

## ENGLISH IN INDIA

DR. N. R. W. PANDE

Shri Kodanda Rao's article on the Language Policy for India, published in the *Triveni* of April '62, summarizes almost all the arguments of the votaries of English. An examination of these arguments will, therefore, suffice to answer them.

Shri Kodanda Rao asserts in this article, as he has done elsewhere, that a language is not the peculiar possession of any racial or national group any more than the train or the motor car. This statement is very fundamental and needs examination. Most nationhoods are co-extensive with a particular language. The French, Italian, German, etc., are nations named after a language. One would have thought that language is a primary determining factor of nationhood. That there are other nationhoods, like the Russian or the Indian, which are multilingual does not detract from the primary role of language in determining nationhood. The example of the Indians or the Russians only points to other factors besides language.

### **The 'English' train and the English language**

The fundamental difference between a language and a branch of knowledge like, say mathematics, or a machine like, say the motor car, is that the criterion of truth in a science, and of efficiency in a machine, are extra-national. A particular mathematical theory is not regarded as correct because it is current in a particular nation. Mathematics may have originated in India or Greece. But the validity of the mathematical ideas of a Ramanujam or an Einstein is not judged by finding out how far they conform to the Indian or the Greek practice. The car may have been invented in America but the efficiency of a car is not judged by considering how far it is a faithful copy of the American model. The standards of correctness or chastity of a language, on the other hand, are judged by conformity to the current and accepted practice in a particular nation. A particular pronunciation of English is correct because that is the current pronunciation in the south of England. A particular idiom is chaste English because it

is current in particular circles in England. A language thus by its very nature is national. English is what the Englishman speaks. What others speak is only English in as much as it conforms to it.

Some English enthusiasts in India have begun to say that by English they do not mean the 'English' English. There can be such a language as Indian English as there is American English. Americans do not very much care whether their pronunciation and idiom conform to what is accepted at Oxford. We may similarly set up our own standard for English.

In this contention, a fundamental difference between America and India is overlooked. The majority of Americans have descended from the Englishmen who migrated to America. The Americans have not acquired the English language by laborious and formal instruction at school. Their language, therefore, is not likely to deviate from the standard English so much that it becomes unintelligible to those who know only 'English' English.

Indians, on the other hand, have acquired the use of the English language on pain of starvation. English, so far, has not succeeded in displacing Indian languages excepting where the British Government displaced them at the point of the bayonet. The process of acquiring English, for an Indian, is very prolonged, involving whole-time learning for about 10 to 15 years, constantly keeping the English norm in view. If the English norm is no longer there, the type of English that will develop in India may be something like the Pidgin English of the Africans which cannot be understood by those who know only English (and those who know Pidgin English only, cannot understand English). For all we know, if the English norm is not kept in view, Indian English may become indistinguishable from *Roman Hindustani*.

Again the whole argument for English is based on the fact that it is the language of a large number of English and American people who have produced a very rich literature on all subjects. Anyone else who wants to take advantage of the wide intelligibility of English in England and America, and the vast literature produced by these nations, must always try to conform to the English that is accepted as English by them. Any other English will be English only in name. It follows, therefore, that English, for the Indian, will for ever remain a foreign language. It cannot be appropriated to ourselves by just calling it our own.

### The Message of Yeats

In this connection, the English enthusiasts should remember the message which the poet Yeats sent to Indo-English writers. When Yeats was asked whether he had any message for Indo-English writers, Yeats is reported to have said "Yes, I have. Don't write in English." In spite of the fact that most of our educational resources in the last 150 years have been concentrated on acquiring the use of English, we have not produced a single writer whose writing can be said to be a part of English literature. Tagore was avowedly a Bengali author translated into English. Authors like Dr. Radhakrishnan are read in the West not for their English but for the *Indian* philosophy which their English conveys, and even authors like R. K. Narayan and others are read for the Indian content of their writings and not for their English. That English cannot be our language has been amply demonstrated in the last 150 years.

