

# From Rejection to Acceptance: A Historical Background of English in Pakistan

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## Abstract

This paper is a part of a Ph.D. dissertation which presents an overview of the history of English in Pakistan. In today's global world, English has established its status as a language of power and prestige, and Pakistan is no exception. Consequently, it is valuable to highlight some historical features that make English important in Pakistani society. Pakistan shares its early history of the contact of the English language with India. In this context, there is a need to get an understanding of its historical and social roots. Therefore, this paper discusses the advent and spread of English in the Indo-Pak subcontinent.

**Keywords:** English language, Pakistan, British rule.

## 1. Introduction

According to Crystal (2004), English has direct and powerful implications for individual success regarding social and economic advantages. The most cited reason for "the success of English comes from the historical role of England as a colonial power" (Zeng, 2011:34). Pakistan was a part of the Indian subcontinent before independence. Same as in the Caribbean, the English language arrived the Indian subcontinent as a result of colonization. Since then, it has always co-existed in Pakistan alongside thousands of local languages.

## 2. Pre-independence

The British first arrived in the subcontinent in early 1600's. At the end of Elizabeth I's era, The East India Company (a British trade company) got the permission from Queen Elizabeth I to trade with the Indian subcontinent. Initially, it was owned by aristocrats, and wealthy merchants and the government has only indirect control over it. The company had its army. The East India Company created its first outpost in Surat. Though it was a small outpost, yet it marked the beginning of a remarkable presence of the British that would last over 300 years and eventually rule the entire subcontinent. In 1614, Sir Thomas Roe, England's first ambassador to the Mughal court, went to the court of Jahangir, the Mughal emperor of India at that time. He was successful to get permission for establishing factories in the name of the King of England: James I. Initially, The East Indian Company set up factories in Agra and Ahmadabad. Then, there was no looking back, and sooner the British dominated in Indian subcontinent by overpowering other European nations such as the French, the Dutch, and the Portuguese.

As discussed earlier, the English language came to the Indian subcontinent at the beginning of 17<sup>th</sup> century with the East India Company. Initially, the British learned regional languages to communicate with the Indian. The company recruited translators for communication with native Indians. However, even at that time, the directors of the East India Company were concerned about the education of the English children. With the increase in their political power, they started to preference to the English language over all other Indian regional languages. It is important to note that other European nations were preaching Catholicism while the British were in favor of Protestantism (Shahbaz, 2012). The later preached Protestantism with the help of missionaries. The East India Company took the responsibility to teach English to native Indians. Therefore, missionaries taught English to the local population. There were no official attempts to impose English language on the masses. Rahman (2002) noticed:

*There was no immediate administrative order imposing English on India but a slow building up of demand for it by offering it first as an additional subject and then providing jobs through it even while Persian continued to be the official language. (Rahman, 2002 as cited by Pathan, 2012:11)*

By the 1700's, Bengal witnessed a spread of Christianity and English language. However, at that time, the British started to gain more power and authority, and missionaries in high number that created unrest among the local Indians. This resulted in a revolt which forced the Company to stop the intake of more missionaries on its ships to India (Shahbaz, 2012). In 1757, the British defeated the last Nawab of Bengal in the Battle of Plassey and established their first independent state where English became the language of the Ruler. Therefore, the demand of learning English began among educated local people of Bengal (Rahman, 2010). Mostly, Hindus

started to learn English for social advancement. However, Muslims who considered English as a language of 'kafir (which means a person who does not believe in God), remained detached from it. The year 1813 was remarkable in the history of English language in Pakistan because of the East Indian Company Charter Act.

