learn English. In this context, Rajeshwari Sundar Rajan, an eminent culture critic, states that,

the chief importance of English in India – as in other non-English speaking nations – is its global currency; as the language of technology and international commerce it serves as an important communication link. While its widespread

use, prestige, and even expansion in India in recent decades are rationalised by this development - which is more properly attributed to the post-war hegemony of the United States than to the British empire – the preserve of English in India is guarded by interests predominantly defined by ideology, region and class. (Rajan, p. 14)

Apart from being a vital connection with the English-speaking world outside India, English retains its supporters in India itself: the non-Hindi speakers, primarily from southern states like Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh etc. R. S. Rajan highlights that

While Hindi is the language of roughly half the Indian population, the other half speaks a multitude of languages unrelated to it. Therefore, the continuation of English in these states ensures that there will be no imposition of Hindi. "If English, which protects us like a shield, is banished, the Hindi sword will cut us to pieces," warned M. Karunanidhi, the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. Major language riots took place in Tamil Nadu in 1965, exiling the Congress party from power in the state and bringing in the DMK and the AIADMK parties on anti-Hindi planks. The much-touted three-language formula was evolved soon afterwards as a solution to the language problem in school education, but it was never implemented with any vigour. With this curious function – of imposing an equality of handicap on learners from all regions – English finds perhaps its most powerful *raison d'être* in India. (Rajan, p. 15)

That is why English is believed to be the most important 'link' language between the Hindi and the non-Hindi speakers of the Indian nation-state. It reflects the intellectual lethargy of the government in not being able to unite the country linguistically through one's mother tongue. Being parasitically dependent on the English language for the effective implementation of most of our educational, governmental, cultural policies is a problem that stares India in the face. One may assume that India must have reaped good results from its continuous engagement with English for almost two centuries, locally as well as globally. However, only a cursory glance at the following statistics would reveal an appalling picture of an uprooted, directionless and unproductive education system:

- (A) Constant deterioration in the academic standards of learning and alarming deficit in Communication Skills/Soft Skills render most of Indian engineering/MBA students unemployable: '93 per cent MBA Graduates are unemployable.'⁴
- (B) The new Annual Employability Survey 2019 Report by Aspiring Minds reveals that 80 per cent of Indian Engineers are not fit for any job in the knowledge economy. The Indian Higher Education System needs a systemic and fundamental change to deal with high unemployability numbers.⁵

- (C) 'Only 27.2 per cent (2018) students enrolled in Standard III can read at Standard II level text. 72.8 per cent cannot. Only slightly more than half (50.3 per cent) of all children enrolled in Standard V can read at least a Standard II level text. 27 per cent of all children enrolled in Standard VIII in India cannot read at least a Standard II level text. Only 28.1 per cent of all children enrolled in India in Standard V can do division. Only 44 per cent of all children enrolled in Standard VIII can solve a 3 digit by 1 digit numerical division problem correctly.'⁶

Culture Critics on the Dominance of English Language Based Education in India

It is noteworthy that India has been home to some of the most eminent culture critics and activists who have, in their works and actions, sought to bring about an alternative modernity. They have challenged the dominance of a western educational model based on the propagation of English as the primary means of knowledge and have stressed at integrating native/indigenous forms of learning in order to bring about holistic development of society. For instance, Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, M. K. Gandhi, Munshi Premchand, Rammanohar Lohia, Dharampal, Vidyaniswas Mishra, etc, in their writings and ways of life have promoted the cause of learning through one's mother tongue. Gandhi once remarked that the British educational system has uprooted the 'beautiful tree' that the Indian system of knowledge represented. In a scathing attack on the prevalence of English language based learning in India, Gandhi, in *Hind Swaraj*, points out that:

To give millions a knowledge of English is to enslave them. The foundation that Macaulay laid of education has enslaved us... It is worth noting that by receiving English education, we have enslaved the nation. Hypocrisy, tyranny, etc. have increased; English knowing Indians have not hesitated to cheat and strike terror into the people... It is we, the English knowing Indians, that have enslaved India. The curse of the nation will rest not upon the English but upon us. (*Hind Swaraj*)

