

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Role of English Language in Building India's Cultural, Intellectual, and Creative Identity

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of English in shaping India's cultural, intellectual, and creative identity. The English language has an important place in Indian literary history. English is a lingua franca in India. India's multicultural and multidimensional history has been a perpetual source of inspiration for writers and artists. This research aimed to investigate how the English language played a significant role in building India's cultural, intellectual, and creative identity. Indian society is diversified in terms of language, religion, sect, caste, gender, region, and culture. English proved to be a unifying force for diversified India. To investigate the role of the English language in the Indian education system, administration, history, culture, and literature have been analysed. A quality content analysis is conducted using the descriptive method. The results have revealed that English proved a cornerstone in building India's cultural, intellectual, and creative identity.

Keywords: Language; Literature; Culture; Education; Identity

FULL PAPER

Introduction

India is a vast country with great diversity. From ancient to modern times, many social, political, economic, cultural, and educational changes took place in India. It is observed that all human societies, to varying degrees, have changed over time. Indian society is not an exception to this rule. For any society, language plays a crucial role in every sphere of knowledge. One could not imagine a culture without language. It is the language that helps us to create and share our knowledge and beliefs. Language provides us with our identity. It is the best way for a society to convey its peculiar culture far and wide. Through language and literature, society could get a sense of identity.

Language and literature cannot be separated. It is the true essence of any society in the world. They both aid in offering a profound understanding of the culture and creative landscape of any country. Literature and language are examples of how people are closely related. They are inextricably linked. Indian society today has its own characteristics and importance. India is home to many different languages, religions, civilizations, and subcultures. One distinctive feature of Indian society is “Unity in Diversity.” One could find vivid descriptions of this phenomenon in various Indian languages as well as in English literature. Many Indian English and other writers, intellectuals, and scholars have described and depicted Indian culture in their works. This research analyses how English has shaped India’s cultural, intellectual, and creative identity.

Literature Review:

English is no longer a foreign language in India. It became a common language for the multilingual Indian society. Ram Ahuja in his book *Society in India: Concepts, Theories and Recent Trends* quoted Macaulay’s purpose while introducing English in education in 1835: “We must create a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern- a class who of persons, Indian in blood and colour but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.” (216) Through Macaulay’s Minutes, the British wanted to create a specific class for their purpose. Indians went far beyond that and embraced the revolutionary nature of the English language. Visionary leaders and social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Mahatma Phule, and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar focused on women’s education and rights and challenged Vedic orthodoxy. Ram Ahuja rightly pointed out:

...English education, particularly at the higher levels, would lead to a change of social values. Social reformers, educated in English, emphasized values such as the removal of caste restrictions, equality for women, the elimination of evil social customs and practices, the voice in the governance of the country, the establishment of democratic institutions, and so on. (*Society in India: Concepts, Theories and Recent Trends* 225)

Literature plays a vital role in human history. In fact, the whole of human civilization and its progress are preserved in literature. It has practical importance in human life. William J. Long described the importance of literature. He writes: "Literature preserves the ideals of a people, and ideals—love, faith, duty, friendship, freedom, and reverence—are the parts of human life most worthy of preservation" (*English Literature* 7).

Many creative Indian writers, such as Salman Rushdie, R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Arundhati Roy, and others, use English dexterously. Through their writings, they highlighted Indian culture, tradition, and social problems. Satish Chandra, in his book *History of Medieval India*, stated: "Indian society was one of the few societies in the world which was able to develop a more or less unified culture, despite differences in race, religion, and language. This unified culture was reflected in an outburst of creative activity" (382). English is not only the "link language" in India but also a language of intellectual, cultural, and creative identity for Indian writers, intellectuals, social reformers, politicians, educationists, artists, and scholars.

Background of the Paper:

This paper tries to understand how the English language contributed to understanding the complex nature of Indian society. It helped connect people to share their rich, varied cultures, as it is well known that different cultures are deeply rooted in India. Through the English language, creative minds not only conveyed the very essence of Indian culture but also depicted the subtle nuances of women and the deprived sections of Indian society. They raised and highlighted social, cultural, religious, educational, and other issues of Indian society. There are many cultural, social, religious, economic, educational, and political issues in India. This paper focused on how the English language played a significant role in shaping India's unique identity on the world stage.

Methodology:

To understand the diversified culture of India, various writers' works and historical documentation have been studied. It has used an analytical and

descriptive approach to interpret the literary works of Indian and other writers worldwide.

Analysis and Discussion:

The analysis and discussion of the paper emphasize the two points. Firstly, it discusses the introduction of English in Indian society and literature. Secondly, it analyses its role in building India's cultural, intellectual, and creative identity through Indian English writers, intellectuals, philosophers, scholars, and artists. In the British Raj, the Education Despatch of 1854, prepared by Sir Charles Wood, broadened the scope of English education throughout India and formalized its usage in secondary and higher education. P.N. Chopra and his co-authors in their multi-volume book *A Social, Cultural, and Economic History of India*, Vol 3, highlighted the very essence of the Wood's Despatch on Education:

According to the Despatch, the foundation on which the educational superstructure was to stand was European knowledge in arts, science, philosophy, and literature. That knowledge was to be spread as widely as possible among all classes of people. To the great mass of the people, the rudiments of that knowledge were to be conveyed through one or other of the vernacular languages. For a higher order of that knowledge, English could be resorted to wherever there was a demand. (Chopra et al 252-253)

