

Evolution of English in India: Pre-Colonial and Post-Colonial Era

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Abstract

The evolution of English in India is a long and complex historical process shaped by trade, colonization, education, nationalism, and post-colonial globalization. This paper examines the development of English from its earliest introduction in pre-colonial India, through its institutionalization during British colonial rule, to its transformation into a localized and influential variety in post-independent India. The study highlights the sociopolitical, cultural, and linguistic shifts that have shaped Indian English and explores its present status as a global language with unique local identity.

I. INTRODUCTION

India's multilingual heritage has always included a vast network of languages—Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrits, Persian, Arabic, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, Bengali, Marathi, and many more. English, however, is a relatively recent entrant into this linguistic landscape. Today, it plays a central role in administration, education, commerce, media, and global communication. The journey of English in India can be broadly divided into three phases: the **pre-colonial era** of early contact, **colonial expansion** and institutionalization, and the **post-colonial phase** of adaptation and Indianization.

This paper traces these phases, examining how English transformed from a foreign trading language into a powerful instrument of governance and education, and eventually into a distinct variety known as **Indian English**.

Pre-Colonial Era: The Beginnings of English in India (1600–1757)

Early Arrival through Trade

English entered India in 1600 with the formation of the **East India Company (EIC)**. The company established trading posts. During this period, English was used in Commercial transactions, Treaties, Communication between merchants and Indian officials

However, everyday interactions depended heavily on **interpreters** because English was not widely understood.

Missionary Influence

The early 18th century witnessed the emergence of missionary schools that introduced English education. Missionaries established small institutions in **Madras**, **Tranquebar**, and other regions. Their objective was religious conversion, not language policy reform. English had no official or cultural status during this time.

Dominant Linguistic Climate

In the pre-colonial period, India's linguistic landscape was dominated by:

- **Persian** (court and administration)
- **Sanskrit** (scholarship and religion)
- **Regional languages** for everyday communication

English remained a peripheral, utilitarian language restricted to trade.

Colonial Era: Expansion and Institutionalization (1757–1947)

Political Control and Linguistic Need

The victory in the **Battle of Plassey (1757)** marked the beginning of British political domination. As the British administrative machinery expanded, they required:

- Trained clerks
- Translators
- Administrative intermediaries

This increased the demand for Indians who could read and write English.

Early Educational Policies

Before formal policy changes, English-medium institutions slowly evolved:

- Calcutta Madrasa (1781)
- Benares Sanskrit College (1791)
- Fort William College (1800)

These institutions trained Indian civil servants in language, law, and administration.

Macaulay's Minute of 1835

The turning point in the history of English in India came with **Thomas Babington Macaulay's Minute on Indian Education**. Macaulay argued that:

- English was superior to Oriental languages

- India must be educated through English
- The goal was to create “a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.”

The **English Education Act of 1835** officially made English the medium of instruction in India, marking the beginning of what scholars call the “Anglicist period.”

Establishment of Modern Universities

In 1857, universities were founded in:

- Calcutta
- Bombay
- Madras

These universities:

- Standardized English as the language of higher education
- Introduced English literature into the curriculum
- Produced the first generation of English-educated Indian intellectuals

Sociopolitical Effects

English played a crucial role in:

Creation of Middle-Class Intelligentsia

A new English-educated middle class emerged, becoming lawyers, teachers, clerks, and journalists.

National Movement

Leaders like:

- Mahatma Gandhi
- Jawaharlal Nehru
- B.R. Ambedkar

used English to communicate across linguistic regions and to address global audiences.

Growth of English Press

Newspapers such as:

- *The Hindu*
- *The Times of India*
- *The Statesman*

became important tools for public opinion and political consciousness.

Emergence of Indian English Literature

The colonial era produced the earliest Indian English writers:

- **Toru Dutt**
- **Bankim Chandra Chatterjee**
- **R.K. Narayan**
- **Raja Rao**

Their works laid the foundation for modern Indian English literature.