The enslavement that Gandhi refers to here is cultural—the mind of the natives has been colonised. This cultural colonialism directly or indirectly suppresses the flow of knowledge from indigenous knowledge systems. The problem lies in the fact that an English based education system is also not able to show positive results. The statistics mentioned above indicate the abysmal performance of India's students and job-seekers who have been victims of the lopsided education system rendering them unemployable or jobless. Despite this

fact, millions of students continue to be victimised by the English language because of the employment opportunities it provides. Gandhi terms it as a form of 'slavery' and 'degradation' which obviously reflects the passive nature of the Indian nation-state:

...English is today studied because of its commercial and so-called political value. Our boys think, and rightly in the present circumstances, that without English they cannot get government service... Hundreds of youths believe that, without a knowledge, freedom for India is practically impossible. The canker has so eaten into the society that in many cases, the only meaning of Education is a knowledge of English. All these are for me signs of our slavery and degradation. It is unbearable to me that the vernaculars should be crushed and starved as they have been. (Bhattacharya, p. 64)

Munshi Premchand in his Hindi essay entitled 'Manasik Paradheenta' (Mental Slavery) written in 1931, also reiterates Gandhi's perspective regarding the hegemony of English language in Indian society. He laments that English has become the language of elite classes in India (78). Further, he says that 'we have become such worshippers of English language that we use English while writing personal letters...when friends meet, they greet and talk to each other in English...Whoever you meet, is enamoured by the majesty of English language.'⁷ He suggests that the educated and elite classes of India have inevitably alienated themselves from the rest of the common people. As a result, an unbridgeable gap, a gulf, is created between the knowers and non-knowers of English language that fractures the foundations of a society.

Even Tagore in his lecture, 'The Centre of Indian Culture' (1919), highlights the need to change the Macaulay driven education system of India which was fast eating into the vitals of the nation. Just as Gandhi in *Hind Swaraj* blames Indians themselves for giving themselves away to foreign rule, Tagore in his lecture, also censures their imitative tendencies by saying that, 'Let us blame our own weakness in being obsessed with the idea that we must have some artificial wooden legs of an education of foreign-make simply because we imagine that we have no legs of our own to stand upon.' (p.7). His unsparing criticism of the newly established Indian Universities following the pattern of western education is evident when he points out: 'These solidly complete Universities, over which our country is brooding, are like hard-boiled eggs from which you cannot expect chickens to come out.' (pp. 8-9). What he wants educated Indians and policy makers to understand is that educational institutions in India should be in harmony with the organic unity of the country. If they are divorced from the emotional, cultural, aesthetic and spiritual tradition of the country, they would not produce human beings

capable of making their societies better, but cultural zombies, remaining alienated and aloof from the rich cultural heritage that they belong to.

That is precisely why Tagore unequivocally states that, 'For the best irrigation of learning, a foreign language cannot be a true medium.' He emphasises that a progressive and free nation would consist of students who are not parasitically dependent on foreign tongue to express their ideas. Unless Indian languages are accorded that respect, India can never attain *Swaraj* in the truest sense. To substantiate what Gandhi and Tagore said a century ago, a UNESCO research validates that children who learn through the medium of their mother tongue are more progressive and independent than those who have to depend on a foreign medium for learning. Therefore, the fact that students need to be imparted education through the medium of their mother tongue for an effective growth of their faculties deserves immediate attention.⁸

Rammanohar Lohia, a freedom fighter and a political leader-thinker, also points out the 'grossly stupid' or 'culpably dishonest' policies of the government that make it compulsory for a student to learn English. In his influential essay 'More About Alphabet, Language, Instruction and Some Oddities,' he compares how alphabets in different Indian languages like Kannada, Telugu, Malayalam and Hindi are similar to each other. In this way, it is easier for students to learn their native languages rather than a foreign tongue like English.

