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ENGLISH IN INDIA'S GRAND STRATEGY

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Abstract

The term ‘grand strategy’ may appear to be an extravagant and abstract expression, yet it is simply a shorthand manner of describing a country’s efforts in diverse areas towards its key goals. According to Yale historian Paul Kennedy, the crux of grand strategy lies in the “capacity of the nation’s leaders to bring together all of the elements, both military and nonmilitary, for the preservation and enhancement of the nation’s long-term (that is, in wartime and peacetime) best interests” (Kennedy 1991:5). Thus, grand strategy deploys all of a country’s assets. For India, one such asset is the English language. Although English was a ‘gift’ – unasked for and problematic – from its British colonizers, modern India has strategically deployed English as part of its grand strategy.

The first section of the paper considers the global dominance of English and the political implications thereof. The next section provides a brief historical overview of English in India. English is a strategic asset in three areas: domestic politics, economics, and diplomacy. The third section discusses the contribution of English competence to India’s achievements in these three sectors. The final section discusses the role of English education in foreign policy.

Keywords: English in India, English and diplomacy, grand strategy

English in India's grand strategy

English as a global language

English is the first truly global language, since Latin and French (the original *lingua franca*) functioned in a more restricted geographic sphere. Politics elevated English to this position, and the policies of nations reflect their acknowledgement of this fact.

Why is English known as a global language? One and a half billion people are estimated to have some amount of competency in English (Crystal 2003). There are only three languages that can compete with these numbers: Chinese, Spanish, and Hindi-Urdu. However, there are more speakers of those three languages who are trying to learn English, than speakers of English trying to learn Chinese, Spanish, and Hindi-Urdu (McArthur 2002:114). We can predict that English will retain a dominant position in the future.

What kind of English is dominant today? English is the native language of only a fifth of its speakers (Stevens 1992:28). The great majority of those who use English employ it in ways that are inflected by their own cultures, and informed by their own purposes. Peter Stevens distinguishes between English as a foreign language and English as a second language. In a community where it has no special standing, it is a *foreign* language. A *second* language is used in administration, by some sectors of the population, as a medium of instruction, and so on. English is a foreign (albeit increasingly common) language in South Korea and Brazil; but a second language in places like India and Nigeria (Stevens 1992:36). While in the past, proper British English was the ideal, today the number and diversity of speakers renders other ways of speaking more acceptable. Countries in which English is a second language are no longer apologetic about their variants. For example, Singapore's ambassador to the United Nations asserted: "I should hope that when I am speaking abroad my countrymen will have no problem recognizing that I am a Singaporean" (Stevens 1992:38).

How did English get to this dominant position? In 1578, travellers were advised that "English will do you good in England, but past Dover it is worth nothing" (McArthur 2002:120). It is thanks to British imperialism, American cultural influence, and the origins of modern commerce in Anglo-America, that English became the language of international interaction.

International institutions have explicitly recognized the dominance of English. English has replaced French as the language of diplomacy (Crossette 2001). The watershed moment came at the Versailles Convention in 1919, where the post-World War I settlement was being discussed. The US President Woodrow Wilson and the British Prime Minister Lloyd-George disapproved of the French draft of the peace treaty. In fact, the latter cited the prevalence of English in India as one reason in favour of an English draft. He pointed to the numerical majority of English speakers in the world: “the United States, with a population of over 100 million inhabitants, where the official language is English, not to speak of the Empire and India, where more than 300 million inhabitants understand this language, and where there is a total of over 170 million people speaking English who will find themselves represented at this Conference” (Brimelow 1976:31). We see here that while Britain brought English to India, India contributed to making English a global language and enhanced Britain’s status.

The global dominance of English is bound to shape the foreign and domestic policies of countries. Those that are not adept in English find themselves at a disadvantage. After a linguistic *faux pas* by his president made the news, one French leader lamented: “The linguistic incompetence of the French is a recurring joke at European summits and in international businesses.” Former French president Nicolas Sarkozy, who failed to graduate from the elite Sciences-Po school due to low grades in English, introduced an emergency plan in 2009 to raise the standard of English in France. The plan called for more native English-speaking teachers, initiating more contact between French students and English speakers, and moving from written to oral exams (Sessions 2013). Catherine Prendergast’s sociological study of post-Communist Europe, aptly titled *Buying into English*, illuminates the ways in which people in this region (often with government support) are trying to learn English to improve their life chances (Prendergast 2008).