Post-Colonial Era: Continuity, Adaptation, and Indianization (1947 onwards)

English in Modern Education

English dominates:

- Higher education
- Science and technology
- Medical and engineering courses
- Professional training and competitive exams

Private English-medium schools continue to expand.

English became the language of:

- Employment
- Technology
- Corporate culture
- International mobility

India became one of the largest English-speaking populations in the world.

Current Status of English in India

English acts as a unifying language between linguistic groups in administration, academia, and corporate settings.

English proficiency is associated with:

- Social mobility
- Economic opportunities
- Access to higher education

With over **125 million users**, India is one of the largest English-speaking countries, shaping global communication and outsourcing industries.

Despite its advantages, English in India also brings:

Urban students often have better access to English-medium education than rural students.

English proficiency often determines employment opportunities.

Regional languages face pressure in higher education and professional sectors.

Many schools lack trained English teachers, affecting language acquisition.

Conclusion

The evolution of English in India reflects the country's historical, political, and cultural transformation. From its modest beginnings in the pre-colonial era to its expansion during colonial rule, English became a crucial tool for administration, education, and the nationalist movement. After independence, instead of fading away, English adapted and re-emerged stronger as a language of modernization and globalization.

Today, English is not merely a colonial legacy but a dynamic Indian language with its own identity. It serves as a link language, an academic medium, a professional

asset, and a literary force. The future of English in India lies in balancing global advantages with the preservation and promotion of India's rich linguistic heritage.

Reign of British English in India

The **reign of British English in India** refers to the period when English became the dominant language of administration, education, law, and elite culture under British colonial rule (roughly 1757–1947). This phase permanently transformed India's linguistic landscape and laid the foundation for modern Indian English.

Introduction

When the British arrived, India had Persian as the court language, Sanskrit as the language of scholarship, and rich regional languages for everyday communication. English was initially a trader's language, but over time, it grew into a powerful instrument of colonial governance and cultural influence. The British used English to control administration, produce loyal clerks, and introduce Western education.

Phases of the British English Reign in India

Early Phase (1600–1757): Limited Presence

- English arrived with the **East India Company**.
- Used mostly for **trade**, not governance.
- Missionary schools and church institutions taught basic English.
- English had no official status and was rarely spoken by Indians.

Consolidation Phase (1757–1835): Administrative Need

After the **Battle of Plassey**, the British required English-educated Indians to help run the administration.

Developments:

- Training centers established (Fort William College).
- English used for legal and administrative records.
- Schools for clerks teaching English grammar started growing.

Reform Phase (1835): Macaulay's Minute and English Education Act

Macaulay's Minute (1835) argued that:

- English is superior to Oriental languages.
- Indians must be taught Western knowledge through English.
- The goal was to create “a class of persons Indian in blood and colour but English in taste.”

Results:

- English became the **official medium of instruction**.
- Government funding for Sanskrit and Persian declined.

- English gained prestige and authority.

Expansion Phase (1857–1900): Institutionalization

The British established modern universities:

- Calcutta University
- Bombay University
- Madras University (all in 1857)

These universities:

- Standardized English-based curricula.
- Produced graduates loyal to the colonial administration.
- Introduced English literature, science, and law.

English became the language of:

- Courts
- Law and justice
- Postal services
- Railways
- Higher education
- Journalism

High Colonial Phase (1900–1947): English as a National Tool

By the 20th century, English had become the **unifying language of the educated class**.

Key roles:

a) Language of the National Movement

Ironically, English became a weapon against the British:

- Leaders like Gandhi, Nehru, Ambedkar wrote and spoke in English.
- It united Indians from different linguistic regions.

b) Growth of English Press

Newspapers such as:

- *The Hindu*
- *Times of India*
- *The Statesman*

spread political awareness.

c) Literature in English

The rise of Indian English writers:

- Toru Dutt
- Rabindranath Tagore (translations)
- R.K. Narayan
- Raja Rao

They used English to express Indian themes, creating the foundation of modern Indian English literature.

Impact of the Reign of British English

Positive Impacts

✓ Modern Education System

British introduced universities, colleges, academic degrees, and secular education.