He admits the fact that:

Of all students who fail annually at the matriculation examination in various parts of India a good 2/3rds fail alone in the English language. The percentage of passes at matriculation examinations in this country is unreasonably low... What this means in waste of national time and money is evident; what may not be evident is the bitterness and the inferiority that enters the soul of nearly half a million young persons annually, who pass in all other subjects but fail in just one. Why should they be compulsorily taught English and subsequently suffer the ignominy of failure? Education is meant to equip them with necessary knowledge and not to harass them with the study of a foreign language which they almost find impossible to learn. (p. 119)

It is significant that in the public sphere, people who cannot converse in English suffer from inferiority complex which hampers their emotional, social, and spiritual development. Half of the energy and talent of students is lost in learning a non-native language like English. Thus, being weak at English leads to severe psychological crises among the youth. This also creates a huge gulf between the students of so-called private and government schools. In other words, a linguistic apartheid is created between the speakers and non-speakers of English language wherein

the rich can send their wards to private schools whereas the poor have to admit their children to government schools. This is the great divide that afflicts the present education system in India.

Private schools are the capitalistic giants that exploit the insecurity of middle class Indians regarding the education of their pupils. Most Government schools, on the other hand, suffer from lack of infrastructure and teaching staff, and fail to deliver promising results.

Is There a Way Ahead?

If we relook at the Gandhi-metaphor cited above in the beginning of this paper, Gandhi does not exclude English, what to speak of hating it, in his vision of cultural swaraj. He wanted educated Indians to learn as many world languages as possible, including English, in order to enrich their native Indian languages/culture with the wealth of good ideas received from other cultures. This is how the learning of English or any other European or world language would only nourish and enhance the inherent strength of Indian languages and culture. At the same time, he always stressed the urgent need to simultaneously develop and promote the use of Indian languages for all kinds of educational and administrative work in India (including judiciary, legislature and executive). In his *Hind Swaraj*, he suggests a practical solution to lessen the dominance of English language:

Every cultured Indian will know in addition to his own provincial language, if a Hindu, Sanskrit; if a Mahomedan, Arabic; if a Parsee, Persian, and all, Hindi. Some Hindus should know Arabic and Persian; some Mahomedans and Parsees, Sanskrit. Several northerners and westerners should learn Tamil.

The solution suggested above resolves most conflicts that have sprung up in India. The non-Hindi speaking states have continually opposed the proposal of declaring Hindi as National Language. Unless other major languages like Kannada, Tamil, Bengali, Malayalam are given due recognition in the North Indian states, why would they accept a language primarily spoken in North India as their own? Thus, an urgent inter-cultural dialogue is needed to address the present language issue in India. Given the immense linguistic plurality that defines the Indian culture, the government should utilise this plurality rather than letting English retain its stronghold over Indian languages. Unless Indian languages do not become the means to achieve economic independence, English will continue to dominate the already decimated Indian education system.

Educational policies need urgent revision because most of the mother tongues in a linguistically rich country

like India are at the risk of total or partial extinction.⁹ Critics and language enthusiasts like G. N. Devy in the Linguistic Survey of India highlight that 250 languages of India have already disappeared in the past 60 years and many are at the risk of losing their speakers. He points out that a dying language takes away a whole cultural ecosystem associated with it:

When a language dies, its speakers decide to migrate. First, they migrate to another language and then they physically start migrating to another region. The second thing that happens is that their traditional livelihood patterns go down. They may have some special skills and that disappears. Thirdly, a unique way of looking at the world disappears. Every language is a unique worldview.