The dominance of English does have its opponents. Some scholars make an argument based on “language ecology”. They frame the spread of English as a disruption that is devastating local languages and imposing a dangerous monoculture. Others perceive the spread of English as linguistic imperialism, and call for a form of linguistic justice in which other languages are protected and promoted (Pennycook 2000). It is important to note that English is not neutral in its effects on countries’ positions in world politics, or on the life

chances of individuals. David Crystal's assertion that English became the globally dominant language because it happened to be at "the right place at the right time", ignores the cruelty of history, and the work that goes into maintaining global hierarchies (Crystal 1997:110).

This paper does not intend to deny the injustices of the past nor legitimize the current hierarchies sustained by English. It attempts to explore the creative uses of a no-longer-foreign language in the service of national goals. Furthermore, the paper does not discuss the interesting ways in which Indians' use of English has transformed the language itself, by introducing new terms (such as 'prepone') into the vocabulary, and by enriching the literary canon (since 1981, when Salman Rushdie was the winner, four Indian writers have won the Booker Prize).

The status of English in India

Linguistic diversity is one of the remarkable features of the Indian polity. The Constitution recognizes twenty-two major languages in its Eighth Schedule; there are at least another twenty that are spoken by millions, and a few hundred dialects in addition. India has no national language; Hindi and English are official languages with equal status.

How many Indians speak English? It has been estimated that 3 to 5 percent of the population makes regular use of English, yielding a figure between 40 and 60 million. Surveys using a more expanded notion of fluency indicate that nearly twenty percent of the population can be said to speak English (Crystal 2003:46). The 2001 census revealed that 125 million residents claim to speak it (Anon 2010). What about the fluency with which Indians handle English? The international education company Education First conducted a survey of 70 countries and over 90,000 adults to create its English Proficiency Index. Here India is in the 'high proficiency' group, ranked 20th out of 70 countries (Education First 2016).

In the early 19th century, the British rulers engaged in a debate on whether English should be promoted at the expense of Indian languages. The debate was resolved in the affirmative, as codified in the Indian Education Act of 1835. It is important to remember that many among the Indian elite were in favour of English; learning English facilitated upward mobility for them (Krishnaswamy and Krishnaswamy 2006:45,71). By the early twentieth

century, functional communicative ability in English was required for many middle-ranking employees such as clerks, railway agents, and military personnel (Schneider 2007:165). Some leaders supported the teaching of English in order to counter the oppressive strictures of the Hindu caste system, which privileged a knowledge of Sanskrit (Chimurkar 2015). Muslims in colonial India were also divided over English education. Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, the famous reformer, urged his fellow Muslims to study English to better their socio-economic condition (Aligarh Muslim University n.d.).

Even those who fought for freedom from British rule communicated with each other, and the public, in English. Mahatma Gandhi saw the irony in the situation, writing in *Hind Swaraj*, “Is it not a sad commentary that we should have to speak of Home Rule in a foreign tongue?” On the one hand, Gandhi lamented: “It is we, the English-knowing men, that have enslaved India. The curse of the nation will rest not upon the English but upon us.” On the other hand, he urged the appropriate use of English: “In our dealing with the English people, in our dealings with our own people, when we can only correspond with them through that language, and for the purpose of knowing how much disgusted they (the English) have themselves become with their civilization, we may use or learn English...” (Gandhi 1908).

Others in the freedom movement were less conflicted than Gandhi about the place of English. The politician and philosopher C. Rajagopalachari (and Gandhi’s close associate) called English the gift of Saraswati to India (Krishnaswamy and Burde 1998:13). Saraswati is the Hindu goddess of art, education, and literature. Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first Prime Minister and an accomplished writer in English, whose entire higher education took place in Britain, described himself as the last Englishman to rule India (Venugopal 2001).

English in India’s grand strategy

In the sectors of domestic politics, economics, and diplomacy, English has helped India present itself as a united, modern, and economically vibrant country that is well integrated with the rest of the world.

English as a political asset

English is an important ingredient in the glue that holds India together, enabling the country to present a united front to the world. In the first decade of

independence, it was prophesied that India would not survive as a political unit because of the internal cleavages of religion, language, and caste. That India exists today is, at least in part, thanks to the decision to choose English as an official language, alongside Hindi (Bajpai 1997:60).