In fact, Wood's Despatch proved a significant turning point in the history of education in India. It provided legal aid to the deprived section of Indian society. The door of education opened for the lower and outcaste people. Intellectuals and social thinkers like Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and Ambedkar used English and brought about a social revolution in India. The English language helped them to understand the difference between Western ideas of nationalism, the importance of education, and the universal rights of human beings. They could not find liberty, equality, fraternity, or justice in Indian society because Indian society was primarily based on caste hierarchy. Caste discrimination was prevalent in India. Phule and Ambedkar experienced the adverse effects of caste-ridden Hindu society. They raised social, economic, educational, cultural, and many other issues on various platforms around the world. Ram Ahuja, in his book *Society in India: Concepts, Theories and Recent Trends*, rightly pointed out the unequal stratification of Indian society:

In India, both caste and class are used as bases for hierarchical ranking and coexist. However, caste, rooted in religious belief, is considered a more important basis for social stratification for social, economic, and religious purposes. 'Caste' is a hereditary social group that does not permit social mobility to its members. It

involves ranking by birth, which affects one's occupation, marriage, and social relationships (35). Without any doubt, the Indian caste system had many adverse effects. It affects every walk of life in India. It is a challenge for intellectuals, scholars, thinkers, reformers, educationists, and policymakers. Besides the caste system, there were other ill social practices like the *sati* tradition, dowry, widows not having the right to marry, etc.

There were many changes in India's social, educational, cultural, political, and religious history. It has been observed that Indian society has its own merits and demerits. Many writers, critics, intellectuals, politicians, social thinkers, philosophers, and scholars have highlighted the significant achievements and problems of Indian society. Through their work, we can see that Indian society has many memorable glories and serious issues in politics, education, and other fields, both in the past and in the present.

In the Ancient Period, Vedic and non-Vedic traditions were prevalent. Sanskrit, the language of the Vedas, dominated the sphere of knowledge and social life in India. Brahmins solely dominated Sanskrit. Common people used non-Vedic languages such as Pali and Prakrit. In the Ancient Period, there were many differences, such as racial, educational, cultural, and social. Chopra and his co-authors, in their *Social, Cultural and Economic History of India, vol. I*, write: "India—with its vast collection of people differing from one another in physical characteristics, in language and in their way of life—represents all the ethnographical divisions of mankind primarily." (4) Both the Vedic and the non-Vedic traditions contributed to and shaped Indian society. The Vedic tradition had the *Gurukul* way of teaching practice. In those days, only upper-class students had the privilege of education in the *Gurukul* system. The standard or lower classes were deprived of the right to education. Moreover, the social, economic, and cultural status of the lower classes was insignificant.

In the Medieval Period, the feudal system arose, changing the social structure of India. Foreign invaders and indigenous rulers like Turks, Mughals, Arabs, Mongols, Palas, Harsha, the Guptas, the Pratiharas, the Rashtrakutas, and the Cholas dominated political, social, economic, and cultural power. During this period, foreign invaders brought their languages, customs, and cultures, which were assimilated into Indian culture. Medieval saints and poets, like Tukaram, Kabir Das, Raidas, Namdev, Meerabai, Basavanna, Malik Muhammad Jayasi, Amir Khusro, and Guru Nanak, vividly depicted the peace and turmoil of the period. However, it was written in vernacular languages, and later on their writings were translated into many

languages, including English. Moreover, it gained widespread recognition and established its own identity.

The Modern Period witnessed new scientific inventions and the Industrial Revolution. The British arrived in India and brought English with them. They changed the governing, educational, political, social, cultural, intellectual, and creative pattern of this land. Their new political order brought drastic changes in the minds of intellectuals, scholars, and creative writers. They opened doors of education for one and all. Earlier, it was only for the upper castes, such as Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas. Through English, lower- and upper-class Indians peeped out at the world. It proved fruitful and valuable for them. From Anglo-Indian literature to Indian English literature, Indian authors, scholars, and intellectuals have taken a giant leap. A drastic change could be seen in Indian society as well as in language and literature.

One could easily find that many changes have happened due to the English language. First of all, Indians had the opportunity to study Western thought, traditions, and cultures. Scholars and politicians like Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Dr. Panjabrao Deshmukh, and many more not only adopted Western liberal ideas but also criticized unethical, illogical, and immoral social practices of the Vedic religion. Nehru's *autobiography* is a fine piece of literary work in English. Ambedkar's research-based English prose opened novel vistas in Indian society and culture. Dr. Panjabrao Deshmukh's research work and his own life are pathbreaking. All these stalwarts of English prose upheld the ethical, logical, and moral principles in their lives and writings. Creative writers like R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Rabindranath Tagore, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Gita Mehta, Arundhati Subramaniam, and many others focus on contemporary cultural, social, spiritual, and traditional issues in Indian society.

Findings:

This paper has looked into the significant issues and challenges of Indian society. This paper has discussed social, political, religious, educational, cultural, gender, and other issues in the context of the English language. It thoroughly studied the works of Indian writers like R.K. Narayan, Rabindranath Tagore, Sarojini Naidu, and others. In this way, the paper seems significant from the viewpoints of culture, society, economy, politics, history, religion, and the English language.

Recommendations:

As an international language, English can be proper for addressing various social, cultural, educational, and political issues. To understand the major

contemporary issues in Indian society, an interdisciplinary approach could be used. There is a strong need to train more scholars in contemporary studies to develop a deep understanding of emerging social issues and problems.

Conclusion:

This paper has given deeper accounts of the English language and its significance in Indian society. It helped to build India's social, cultural, educational, religious, and political foundation. It has created India's cultural, intellectual, and creative identity. It discussed and analysed the works of Indian and other writers from around the world. Indian writers deftly used the English language and brought glory to India worldwide. The English language is a silver lining in a complex Indian society. Various contemporary research helps us to understand the complex society through a common language like English. Therefore, such a deep understanding of complex Indian culture, intellectual and creative identity is important.

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