

Imperialism and English Education Policies in the Sub-Continent

Zakia Ahmad*

Abstract: This paper examines the status of English in the sub-continent as having been determined by two major legacies--imperialism and colonization. And in the post-independence era, that is 1947, and post-Bangladesh era, that is 1971, the indigenous political issues have also affected the education system of the countries: India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, respectively. The paper traces the various influences coming from colonization, imperialism, political issues and globalization that have contributed to the formulation of the language policies of these countries.

Introduction

Empires around the world had established themselves through military, economic and political powers. Conquest of nationalities and territories, economic and political expansion, imposition of culture and tradition are characteristics of empires. In order to enforce imperialism empires took recourse to hegemony, i.e. domination and mobilisation of resources to establish power. Imperial power was sustained in the colonies through military, political, economic and cultural impositions. The establishment of the British empire from the 19th century was sustained through imperialistic powers and attitudes. The motive driving imperialism is far more deep-rooted and subtle than can be understood from the physical aspects of empire building. Imperialism is not just imposition of military power but also of cultural attitudes and beliefs. The spread of English into colonized South Asian countries such as India and Bangladesh bears proof of British cultural imperialism. As Johnson (2003) says, even the Moghuls could not do what the British did because "the English language and British-built communications linked Indians as never before" (187). British cultural imperialism is evident in the development of the education and language policies of South Asian erstwhile colonized countries.

This paper is a study of the impact of British imperialism on the education and language policies of former British colonies such as India and Bangladesh. How has imperialism affected the education and language policies of India and Bangladesh? To analyse the question, I've chosen the time frame from 1947 up to present day language policies in the countries under review.

The ambiguous status of English language and the changing language policies of these countries reflect the effects of colonization. Even after fifty years of

* Zakia Ahmad, Assistant Professor, Department of English & Humanities, ULAB, Dhaka

independence the legacies left by the British are firmly embedded in the culture of these countries. This paper will focus on how British imperialism has been sustained through language and culture in India and Bangladesh even after decolonization.

Background

In order to trace the development of English in South Asia we have to take a look at the history of the region. India came under direct British Rule in 1858. It was during the British Raj that English entered all the important spheres of Indian life. "Imperialism led to the spread of English as the language of the educated and the political elite, and also of commerce" (Johnson, 2003: 8). During the British rule politics, culture and education of the country were influenced by the imperialistic attitudes of the British.

The British tried to establish their colonial rule not only through economic and political measures but also through imposing cultural domination. Thomas Macaulay's famous *Minute* (1835) opened up a new English culture in the sub-continent: "We have to educate a people who cannot at present be educated by means of their mother tongue. We must teach them some foreign language. The claims of our own language it is hardly necessary to recapitulate. It stands pre-eminent even among the languages of the west" (Thirumalai 2003). Lord Bentinck's acceptance of the *Minute* firmly established English in the Educational system of India and this paved the way for its steady growth. There were controversies and debates regarding this issue in Britain as well as in India but nothing could stop the emergence of English in Indian education. With the establishment of the three Universities of Bombay, Madras and Calcutta in 1857 English became the primary medium of Education. So the status and growth of English was guaranteed in the educational system of the country.

There were three factors mainly which worked solidly in spreading English in the subcontinent. Firstly, it was the work of the Christian missionaries. Secondly, the government made English the medium of administration, and thirdly it was the foresightedness of the local leaders, namely, Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) who wanted the medium of education to be English so that the Indians could benefit from Western knowledge. Gargesh (2007) points out that English does not stand alone but does along with other Indian languages in the classroom.

Decolonization

The British left India in 1947. Decolonization was inevitable. Charles Trevelyan as in Johnson (2003) says, "The existing connection between two such distant countries as England and India cannot, in the nature of things, be permanent: no effort of policy can prevent the natives from ultimately regaining their independence" (185). British colonization ended but British imperialism has been

sustained through culture and education of the colonized people. Since independence the diffusion and impact of English has not decreased, rather the spread of the language has increased in its functional, social and cultural fields. The economic and political power of the colonizers over the colonies may have ceased but the cultural effects are still very much prevalent in the education and language policies of these countries. Some nationalists in India were in favour of the oriental form of education but they did not have enough support to continue the old forms of education which were in Arabic, Sanskrit and Persian. So ultimately the occidental form of education prevailed.