The Constitution of India provided that the government would promote the use of Hindi, and that the status of Hindi and English would be re-examined after the first decade. In 1954, the High Court in Mumbai (then Bombay) issued a ruling that gave English the status of an Indian language. In his verdict, Justice M.C. Chagla declared (Indian Kanoon 1954):

Every language in India which is in use is an Indian language... It may be said that in a sense the English-language is a foreign language. It does not arise from the soil; it does not owe its origin to any of the classical languages of this country; it was brought to this country by foreigners and in that sense undoubtedly English is a foreign language. But in the constitutional sense -- and that is the only sense we are concerned with -- it is as much an Indian language today, as much recognised by the Constitution, and as much entitled to protection as any other language spoken by any other section or community in this country.

As the deadline for re-evaluating the status of English approached, in northern India both the left-leaning Socialists and the right-leaning Jan Sangh called for the replacement of English with Hindi. In 1965 and 1966, however, there were bloody riots in South India demanding that English be retained as an official language. Politicians there championed English as a way to protect the place of South Indian languages, and Tamil in particular. The Official Languages Act was amended in 1967, providing that the use of English would be ended only with the agreement of the legislatures of every state that had not adopted Hindi as its official language, and of both Houses of Parliament.

This expedient of a supposedly ‘neutral’ language that belonged to (and therefore privileged) no one, prevented a North-South schism. Yet English continues to cement social inequalities in place. Veteran journalist Mark Tully considers English in India to be “divisive and dangerous” (Tully 1997). Those at the bottom of the economic ladder see that lack of ease with English is holding back their socio-economic progress (Puri 2008).

At the same time, some champion the potential of English to transform socio-economic status (Ilaiah 2016). Chandrabhan Prasad, a prominent intellectual from a Dalit background, has constructed a temple to the Goddess of English in North India. He believes that learning English is the key to Dalit progress (Babu 2010). When a Leftist government in West Bengal dropped English as a subject in elementary school, an Opposition activist compared the decision to colonial misrule: “Just like the British who did not want English to be taught to the broad masses since it would spread liberal ideas, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) wants to keep the masses uneducated so that they can be manipulated and prevented from questioning the system” (Banerji 1985).

English as an economic asset

On gaining independence in 1947, India was in dire economic straits. The knowledge of English in an admittedly small segment of society was seen as a precious asset. As Annamalai puts it, “nationalistic euphoria gave way to the realities of economic reconstruction of the society” (Annamalai 1991). Knowledge of English reduces transaction costs in interactions with the global economy. All other things being equal, India has an advantage in attracting foreign investment and in penetrating foreign markets.

Annika Hohenthal investigates the place of English in Indians’ worldview and finds that English represents scientific knowledge, modernization and development. 90 percent of respondents in Hohenthal’s survey said that English was important to India’s development, while only a third perceived Hindi to be important in this way (Hohenthal 2003). A 2009 survey by an Indian TV channel found that 87 percent of Indians “feel that knowledge of English is important to succeed in life” (Graddol 2009:21).

Facility with English is especially important in the service sector, specifically in business process outsourcing and tourism (Anon 2012). India has a comparative advantage in the service sector. Already in 1996, Mark Tully was writing that the Indian software industry owed its success partly to the workforce’s knowledge of English (Tully 1997). Within India, areas with greater English proficiency do better at attracting information technology (IT) firms. One study found that when the number of English speakers in a district is two percentage points higher, the probability of IT firms setting up shop there increases by six percentage points, and overall school enrollment grows faster as well (Kartini Shastri 2012). Today, there is some anxiety that India’s

historical advantage is being eroded by aggressive English promotion in countries that are competing with it. The decision of the Chinese government to make the study of English mandatory is often cited in this regard (Stevenson 2009). Recently, the Philippines overtook India as the largest hub for call centres in the world, and the primary reason for this shift appears to be that Filipino employees are more proficient in English than their Indian counterparts (Maddineni 2015).

Responding to these economic imperatives, the Indian government is promoting the idea that English should be introduced at an early stage in formal schooling. In the Draft National Education Policy of 2016, the central government recommends to states that English should be the language of instruction after Class V. The policy also recommends that English be introduced as a second language in primary schools: “Knowledge of English plays an important role in the national and international mobility of students and provides an [sic] access to global knowledge. Hence, it is important to make children proficient in reading and writing English. Therefore, if the medium of instruction up to the primary level is the mother tongue or local or regional language, the second language will be English...” (Ministry of Human Resources Development 2016:31).