It is true that a man is not born with a language but into a language and, therefore, an Indian child removed from birth to England, and brought up in the same surroundings as an English child, will be as efficient in English as the English child. (Even about such cases, Psychologists like Jung, with their theory of the racial unconscious, will maintain that an Indian child will not be able to get rid of its Indian linguistic ancestry even if he is removed to England at birth. But this may be ignored for the present argument.) Even then you cannot remove the whole of India to England. What is true, therefore, of a solitary child, cannot be true of a nation. A vast body of Indian teachers will have to do the teaching of English with their Indian pronunciation and Indian idioms, constantly on guard lest their English may degenerate into Roman Hindustani, by keeping the standard English authors and standard BBC accent in view. We can thus never be creative in English. *For an Indian to be creative in English is taking the first step in switching over to his own language.*

Shri Kodanda Rao observes that our language policy should be based on present communicational needs. I would agree with this statement if the word 'present' is dropped from it. The present communicational needs in India have been artificially brought about by a military conquest. If our country had been conquered by the Chinese or the Japanese, Chinese or the Japanese would have today occupied the same place as English is occupying. Since we

are now free to choose our own language, the fact that we were conquered by the English should no longer weigh in choosing a Union-language. In fact a self-respecting nation would regard that as a reason for not having English.

### **Who needs English ?**

What then are the communicational needs of the Indians? Most Indian languages are highly developed instruments of expression with thousands of years of literary history behind them. It is only deplorable ignorance of our own languages, and fashions of thought perpetuated by our subjugation, that have given rise to the widely held view that the Indian languages are inferior to English. No Indian would need English for communication if the Government does not make it obligatory that English must be used. Most Indians can satisfy all their communicational needs by learning their mother-tongue. A few who will serve the Union Government will need to know the language of the Union Government, which according to the Constitution is Hindi. Since Hindi is the mother-tongue of over 10 crores of Indians, it follows that those who are included in these over 10 crores will not need to learn any language other than their mother-tongue even if they serve the Union Government. Who then needs English in India?

The answer is that only those who have received education upto M. A., and want to pursue the subject of their special study throughout life, need to know English. But here also the claims of English are not exclusive. The claims of French, German, Italian, Russian and Spanish cannot be ignored. It is very often said by the English enthusiasts that these other languages are not as rich as English in scientific literature. But this does not mean that we can afford to ignore these languages. English may have 100 technical papers for every 70 in German but the 100 English papers are no substitute for the German ones. For every hundred English knowing graduates, we must therefore produce at least 70 German knowing ones. It follows, therefore, that even as a foreign language, English cannot have any monopoly in the Indian system of education.

Acquiring scientific knowledge is not the only purpose in studying a foreign language. Being conversant with the life and literature of a vast body of people, the 600 million Chinese, for example, is an important purpose in learning a foreign language.

Our deplorable ignorance about the Chinese is mainly due to our exclusive adherence to English, and not studying any other foreign language as an alternative to it. If there were thousands of educated men in India who have spent as much time on Chinese as we are required to spend on English, we would not have been cut off from momentous events occurring in an important area of the world. Far from being a "window on the world" English has been mainly responsible for our isolation. We view the world through the glasses of the English speaking nations. Languages like Chinese and Japanese must, therefore, have an honoured place in our curriculum and those who take to them should not be bothered with the study of English in addition.

### **Comprehension and Expression**

Shri Kodanda Rao has ignored the question of the level of ability in a foreign language that is needed by us. Even the life-long research workers need to know English only for comprehension purposes. They need not be able to express themselves in English. A comprehension level of ability in a language can be attained much more easily than the expression level of ability. It is quite sufficient to start the study of English or some other European language at the University level. Six years' study upto the M.A. standard by highly intelligent people, for whom alone University education should be reserved, should be sufficient for the attainment of a comprehension level of ability in European languages. I would recommend, therefore, that the incubus of English should be removed altogether from our schools.

Shri Kodanda Rao has fallen a prey to the missionary myth that India has thousands of languages. He has also referred to the languages spoken by one person. In that sense, India does not have thousands but 400 million languages. The linguistic distribution of present day India can be adequately covered by about 10 languages. Even these 10 languages are so similar to each other that if English had not interfered in the last 150 years, most Indians would have been able to follow each other in their own languages. A Maharashtrian does not take much time to follow Gujerati or Punjabi, even with the present hindrance of English, if he stays for a few weeks in Gujerati or Punjabi areas. If the hindrance of English were not there, migrants to other provinces would have tried more sincerely to understand the inhabitants of their new province in their own language. This is

hardly a matter of weeks. The so-called linguistic heterogeneity of India is a myth created by the votaries of English. Just as the British rule prevented the integration of the Indian nation, the English language has prevented the integration of the Indian languages.