Linguistic Imperialism

The focus of the paper is the impact of British imperialism and how it has been sustained through the use of the English language in colonized countries. The efforts of Lord Macaulay and Raja R. M. Roy established English education in India. This paved the way for linguistic imperialism. "Language education policy is also called language acquisition policy. Another form of planning is language diffusion policy or linguistic imperialism" (Spolsky 1998: 66). Theoretically the British had left India but their cultural influence was far reaching. The imperialism practiced on former colonies was not political or economical anymore but cultural. "All the Asian nations/regions where English is not used for everyday communication outside class but just learned as a foreign language are the countries/regions which were not former British or American colonies" (Choi and Lee 2008: 4). But the countries where English was adopted as a medium of education and as a second language were specifically those which had a history of colonial past. Tsui (2004) observes:

Phillipson (1992) coins the term "linguistic imperialism" to describe the dominance of English worldwide.... He observes that linguistic imperialism is analogous to economic and military imperialism, except that it is even more pervasive and penetrating because the domination is not just economical but also cultural and ideological.
(18)

The language policies of India and Bangladesh give a very realistic view of language imperialism: the tool through which the British have sustained their imperialism in these former colonies.

Language Policies

Countries which had broken free from the domination of imperialism tried to establish their own identities by formulating a strong education and language policy which favoured the mother tongue or first language of the state. It was only after British colonization that the idea of having a language policy in education became necessary (Gargesh 2007:118).

As noted by Spolsky (1998) there was a lot of controversy in formulating education policies in the beginning of the 19th century and it was only "[i]n the late 1980s the regular failure of national planning activities seems to have encouraged the more neutral-seeming term, language policy" (66). There are various reasons why a language gains official status in a country: some of these are related to historical tradition, political power, technological, commercial and cultural advancement. To back up all this the language needs to have political, military, and economic power. The English language having all these advantages gained an official/second language status in the sub-continent.

Language Policy in India

The spread of English around the world has been shown by the Indian American linguist Braj Kachru (1983) as three circles one rising out of the other: the "Inner Circle, the Outer Circle and the Expanding Circle." "The Outer Circle" includes countries which have a history of colonial domination by Britain and the USA. In this circle we have countries such as India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Singapore, Philippines, Kenya, Sri Lanka. Kachru's model is important for it brings into perspective the historical and social issues of language policies. "In many post-colonial countries ... English was chosen as one of the official languages and is still effectively functioning as a dominant language" (Choi and Lee 2008: 2). English is the main link-language between South Asian countries as a result of British colonial, commercial and educational influence.

The conflict between the supporters of English, Hindi and other regional languages led to the "three language formula" in the 1960s. India with 14 recognized state languages and over 350 regional varieties had to choose English as the chief alternative to the local state language. In India English is now recognized as an 'associate' official language with Hindi the official language of four states. English is used within the legal system, government administration, higher education, the armed forces, the media, business and tourism. In the south it is widely preferred to Hindi as a lingua franca. About 4% of the population which is approximately 30m people regularly use English. This makes India the third largest English speaking country in the world, after U. S. A. and U. K. There is a further unrecorded number of people with greater or less knowledge of the language. British imperialism has been sustained in India thoroughly through the English language.

The legacy of British imperialism is one of the most important factors of the socio-cultural development of English in the South Asian countries. Pointing out the inseparability of the colonial language with history, Tsui (2004) says, "It is essential to situate language policies and the debates surrounding them in their sociopolitical contexts, which cannot be separated from their historical contexts" (2). The Indian Government reports show that the "current syllabuses in English

.... are heavily weighted on the literature side," and this is also a legacy of the colonial times according to Gargesh (2007:127).

Language Policy and English in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh English education and language policy has been a topic of debate for long. Bangladesh has the same history of English as India up to 1947. "The region's legacy of the English language is synonymous with the nearly 200-year colonial history of India under the British Raj until 1947" (Rahman 2007:67).

When the partition of the Indian subcontinent took place in 1947 East Bengal became East Pakistan for being the Eastern wing of Pakistan. In Pakistan 'Urdu' was declared the national language. The declaration of Urdu as the national language led to a violent language movement in East Pakistan in 1952. Finally, Urdu and Bengali both were granted national status and English was used for official purposes, government administration, law courts, higher education and also as a link language between the two wings of Pakistan. As Tsui (2004) remarks: "The histories of the language policies of Asian countries that have a colonial past show remarkable similarities. The imposition of the language of the colonizer on the colonized is most symbolic of colonization, commonly realized through the medium of instruction" (2-3).

In 1971 Bangladesh became an independent country - The People's Republic of Bangladesh. Urdu was naturally abolished. Bengali was declared the state language and in 1972 all English medium schools were abolished. Explaining why it happened so, Rahman said that English was, "[c]onsidered a symbol of linguistic imperialism, this hegemonic view of the harmful power of the ex-colonizer was a result of nationalist fervour resulting in the displacement of English" (2007: 84). There was an attempt on the part of the political leaders to assert Bengali nationalism through the use of the native language in all spheres of education and governance.

