



Macaulay's Minute and the Making of Indian English

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Abstract

This paper re-examines the colonial foundations of Indian English through a critical engagement with Minute on Education, a document that profoundly shaped the linguistic trajectory of the Indian subcontinent. Moving beyond the well-rehearsed critique of Thomas Babington Macaulay as a cultural antagonist, the study offers a close textual analysis of the Minute, with particular attention to its rhetorical strategies and institutional context. It further traces the historical processes through which English, initially introduced as a colonial instrument, was appropriated and transformed within the Indian sociocultural milieu. While engaging with Robert Phillipson's theory of linguistic imperialism and Alastair Pennycook's framework on the cultural politics of English, the paper critically assesses their limitations. It argues that these models do not fully account for the complex, negotiated, and often contradictory processes that underpinned the emergence of Indian English. In developing this argument, the study draws on recent work by Sharma and Sharma, alongside the broader theoretical contributions of Braj B. Kachru, Gauri Viswanathan, and Bill Ashcroft. The paper contends that Indian English should not be viewed as a passive colonial inheritance but as a historically situated and actively constructed linguistic formation, shaped through processes of adaptation, resistance, and creative agency.

Keywords: - Macaulay's Minute, linguistic imperialism, Indian English, colonial education, nativization, postcolonial linguistics.

1. Introduction

English did not arrive in India on wings of enlightenment. It came packed alongside muskets and accounting ledgers, tucked into the administrative machinery of the East India Company. That much is well known, almost a cliché of postcolonial studies. But clichés become clichés because they are roughly true, and this one captures something essential: the English language in India was never culturally neutral. It carried epistemologies, hierarchies, ways of sorting the world that would reshape sometimes violently how Indians understood themselves and each other.

And yet. To tell the story only as imposition misses what I find most fascinating about Indian English: the sheer creative audacity with which Indians took the colonizer's tongue and bent it into shapes Macaulay could never have imagined. Braj Kachru called this process "alchemy"³, which is the right word it suggests transformation, not mere adoption. Raja Rao wrote in his preface to *Kanthapura* that "the telling has not been easy"¹⁰, and that modest understatement conceals an enormous cultural labor: the work of forcing a foreign language to carry indigenous rhythms of thought, narrative, and feeling.

This paper traces that process from its colonial origin point Macaulay's Minute through the theoretical debates it has spawned and into the linguistic reality of Indian English today. I am not trying to rehabilitate Macaulay or to excuse the violence of linguistic imperialism. But I am trying to tell a more complicated story than the one we usually hear, because the actual history is more complicated, and more interesting, than any simple narrative of domination and resistance can accommodate.

2. The Orientalist-Anglicist Debate: What Was Actually at Stake

The argument over education policy in colonial India did not start with Macaulay. It had been simmering for decades, and to understand the Minute properly you need to understand what came before. In the late eighteenth century, Company scholars like William Jones and Charles Wilkins approached Sanskrit and Arabic with genuine if strategically motivated intellectual enthusiasm. Jones's 1786 observation about the "stronger affinity" between Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin⁵ was not just philology; it was a claim about civilizational kinship that served to justify British engagement with Indian learning on respectful, if paternalistic, terms.

The orientalist position had institutional weight: the Asiatic Society of Bengal (founded 1784), Sanskrit College at Benares (1791), the Calcutta Madrasa. These were not charitable ventures. Viswanathan has shown convincingly that orientalist patronage was a mode of control it made Indian knowledge legible to European categories and therefore manageable within the colonial administrative apparatus.¹² But it was a relatively gentle mode of control, at least by comparison with what followed.

The anglicists evangelicals, utilitarians, free-market liberals wanted something blunter. Charles Grant's 1792 Observations had already laid the intellectual groundwork: Indian civilization was degraded, Western knowledge was the cure, and English was the delivery vehicle. James Mill's utilitarianism gave this argument a secular veneer. The evangelicals supplied the moral urgency. What they shared was a conviction that Indian traditions, whatever their past glories, were now obstacles rather than resources. The stage was set for Macaulay.

3. Macaulay's Minute: A Closer Look

Macaulay's Minute of February 2, 1835 is one of those documents that everyone cites and almost nobody reads carefully. The famous line about "a single shelf of a good European library" being "worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia"⁶ is breathtaking in its arrogance, and it has quite rightly become a touchstone in postcolonial critique. But if you actually sit down with the full text, a more interesting picture emerges. Macaulay was not primarily writing a cultural manifesto. He was writing a policy memo, and his arguments are calibrated to institutional pressures that the outrage quotient of the famous line tends to obscure.

He frames the question instrumentally: which language will most efficiently produce the class of administrators the Company needs? He points to the success of English education already underway in Bengal. He appeals to fiscal prudence. These are bureaucratic arguments dressed up in rhetorical fireworks, and they tell us something important about how linguistic imperialism actually operates not (or not only) through dramatic declarations of cultural superiority but through the mundane machinery of budgets, staffing decisions, and examination protocols.

The Minute led to the English Education Act of 1835, and as Sharma and Sharma have argued the consequences were seismic.¹¹ Macaulay wanted to create "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect".⁶ He got something far more unpredictable: a class of English-educated Indians who would use the master's language to dismantle the master's house. The irony is too perfect to be accidental; it suggests that linguistic imperialism, however powerful, cannot fully control what colonized peoples do with the tools they are given.