Shri Kodanda Rao talks of the cost involved in translating from English into Hindi. Here he is on the weakest ground in his argumentation. Comparing the cost of producing the required literature in Indian languages with the cost of teaching English to every school-going child, is like comparing the cost of setting up a car industry in India with the cost of importing cars for all time to come or the cost of building a road with the cost of every traveller making his own road. If we are turning out 2 million English knowing students, the cost involved is at least 20 million man-years, on the assumption that about 10 years whole time study is needed for acquiring the use of English. Again this cost in man-years is perpetual and ever-increasing. In 20 million man-years the entire literature of English can be translated several times over.

#### **English and our Defence**

Those who justify the imposition of English on every school-going child forget some elementary psychological facts. Every school child does not have the ability to pick up a foreign language like English, to the level of comprehension and expression which our system aims at. The result of this is that many pupils who lack this ability but have tremendous talent in science or other disciplines are unjustly denied a chance of further education. This is a great loss to the country.

This is more evident in Defence than anywhere else. Military abilities have no special relationship with the ability to learn English. By restricting entry to all the important jobs in the Defence Services to the English knowing few, we are denying ourselves the services of thousands who may have superior military abilities.

This question will assume serious proportions if we are required to raise an army comparable to that of China. An army of three million may need thirty thousand officers. At the present rate it would be impossible to find this number among the English educated. Even if somebody gives us 10,000 planes, we would not be able to produce 10,000 efficient pilots expeditiously if our choice is limited to the English-educated, because English education has no special relationship with flying efficiency.

vocabulary. Since Sanskrit vocabulary is common to all the Indian languages, including Tamil, and the inflections of *khari boli* also are fairly common throughout India, the apprehension that people coming from a particular province will have an undue advantage in handling such a language is largely imaginary. After about a couple of decades, it is quite certain that the South Indians will be able to influence the development of Hindi itself according to their own genius. Indians can never hope to influence the growth of the English language according to their own genius. That this will not be the case with Hindi is evident from the fact that many pioneers of Hindi literature came from the non-Hindi speaking sections. South Indians form more than one-third of the population of India and it is inconceivable that if they take to Hindi, Hindi will dominate them. It is more rational to expect that *they* will dominate Hindi.

### **Real Linguistic Integration**

Nevertheless there is some justification for the demand that the Hindi speaking people should be required to study an Indian language other than Hindi. The process of linguistic fusion should be mutual. Shri Kodanda Rao frowns on this admirable suggestion as a "reciprocity in disability." It is strange to hear that knowledge is a disability. I do not myself know any South Indian language but many south Indian languages must be having literatures almost as rich as that of Marathi or Bengali and purely from the educational point of view the knowledge of the life and literature of the South Indians will be a valuable achievement. Besides, if our educational system produces people who are intimately conversant with some other Indian language besides their own, there will be a far greater emotional understanding of each other, than there is at present.

The most pathetic part in the advocacy of English is the claim that it is the "cementing force" of Indian nationalism. If the English language is supposed to be a cementing force of Indian

nationalism, the British Government can with equal justice be said to have fulfilled that claim and we can have any number of such "cementing forces" if we allow our country to be occupied by the Chinese or Pakistani invaders.

The advocates of English strike me as people who cannot look beyond their noses. The accidental circumstance of their being born under British rule in India has coloured all their judgement. I have seen individuals who, being born *before* the British rule was established, died *after* it came to an end. The British rule did not outlast an individual human life. It was a brief—though shameful—chapter in our history, and to suppose that this brief period should determine the shape of India for all time to come is betraying myopia of intelligence. The British rule was a misfortune. All its consequences were disastrous and there is hope for this country only as long as we look upon this period with unalloyed shame and try to wipe out all its traces.

#### **Traces of British Occupation**

But for the accident of British occupation it would have been obvious to anyone that we have a tremendous asset in the Hindi language. It is known by 14 crores of people. If we adopt the right policy, it can surely become intelligible to 400 millions. The language understood by 400 million people with a long, and on the whole proud, history will not take time to become rich in all types of literature and spread at least throughout Asia. Even now with great political disadvantages, Hindi has spread to Ceylon, Burma and South East Asia. If we adopt the right policy it can soon become a major language of Asia. Our prestige will rise higher if *our* language becomes a major language in the world. This will promote Hindi studies throughout the world, and thereby help to secure universal understanding and sympathy for India. The spread of Hindi in the world will bring us prestige which our parroting of English will never bring. English will for ever be the mark of our subjugation.

The contention of the advocates of English that it is necessary for international communication is baseless. The United Nations, for example, have not accepted this contention. They have accepted many other languages including Hindi as international.