As Dove (1983) reports: "When Mujib¹ ruled that Bengali alone was to be the medium of instruction in all primary schools and gradually throughout the whole system, the main motive was to assert Bengali national identity" (85). In a country which is largely monolingual this was done quite easily. But, in spite of such orders English went on being used in all official work, law courts, and higher education. Dove reports, "[i]n 1977-78 English was partially re-instated, becoming a subject on the curriculum again from Class 3" (1983: 85). A final attempt to establish Bengali in all parts of government administration was made in 1987 with the passing of the Bangla Procholon Ain (Bengali Implementation Act). Apparently there was an antagonism towards English because it was a legacy of British imperialism and colonization.

The language issue always had a sentimentality and sensitivity attached to it in Bangladesh. An issue which the political parties and leaders exploited to their

own benefit later on. Have the colonized become the colonizers in Bangladesh? Every political party in power has its own agenda regarding education and language policies. The political elite to gain popularity and public favour assert the importance of Bangla in all spheres of administration, education and culture. But for their children they prefer English medium schools and universities abroad.

The Education system of Bangladesh has been badly affected by the changing language policies of the government. At the tertiary level English has been introduced as a compulsory subject. The University Grants Commission being directed by the Ministry of Education instructed, through an ordinance passed on June 26th, 2002, all universities to use English as the medium of instruction. This, as Dove observes, "favours the political elite" of the country (1983: 85).

The trend in the cities is now towards English medium education. Whether consciously or not, the language of the imperialists has again found its way into the education agenda of the country.

Globalization

The renewed interest in the learning of English could be for functional, commercial, economic, and cultural purposes – and at the root of all this is Globalisation. Martin Khor (1995) as cited by Scholte (2005) declares that "globalization is what we in the Third World have for several centuries called colonization" (16). This reinforces the focus of my paper which states that British imperialism is being sustained through the spread and use of English, and in recent times this has become a global issue. English has become so deeply involved with advancement in business, communication, entertainment, media and education that people have to depend on it for economic, social, and cultural enhancement. The necessity for a global language has been appreciated much by the academic and business communities of the world, as Gargesh says: "Globalization in particular has thrown up new opportunities for the exploitation of English for economic betterment of the Indian people" (2007: 117).

Despite various controversies India and Bangladesh have adopted English for official and educational purposes which shows that the "essential role of English in these fields is strongly interwoven with globalization or national development" (Choi and Lee 2008: 20). Though these countries have retained and renewed the use of English for pragmatic reasons the underlying fact remains that it is the language of the imperialists. The British have withdrawn their territorial rights over these countries but their imperialistic influence and cultural domination remains not in the form of imperialism but in the form of globalization. The demand for an English education shows the rise of a society which needs to be integrated with the globalizing world and market (Gargesh 2007: 123).

Conclusion

The status of English in the language policies of India and Bangladesh shows the impact of British imperialism and how it has been sustained in these former colonies. This impact is "even more pervasive and penetrating" because it is "cultural and ideological" as Tsui (2004: 18) quotes from Phillipson (1992). Culture covers a wide area of human life and behaviour and language is probably the most important part of it. Society and language are mutually indispensable. Since World War II the dominance of the English speaking peoples in science and technology and international commerce has led to the recognition of English as the major international language in the world of practical affairs. It is evident from the positive attitude towards English that English has become a tool in India. "Today the English language has a prominent place in India, a place that no other indigenous Indian language has" (Gargesh 2007:138). The use of English has become so pervasive in India that a new variety of English known as 'Indian English' is being recognised.

In Bangladesh we can see the trend to be similar. The impact of globalization is felt here too from a sociolinguistic perspective. English is being accepted as the vehicle for the urge to extend oneself and one's roles beyond the confines of one's culture and language (Rahman 2007: 85). This is seen in the newly emerging educational institutions which have all chosen English as their medium of instruction.

More and more countries are making English the first foreign language to be taught and thus producing a vast expansion of English language teaching programs all over the world. Most of these programs are organized by British institutions which again indicates that British language imperialism is an ongoing process. Globalization is making English the lingua franca of the world. In the former colonies there is a largely unconscious and involuntary process of acculturation. British imperialism sustained through the spread of English cannot be denied in this globalizing world.

However, further reflection shows that cultural imperialism is not a oneway traffic.

This paper opens up fields for further research and inquiries. Studies have shown the influence of British imperialism on former colonies, but an interesting aspect of study would be to examine the flow of counter influences in this globalizing world.² In the newly emerging globalizing world the influences of other cultures on the imperialistic British civilization is irrevocable.

Notes

1. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh (1972-75) and Father of the Nation.
2. "The study of cultural imperialism still tends to focus quite heavily on the flow of Western influences out into the world, and rather less on the counter flow, or on the transfer of languages, cuisine and ideas" (Johnson, 2003: 8).

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