It is also worthwhile to note that the situation in India is also not as bad as that in the African nations that were colonised by European powers. Nations like Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Congo have faced massive if not total destruction of their native languages after the imposition of English as the language of administration. The reason may be that 'the languages and literatures of India, many of them older and better developed than English, did not altogether languish in the shadow of a hegemonic English; and the phenomenon of bilingualism (an even trilingualism) has divided up the spheres of actual language use in such a way that English and Indian languages co-exist in a fairly natural way within social discourse.' (Rajan, p. 16)

Towards a Cultural Swaraj

From the above discussion, it must not be misconstrued that Indian thinkers are completely against the English language and dislike it utterly. Gandhi, in his famous quote mentioned at the beginning of the paper compares his mind to a house and maintains that he would welcome the cultures of all lands to leave an imprint on his imagination without losing touch with his own culture. For instance, Mulk Raj Anand before the publication of his first novel, *The Untouchable* (1935), met Gandhi at Sabarmati Ashram, where he showed him his manuscript of the novel written in English. Gandhi asked him to 'cut meretricious literariness in it.' When asked as to whether he should continue to write in English, Gandhi practically replied, 'The purpose of writing is to communicate, isn't it? If so, say you're your say in any language that comes to hand.' (Mehrotra 13). It must not be forgotten that Gandhi, Tagore, Lohia in their discourses and ways of life, had developed a constructive dialogue with the west, assimilating what is best in it and interrogating/rejecting what is worst. They were cosmopolitans yet their philosophy was rooted in local ethos. That is why they could envision an India that would be free from any

outside control and would subsequently restore its lost glory.

In popular culture, a song '*Ki Banu Duniya Da*' by Gurdas Mann has some appropriate lines which echo the concerns of this discussion: '*har boli sikho, sikhni vi chahidi, par pakki vekh ke kachchi ni dhai di, par pakki vekh ke kachchi nai dhai di*' (you must learn new languages, for it is a good thing to do, but it is abominable to detest one's mother tongue at the cost of learning another).

Much earlier, Tagore had pointed at the constructive dialogue that needs to be initiated with the West, rather than its blind imitation which creates an unusual inferiority complex in the minds of the masses:

Let me state clearly that I have no distrust of any culture because of its foreign character... What I object to is the artificial arrangement by which this foreign education tends to occupy all the space of our national mind and thus kills, or hampers, the great opportunity for the creation of a new thought power by a new combination of truths. It is this which makes me urge that all the elements in our culture have to be strengthened, not to resist Western culture, but truly to accept and assimilate it, and use it for our food and not as our burden... (p. 55)

In order to underline the growing importance of decolonisation of English language in the present context one may recall what R. K. Narayan makes the protagonist of his famous novel, *The English Teacher* (1946), state regarding the incalculable damage done to the nation through English as a medium of instruction of education:

I was going to explain why I could no longer stuff Shakespeare and Elizabethan metre and Romantic poetry for the hundredth time into young minds and feed them on the dead mutton of literary analysis and theories and histories... This education has reduced us to a nation of morons; we were strangers to our own culture and camp followers of another culture, feeding on leavings and garbage. (p. 178)

To conclude, the thinkers/writers mentioned above were no blind nativists aiming to reject English language altogether. They just sought to reduce the stranglehold of English language over Indian culture so that the people of India can experience *swaraj* not only politically, but also culturally and spiritually.

Notes

1. *Young India*, Jan 2, 1937. While explaining the meaning of Swaraj, Gandhi describes *dharma* or righteousness as the end as well as the means of attaining social, political and economic freedom.
2. <https://www.deccanherald.com/content/297143/students-fined-speaking-hindi.html>
3. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/chennai/schools-to-parents-pay-donation-get-admission/article3155940.ece>

4. www. indiatoday.in. Rohini Chakrabarty, July 11, 2016, updated Feb 6, 2018 accessed on 02 Nov 2019 at 5.55 AM.
 5. Business Today, March 25, 2019; <businesstoday.in/current/corporate/Indian-engineers-tech-jobs-survey-... Accessed on 2 November 2019 at 5.48 AM.
 6. ASER<img. asercentre.org/docs/ASER%202018/Release%20Material/aser2018press_releaseenglish.pdf> accessed on 2 Nov 2019 at 4.05 AM.
 7. Translated by the authors of this paper.
 8. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000161121>
 9. <https://indianexpress.com/article/research/international-mother-language-day-2018-ganesh-devy-indian-languages-5072487/>
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