### **2.2 Charter Act of 1813 and spread of English**

In the Charter Act of 1813, two major decisions were taken that affected both language and culture of the nation. The East Indian Company allowed taking missionaries to India because the long-standing ban prohibition on missionaries was removed. Moreover, they were free to open schools in India on the models of schools in England. According to Viswanathan (1992), the reason behind this clause was:

*Apparently, missionaries were not to touch upon the issues of faith and religion; however, it is assumed that many benefits would come from 'missionary contact with natives and their many immoral and disgusting habits' (Viswanathan, 1992: 432)*

### **2.3 Medium of instruction controversy**

The second major decision was the grant of one hundred thousand rupees by the government to educate the local Indians. As a result, a debate started on what kind of education, English or classical Indian, should be funded in the subcontinent. On the one side, the Anglicists wanted to enforce the English language. On the other hand, the Orientalists were in favor of using local Indian languages such as Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic to educate Indians. This controversy continued for some time. Even though both Anglicists and Orientalists disagreed on the language to be used for higher education, they agreed that it was in their interest to extend the British rule as much as possible. One can say that they all were trying to establish a strong British Empire. The controversy was finally settled down in 1835 when Thomas Babington Macaulay wrote his famous "Minute upon Indian Education." Macaulay's Minute was written as a rebuttal to those council members who believed that Indians should continue to be educated in their local languages as well as English. He wanted to introduce English language education in India. Macaulay met the Governor General. Consequently, the Anglicists won the day. The credit for the promotion of Western education in British India credited to Macaulay. He envisaged the creation of a class that would act as a bridge between the rulers and the ruled and serve as a low-cost workforce for the future administration. Macaulay wrote:

*....to sum up what I have said, I think it is clear that we are not fettered by the Act of Parliament of 1813;....that we are free to employ our funds as we choose; that we ought to employ them in teaching what is best worth knowing; that English is better worth knowing than Sanskrit and Arabic; that the natives are desirous to be taught English, and not desirous to be taught in Sanskrit or Arabic.... We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals, and intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population. (Macaulay, 1835)*

### **2.4 Consequences of the replacement of Persian with English**

As a result of Macaulay's "Minute," English language replaced Persian as the official languages of the law courts in 1837 (Mehboob 2002; Philipson, 1992). It was a major decision by the British which left a long lasting impact on the local Indians. Hindus accepted the decision because it was just a replacement of the language of the former rulers (Muslims) with the tongue of the new rulers (the British). They had been learning a foreign language (Persian) to get jobs for centuries (Seth, 1949). However, Muslims did not welcome this decision because they were more comfortable with Persian as an official language than English (Pathan, 2012). Therefore, Muslims avoided English education. Since the British took power from the Muslim, the later developed a sense of rejection for the former's language. On the contrary, Hindus started learning English by heart. It was a blessing in disguise for Hindus because Muslims were unable to get jobs due to lack of English language ability. The new English education policy made English the language of administration, trade, commerce, and the language of upper strata of the society. To be educated in English was the need of that time but Muslims failed to perceive it. Consequently, it is evident from the above discussion that Muslims who did not welcome English for a long time.

Till 1870's English was used in higher education, but in 1883 a decision was made to introduce English education at primary level. In the late nineteenth century, British India witnessed considerable progress in postal services, railways, and telegraph. As a result, new job opportunities emerged. English language proficiency was the only requirement to get those jobs. This gave a boost to English education and English language firmly rooted itself in the society till the twentieth century.

### **2.5 Results of the British English Education policies**

The results of the British English educational policy are significant and far-reaching (Waseem, 2009). The severely affected victims were Muslims. The centuries-old Indian education system which suited the genius of the local people was disturbed by the introduction of the western education system (ibid). The replacement of Persian with English as an official language proved a disaster for Muslims' education. The well-educated Muslims who had an excellent command over Persian became illiterate at once. Waseem (2009) quoted the words of Qureshi to depict the reason:

*This served the double purpose of seeking to make the English language attractive and striking at the root of Muslim influence (Qureshi, in Thorpe: 231 as cited in Wasseem, 2009:21).*

Thus, it can be remarked that the British education policies resulted in the growth of illiteracy which turned a well-educated community (The Muslim in the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent) into one of the most illiterate in the world (ibid). Hindus captured all prestigious posts. It resulted in economic deterioration of Muslims in the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent. Waseem (2009) quoted Hunter (1964)'s words to argue this point well:

*A hundred years and seventy years ago it was impossible for a well-born Muslim in Bengal to become poor; at present, it is almost impossible for him to continue rich (Waseem, 2009:21)*

As stated earlier in this chapter, the primary motive behind all these education policies was to get low paid local workers to work for the government. Kazi (1994) described the same idea in the following words:

*During the British rule, the education system of India was modified to fit the perceived needs of the British colonizers. The goals of the British educational policies were those of political control and production of a cost-effective administrative bureaucracy (Kazi, 1994:57).*

It can be remarked that it is crystal clear from the discussion that English possessed the same status in post-independent in Pakistan as in today's Pakistan. The westernized elite had maintained a habit of using English in the domains of power. English became a means of conferring and deferring power, status and economic privilege. Historians criticized the British for those policies. According to Waseem (2009), "it can be argued that the British had some 'moral' excuse for having ignored the downtrodden of their empire, some justifications on the ground of paucity of resources, etc., but for an independent sovereign state to ignore a huge section of its society, is not only callous, but seriously calls into question the integrity and sincerity of its leaders" (ibid).

### **3. Acceptance of English by Muslims: Role of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan**

However, some prominent Muslim civil servants encouraged Muslims to learn English and requested the British to introduce English in Muslim schools as well. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan wrote his name history by opening the first English medium school for Muslims in 1875 which turned into college in 1878 and finally into the first Muslim university in the Indian subcontinent named Aligarh Muslim University in 1920. Therefore, no one can ignore the role of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan in any discussion on Muslims' education in the Indian subcontinent. As discussed above, Muslims remained aloof from the British English education. The conditions become worst after the War of Independence in 1857. The British considered Muslims, the sole responsible for the war. Even though, Hindus also took part in the war. As a result, Muslims were humiliated and discouraged by the British. In that Dark Age for the Muslim in the subcontinent, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan proved himself a ray of light. He was of the opinion that English education was the need of time and the only cure to all socio-political ills of Indian Muslims.

### **4. Post-independence**

The year 1947 is the beginning of the post-colonial Pakistan period. British had left behind a running administration and education system for the new rulers of the new country. After independence, in the first constitution of Pakistan, English got the position of official language that would be replaced within fifteen years with Urdu, but it took almost 60 years. However, Urdu and Bengali got the status of national languages. At the time of independence, Pakistan had two parts: West Pakistan (today's Pakistan) and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Bangla was the dominant language of more than 98% population of East Pakistan. On the contrary, West Pakistan had different ethnic groups with six regional languages (Shamim, 2008). In 1947, English was available only in a few elitist schools and in institutions such as Aitchison College in Lahore, in the areas now called Pakistan. (Rahman, 2005) after independence, the use of English language was unavoidable for maintaining administrative affairs. (Rahman, 2002) As a result, English became the official language of Pakistan along with Urdu. English was the language of the ruling elite to perform their official duties. "The use of English was inevitable for system maintenance: the ruling elite were trained to do their official works in English" (Haque, 1983:06). Since then, English remains in the heart of Pakistani elitist society. English had the advantage of being neutral language because it was not the mother tongue of any ethnic group in Pakistan (Pathan, 2012). Therefore, it continued to be the official language of Pakistan till 2015.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper, we have tried to give a brief historical reason for the royal status of English in Pakistan. A review of history and the British education policies has made it clear that there have been some drawbacks at planning and implementation levels since the British rule. They made it the language of power and the ruling elite. Consequently, the westernized elite has maintained a habit of using English in the domains of power in Pakistan—the government, bureaucracy, military, judiciary, and media, etc. (Rahman, 2005). Even though in 2015, the government of Pakistan announced plans to abolish English as the second official language, no one can deny the importance of English in Pakistan. The English language has rooted itself in the upper strata of Pakistani society. It is not possible to become an Army officer or a bureaucrat without proper knowledge or command over English. All this has created a huge demand of English language in Pakistan.

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