4. Linguistic Imperialism: Useful Frameworks and Their Limits

Phillipson's concept of linguistic imperialism (1992) gives us a structural vocabulary for talking about how English achieved and maintained its dominance: through education systems, civil service exams, legal proceedings, all conducted in a language most Indians did not speak.⁹ The framework is

valuable, and I use it. But Phillipson tends to present English's dominance as monolithic, as something done to passive recipients, and the Indian case is more tangled than that.

Pennycook's work is a useful corrective. He attends to the discursive construction of English as "modern," "rational," "progressive" the ideological scaffolding that makes English desirable, not just imposed.⁸ This matters for India, where the demand for English education was not only colonial imposition but also indigenous aspiration. Raja Ram Mohan Roy petitioned Lord Amherst in 1823 for English-language schools. He was not a stooge of empire; he was a reformer who saw English as a tool for accessing scientific knowledge and challenging orthodox Brahminical authority. The picture is messy. It is supposed to be.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o offers the starkest counterposition. For Ngũgĩ, colonial language is spiritual violence, a severing of the colonized from their cultural roots, their ways of knowing, their very capacity for authentic self-expression.⁷ His decision to write in Gikũyũ rather than English is a rebuke to the entire Macaulayan enterprise. But many Indian writers and scholars have chosen a different path, arguing that English can be decolonized from within, that appropriation is itself a form of resistance. I am sympathetic to both positions, which is another way of saying that I think the argument is genuinely unresolvable.

5. How Indian English Was Actually Made

Whatever Macaulay wanted, the English that took root in India was emphatically not the Queen's English. From the start, Indian speakers adapted the language its sounds, its syntax, its vocabulary to the multilingual reality of their lives. Kachru's term "nativization" captures this process: retroflex consonants replacing alveolar ones, the progressive tense where British English would use the simple form, the ubiquitous tag question "isn't it?" appended to sentences regardless of their grammatical subject.⁴ These were not mistakes. They were creative adaptations evidence of a living language being shaped by new speakers to serve new communicative needs.

The literary dimension is equally striking. When Raja Rao described the challenge of "molding" English to suit Indian realities¹⁰, he was articulating a project that generations of Indian writers would pursue: making English carry the weight of Indian experience without flattening that experience into European forms. Rushdie's exuberant, chaotic sentences. Roy's neologisms and capitalized abstractions. Ghosh's polyglot registers moving between Hindi, Bengali, Arabic, and English. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin theorize this as "abrogation and appropriation" the simultaneous rejection of imperial standards and the seizure of the language for new purposes.¹ The phrase is clunky, but the insight is sharp.

At the political level, the irony deepened. Macaulay's "class of interpreters" turned out to be anything but docile. English became the medium of anticolonial thought Naoroji's drain theory, Congress resolutions, Nehru's Discovery of India. The colonizer's language was turned against the colonizer, and this reversal was not accidental but structural: English education, by creating a pan-Indian intelligentsia, inadvertently provided the nationalist movement with its common tongue. Dasgupta has noted the peculiar double life English leads in India simultaneously a marker of elite privilege and a potential lingua franca, a tool of exclusion and a vehicle for democratic aspiration.² That ambivalence is the colonial encounter's most lasting legacy.

6. The Contemporary Landscape

Nearly two hundred years after Macaulay, the language question in India is if anything more fraught than ever. English-medium education has expanded dramatically, driven by parental demand and market logic. Even low-cost private schools in urban slums now advertise English instruction as their primary selling point. The aspiration is understandable: English remains the gateway to professional employment, higher education, and social mobility in ways that no Indian language can currently match.

But this expansion has deepened existing inequalities rather than resolving them. Access to quality English education is still stratified by class, caste, and geography. The English-speaking elite dominates the professions, the judiciary, the media reproducing, in democratic India, the very

hierarchies that Macaulay's system helped create. The New Education Policy of 2020, with its emphasis on mother-tongue instruction in early years, represents the latest attempt to redress this imbalance. It has been met with skepticism from parents who see English as their children's best chance. The tension between linguistic justice and economic aspiration shows no sign of resolution. Perhaps it cannot be resolved only negotiated, endlessly and imperfectly.

7. Conclusion

The history I have traced here does not have a tidy ending, because the process it describes is ongoing. English in India is still being made in classrooms and courtrooms, in Bollywood scripts and WhatsApp messages, in the code-switching of urban millennials and the careful formality of rural aspirants. It is not one thing. It is a vast, ungainly, endlessly productive mess, and it confounds every attempt to reduce it to a simple story of either imperial domination or triumphant appropriation.

What I take from this history is a conviction that languages are not tools to be imposed or resisted but practices to be inhabited. Indian English in its phonology, its syntax, its literature, its cultural politics testifies to the creative stubbornness of Indian speakers who refused to use English on the terms it was offered and insisted on making it their own. Macaulay set out to create a class of cultural intermediaries. He ended up helping to create a literary tradition, a political vocabulary, and a way of being in language that belongs to India at least as much as it belongs to England. He would, one imagines, be horrified. That is perhaps the sweetest irony of all.

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