Indians are already voting with their wallets for English. One study claims that English fluency can increase one’s wages by over one-third (Nagarajan 2014). No wonder then that the market for English Language Teaching (ELT) was estimated to grow from US \$2.76 billion in 2012 to US \$4.67 billion by 2015 (I.C.E.F. Monitor 2015).

English as an asset in diplomacy

Familiarity with English helps India ‘punch above its weight’ in an international sphere where English is the default language of diplomacy. Elected leaders such as the Prime Minister and Minister for External Affairs can often dispense with the services of interpreters. Their message can be diffused to the rest of the world in English. The only Indian Prime Ministers to address the United Nations General Assembly in Hindi, rather than in English were A.B. Vajpayee and Narendra Modi (Anon 2014).

Even in the years immediately following Independence, when India was fragile and poor, Indian diplomats were able to persuade and lead in forums such as

the United Nations and the Commonwealth. Members of the Indian Foreign Service (IFS) found (and find) themselves at an advantage as compared to their colleagues from other nations, thanks to their knowledge of English.

In the first three or four decades after Independence, the diplomatic corps was a common choice for top scorers in the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) examinations. The successful candidates were usually drawn from prestigious universities and well-connected families (Datta-Ray 2015:55). Knowledge of English and a cosmopolitan outlook could be taken for granted. Two changes produced a gradual decline in English fluency among prospective diplomats: the UPSC introduced reservations, and the IFS slipped down the list of choices of those selected. As a result, “Whereas once the IFS was an English-speaking elite, a symbol of modernity...today Indian diplomats are just as likely to have been educated in vernacular languages...prompting an old-timer to carp: ‘Imagine getting recruits who cannot even speak English!’” (Datta-Ray 2015:58).

In 2013, the UPSC increased the weightage for English skills in its competitive examination by including a mandatory paper in English composition and comprehension. The change was justified on the grounds that “global boundaries have disappeared and language has become the unit of currency”. Advocates for the new test of English claimed that although China and Japan had succeeded without mastering English, even these countries were now “seeing the language as a tool to deal with global competition” (Anon 2013). While this new English paper was dropped from the competitive process, owing to pressure from regional parties, note that the vast majority of candidates (83% in 2011 and 85% in 2014) take the UPSC exam itself in English (Bansal 2016).

The English language was particularly important in the Commonwealth, an association of countries who had been part of the British Empire. During the Cold War, India had close ties with the Soviet Union, yet maintained the stance that it was non-aligned. Sharing the English language with Western countries such as Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States added some credibility to this stance. Prime Minister Nehru acknowledged that it was the English language, rather than any political or ideological link, that connected India to “the English-speaking peoples” (Tickoo 2008:126). Even former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, known as a champion of *realpolitik*, acknowledged that India had a special place in the minds of

Americans: “precisely because it speaks English, is a democracy, and all of us know India, we like and have easy relations with them” (Kissinger 1985).

Alexander Davis claimed that the common language shared by India and the United States was one of the factors that enabled the leaders of the two countries to overcome the negativity generated by India’s 1998 nuclear tests and arrive at a nuclear cooperation agreement (Davis 2014). Even Nigel Farage of the ultra-nationalist and anti-immigration United Kingdom Independence Party, expressed a preference for immigrants from India over those from Eastern Europe, on the grounds that they are “more likely to speak English, understand common law and have a connection with [the UK]...” (Tharoor 2015).

English also facilitates the emigration of educated Indians. Close to 80% of the Indian diaspora lives in high-income or middle-income countries. Even within these countries, Indian-origin immigrants are likely to be better educated and wealthier than the average immigrant, and even the average citizen (Kapur 2010:53-54). In the last decade, members of the diaspora community have been active in influencing the foreign policies of the countries they reside in. The Indian government now views the diaspora as a strategic asset in diplomacy (Kapur 2003).

English education in foreign policy

The Indian government consciously uses its English education infrastructure to welcome foreign students to India, thus establishing links with current and future decision-makers. The government also decided to promote English courses for elites from certain developing countries. Thus, English education also serves the ends of grand strategy.

Education Consultants India Ltd (Ed.CIL) was set up by the Central Government to advertise and co-ordinate international student enrollment in higher learning institutions. On its official page “Why Study in India?” Ed.CIL lists as the second reason India’s English speaking population and its use of English as the primary language of instruction in higher education (India nd). Ed.CIL also offers six-month English courses to students from countries in Africa and South Asia, preparing them to then take advantage of low-cost English-language instruction in professional fields such as engineering, biotechnology, information technology, and agriculture (Pandey 2007). Of course, private institutions also strive to attract foreign students, who are often able to pay higher tuition fees than their Indian classmates.

