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Importance of English Language in India : Its Role in Present National and International Set Up

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to discuss the relevance of English literature in India , especially, in context to the role played by it, in the present national and international set up.

Key words: Importance ,English Language, India

Article

One of the major problems that has engaged our attention in the recent years is the role of English in the different fields of our life. Since independence it has been playing a dominating part in our educational as well as national set up. Today it has become a symbol of people's aspirations for quality in education and a fuller participation in national and international life. The visible impact of this presence of English is that it is today being demanded by everyone at the initial stage of schooling which further adds to the higher level of education too. Consequently, the role and importance of English language in our national curriculum has increased to a greater degree.

The present writing is an attempt to highlight the importance of English language in today's Indian society and what role does it play in present national and international set up.

The University Education Commission (1948) headed by Dr. S. Radha Krishnan recommended : "English be studied in high school and universities in order that we may keep in touch with the stream of ever growing knowledge. This would prevent our isolation from the world and help us to take advantage of the wider reach of the English language."¹ The Kothari Commission (1964-66) endorsed the three language formula, while recommending Hindi and English as link language and English as a library language and a medium of international communication. Two important recommendations in this respect were that English should be the medium of instruction in all universities and a special unit should be set up for teaching English as a skill subject not so much as literature. The National policy on Education (1968) maintained, "Special emphasis needs to be laid on the study of English and other international languages. World knowledge is growing at a tremendous pace, especially in Science and Technology. India must not only keep up this growth, but also make her own significant contribution to it. For this purpose, study of English deserves to be specially strengthened."²

According to Article 343 (2), the constitution of India provides for the use of English for all official purposes for a period of 15 years. The Union Government took upon itself the promotion and the development of Hindi as the medium of expression during the period of 15 years. But it created serious language controversy throughout the country. Consequently the parliament led to pass the Official Language Bill in May 1963 allowing English to continue for an indefinite period. The constitution also provides that English will be the language of the High Courts, the Supreme Court, Acts of Parliament etc.

English is the unifying language. It acts both as a national and international link language. The trade and commercial correspondence from one state to another states is mostly conducted in English. The dialogue between persons of different states is also conducted through the medium of English. Thus Jawahar Lal Nehru rightly remarked : "If you push out English, does Hindi fully take its place? I hope it will , I am sure it will. But I wish to avoid the danger of one unifying factor being pushed out without another unifying factor fully taking its place. In that event there will be a gap, a hiatus. The creation of any such hiatus or gap must be avoided at all costs. It is very vital to do so in the interest of the unity of the country. It is this that leads me to the conclusion that English is likely to have an important place in the foreseeable future."³

English is the language of international politics, trade, commerce and industry. In the words of F.G. French, "By accidents of history and by the rapid spread of industrial development, science, technology, international trade,

and by something like an explosion in the speed and ease of travel and by all the factors which have broken down frontiers and forced nations into closer inter-dependence, English has become a world language. It is the means of international communication; there is no other.”⁴

The opening up of the Indian economy in the 1990s has coincided with an explosion in the demand for English in our schools because English is perceived to open up opportunities (Das, 2005).⁵ The current status of English stems from its overwhelming presence on the world stage and the reflection of this in the national arena, it was predicted that by 2010, a surge in English language learning would include a third of the world’s people (Graddol 1997).⁶

English is the mother tongue of more than 300 million people in the world. A study has shown that the language is spoken by more than 700 million people in the world which is next only to the Chinese language. But whereas Chinese is confined mostly to the Chinese sub-continent, English is used in all parts of the globe. It is the language of international politics trade, commerce and industry. We must learn English if we want to have our say in the world. One out of 10 persons in the world knows English, 75% of the world’s mail, 50% of the world’s newspapers, over 50% of the world’s radio station and more than 50% of the world’s scientific and technical periodicals use English as medium of expression. Again it is one of the six official languages of U.N.O. It is also the link language of the commonwealth countries. Thus as an international language, English has created better understanding among the nations of the world and has been responsible for cultural give and take. It has facilitated mobility of teachers and students from one country to another and has opened worldwide chances for employment.

English has very often been termed as a window on the rapid progress of technology and scientific knowledge that is constantly taking place in the world. It has been described as pipe-line for the stream of knowledge in all branches of learning. The Radhakrishnan University Education Commission observed, “It (English) is a language which is rich in literature-humanistic, scientific and technical. If under sentimental urges we should give up English, we would cut ourselves off from the living stream of ever growing knowledge. Unable to have access to this knowledge our standards of scholarship would fast deteriorate and our participation in the world movements of thought would become negligible ----- for living nations must move with the times and must respond quickly to the challenges of their surroundings. English is the only means of preventing our isolation from the world.”⁷ There is no doubt that English is a window through which we are able to see the scientific, technological, agricultural, commercial and literary developments, taking place in the world. F.G. French very aptly quotes it in the words, “Anyone who can read English can keep in touch with the whole world without living his own home.”⁸