The English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU) provides an illuminating example of the role of English in grand strategy. In 1958, it was established as the Central Institute of English, in Hyderabad in southern India. In 1972, it was renamed the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, when French, German, and Russian were introduced into the curriculum. The name itself was recognition of the fact that English is not a foreign language. In 1973, it became a deemed central university. The institution's mission was to advance and disseminate "instructional, research and extension facilities in the teaching of English and Foreign Languages and Literatures in India" (English and Foreign Languages University nd-a). In 2006, it became a full-fledged central university.

In 1999, the Ministry of External Affairs suggested to the EFLU administration that they offer courses in English (International Training Programmes or ITPs) to foreign professionals. Although this was not entirely congruent with the mission statement of the institution, which had hitherto focused on research and teacher training, the faculty took on the task. Paul Gunashekar, one of the first coordinators of the programme states: "When we launched ITP in the late 90s, we went into proficiency teaching with some trepidation. Very few of us on the faculty had any real experience of direct linguistic-proficiency teaching, and we had to make a conscious effort to shift from traditional teacher training to language training for foreign learners of English."¹

The first contingents of foreign students were drawn from the former Soviet republics in Central Asia, such as Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. India was looking for ways to establish relations with these newly-independent and resource-rich countries, and one of the advantages that it could offer was cost-effective English training. EFLU's records show that approximately 3000 foreign nationals, including ministers, members of parliament, secretaries, diplomats, teachers, doctors, pilots, police officers, lawyers, auditors, journalists and government officials from more than a hundred countries enrolled in the ITPs. In the period from 2011 to 2015, more than a thousand professionals were enrolled. Mongolia, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, Tajikistan and Bhutan sent the highest number of students.²

¹ Personal communication with author via email from Paul Gunashekar, March 13, 2016

² Personal communication with author via email from Meera Srinivas, current ITP Coordinator, March 8, 2016

In addition to courses in English, the participants in ITPs are also exposed to extension lectures which give them an understanding of Indian culture, economics, and politics. In the 1990s, EFLU started the process of establishing centres for ELT (CELTs) in foreign countries. CELTs have been established in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka, “with the objective of equipping students, civil servants, professionals and business persons in these countries with English language and communication soft skills”. CELTs are also planned for five African countries: Sudan, Djibouti, Central Asian Republic, Togo, and Mauritania (English and Foreign Languages University nd-b). This training of foreign elites helps raise the profile of India abroad, and may translate into advantages for India in the long term.

Another change in EFLU’s mission also testifies to the importance of English education in India’s overall strategy. In its early years, the institution carried out its mandate of raising the standard of English education by training teachers of English, who had already completed postgraduate degrees, in ELT. In the mid-1990s, EFLU itself began to offer Master’s level courses in English. Interestingly, students enrolled in these courses are being recruited primarily into Information Technology and Business Process Outsourcing firms, rather than schools and colleges. In addition, EFLU began to offer certification of English proficiency, through a test known as the National English Language Testing Service (NELTS) (Tickoo 2008:103). These developments reflect the evolution of the Indian economy, and show the high demand for fluency in English in growth sectors.

Conclusion

The term ‘grand strategy’ is usually associated with military preparedness. In fact, grand strategy includes the leveraging of all of the assets that a country possesses. In the case of India, knowledge of English is one such asset.

Colonialism led to the diffusion of English across the world. The inherent inequality of the colonial divide was maintained by privileging English and denigrating local languages. However, even during the colonial period, Indians understood that English could serve their interests, both personal and public, both pecuniary and political. Even those fighting for independence made use of English for communication. In today’s globalizing system, the significance of English is growing as transnational economic interactions are on the rise.

Individuals – both elites and ordinary citizens – strategically use English to achieve their goals. The analysis above demonstrates that English enables *the nation itself* to be (upwardly) mobile within international society. It provides two examples from the government’s education policy. First, the demand for English as a means for social and economic mobility is sought to be answered by promoting the study of the language among Indians, and setting up national institutions, like EFLU, to assist in this effort. Second, the government also attracts foreign nationals to India by leveraging Indian educational institutions’ ability to offer English language education.

We can conclude that the teaching of English is important not only for the political unity and economic progress of India, but also for bolstering the country’s position in international society.

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