English is the key to the storehouse of knowledge. Though a multilingual country, but most of the knowledge is not yet available in Indian languages. It is in this context that the role of English as a library language becomes important in India. The Kothari Commission has rightly stressed that English would play a vital role in higher education as an important library language. The commission maintained that no student should be considered qualified for a degree, in particular as Master’s degree, unless he has acquired a reasonable proficiency in English. According to the Commission, “The implications of this (English as a library language) are twofold : all teachers in higher education should be essentially bilingual in the sense that they should be able to teach in the regional language and in English and all students (Particularly post graduates) should be able to follow lectures and use reading materials in the regional language as well as in English.”⁹ Thus it is too tough for a person to be a specialist in any line unless he has a good command over English language.

We have different experts all over the world who term English as the ‘queen of languages’. Sri Rajagopalachari once pointed out that English was the greatest gift of Goddess Saraswati to India. The United Nations Organization (UNO) has given English the status of an official language not only because it is one of the most widely spoken languages, but also because the use of English has made the social and economic exchange between people of different countries and cultures practically possible.

In a multi-religious, multi-cultural and multi-linguistic country like India, people are so attached, and naturally so, with their local languages that they sometime end up treating people speaking other languages as foreigners or strangers. As India was a British Colony, English became an official language for all diplomatic and administrative conveniences and thereby came to be widely used in both spoken and literary context. But the reason that English remained an official language after 1947 is attributed to the fact that as a language it played an important role in unifying regions with different people under the one flag and constitution. So, English could be rightly termed as the Lingua Franca of India. In a country where individual mother tongue number several hundred and according to 2001 census of India, over 30 languages are spoken by more than a million native speakers, English is one common language that is used by people from diverse background as an acceptable vehicular language with high levels of adoption over decades.

Historically, since its introduction to India English as a language has played an important role in media and education. A large number of books are published in English in the country. It is the third largest English

book producing country after the United States and the U.K. Indian writers and poets such as Taru Dutta, Raja Rao, Mohan Roy, Sarojini Naidu, Arundhati Roy, Mulk Raj Anand and Many others have contributed to the rich literary tradition in the country.

In today's world of science and technology English has become the chief language in the Indian Education system. All the prestigious school and colleges use English as their medium of instruction. Today, careers in the field of science and technology, business and commerce, require a good knowledge of English. Most of the works in the field of space, nuclear technology, medicine etc. are available only in English and the vocabulary and terminology used in these are also available in the vary language. Therefore, the language has become a passport of getting a good job not only in the country but also in abroad and in almost all fields. Again with the growing importance of computers in every field the English language has received a further boost. The Radhakrishnan University Education Commission (1948) recommended that "English is a language which is rich in literature, humanistic, scientific and technical. If under sentimental urges we give up English, we would cut ourselves off from the living stream of ever-growing knowledge."¹⁰

Besides schooling and organized education systems prevalent in India the competitive examination scenario also reflects importance of English. Most of the general tests, both the admission tests and the job – related ones have a complete section on this language. They are designed to test the candidate's power of expression, flair in English, comprehension skills, sound vocabulary as well as correct use of language. Thus English constitutes a major portion of almost all competitive examinations.

David Graddol (2010) has made a very interesting observation on the role of English as the language of prestige and power. He maintains, "Throughout India, there is an extraordinary belief amongst all castes and classes, in both rural and urban areas, in the transformative power of English. English is seen not just as a useful skill, but as a symbol of a better life, a pathway out of poverty and oppression. Aspiration of such magnetite is a heavy burden for any language and for those who have responsibility for teaching it, to bear. The challenges of providing universal access to English are significant, and many are bound to feel frustrated at the speed of progress. But we cannot ignore the way that the English language has emerged as a powerful agent for change in India."¹¹ English is indeed a symbol for a better quality of life. It is also a powerful agent for change in our country. It is, therefore, considered to be a means of escape from the confines of one's social position and lack of opportunities. It opens the doors for social and economic aspirations.

Sensing the importance of the language at different levels and perspectives, the government of India along with the state governments, have been taking various measures to introduce it at the grass root level. Recently, there has been a craze towards running government schools especially providing instructions in English as a medium. Many model schools have been established keeping in view this aspect. The experts feel that to able to grasp education at higher levels, children should be acquainted with it as early as possible.

Therefore, there is no denying the fact that English Language occupies a highly important position in the national and international scenario. Learning the language has become the need of the day. Thus it is expected that the pupils who are supposed to be the future leaders of the nation should achieve proficiency in the language at least to a minimum extent so that they are able to face the challenges of the modern world. Sensing this importance of English language and its undeniable role in nation – building Jawaharlal Nehru remarked, "We know it a good deal and we have people who can teach it."¹² With the ever evolving demands for the competitive world, if Indians are to become a commendable force in 21st century, we understand his saying holds strong even today.

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