✓ Administrative Efficiency

English became the language connecting diverse linguistic regions.

✓ Global Communication

Indians gained access to Western science, philosophy, law, and technology.

✓ Development of Indian English Literature

A new literary tradition emerged.

Negative Impacts

✗ Cultural Alienation

English-educated elites were often disconnected from Indian traditions.

✗ Linguistic Inequality

English created a hierarchy between English-knowing elites and the masses.

✗ Decline of Persian and Sanskrit

Traditional education systems weakened.

✗ Language Identity Issues

Debates on whether English should dominate Indian society began.

Conclusion

The reign of British English in India transformed the nation's cultural, educational, and administrative systems. What began as a colonial tool became a global asset for modern India. English created both opportunities and inequalities, but its influence remains deeply embedded in Indian society.

Today, English has evolved into **Indian English**, a recognized and respected global variety that reflects India's multilingual identity.

“Demise of British English in India”

Introduction

The phrase “**demise of British English in India**” refers to the decline of English as a *colonial* language after 1947 and the rise of **Indian English** as an independent, localized, and culturally rooted variety. While English continues to thrive in India, the *British form* of English — its accent, its control, its educational ideology, and its superiority narrative — no longer dominates. India adapted English to its own identity, needs, and linguistic environment.

When Did British English Begin to Decline?

The decline started after:

a) India's Independence (1947)

- British political power ended.
- Therefore, British linguistic control also collapsed.

b) Constitution Debates (1947–1950)

- English was no longer promoted as a “civilizing language.”
- It became only an **associate official language**, not a ruler’s language.
- Regional languages gained importance in government roles.

c) Rise of Indian National Identity

- With nationalism came a move away from colonial accents, textbooks, and cultural models.

This period marks the *demise of British imperial English*, not the end of English itself.

Factors Leading to the Demise of British English

Political Independence

With the exit of British administrators, the authority behind British English collapsed:

- No more British-run schools
- No more colonial policies like Macaulay’s Minute
- No more enforcement of British pronunciation or curriculum

English stayed, but its *colonial prestige* weakened.

Rise of Indian English

Indian speakers began producing their own:

- Accent
- Vocabulary
- Literary style
- Syntax patterns

Examples of Indian English vocabulary:

prepone, eve-teasing, timepass, bandh, hill station, cousin-brother

This marked a **shift from British-only norms to Indian creativity**.

Changes in Education Policy

After 1947:

- Indian-developed syllabi replaced British textbooks.
- Regional languages became mediums of instruction in many schools.
- English survived, but no longer as “Queen’s English.”

Institutions began teaching **functional English** rather than strict British standards.

Decline of Received Pronunciation (RP)

End of British Cultural Dominance

Earlier, British English represented:

- British literature
- British values
- British worldview

After independence:

- Indian writers like R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Anita Desai, Amitav Ghosh reshaped English to express **Indian realities**.
- English no longer represented British culture; it became a vehicle for Indian experiences.

English After Its Colonial Demise

Even after the fall of British English, English in India **did not die**.

Instead, it transformed into:

A link language

Used between states that speak different regional languages.

A global tool

Needed for IT, science, medicine, engineering, higher education.

A symbol of modernity and mobility

English proficiency opens doors to global careers.

Indian English (Ind. E)

A recognized variety with:

- Indian phonology
- Hybrid vocabulary
- Culturally rooted idioms
- Distinct grammar patterns

Thus, English did not end — only *British control over English* ended.

Indicators That British English Lost Dominance

✓ Indian spellings and styles used in government

Example: “programme” was often replaced with “program” in many contexts.

✓ Indian English newspapers use Indian norms

(Not strict British grammar rules.)

✓ Indian English literature gained global fame

Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie, Chetan Bhagat, Jhumpa Lahiri.

✓ English accents in India no longer follow British RP

Indian accents are now socially accepted.

✓ English is now taught as a *postcolonial* language
Not as a ruler's language.

Conclusion

The **demise of British English in India** does not mean English disappeared. Instead, it means:

- The **colonial authority** of British English ended.
- India stopped imitating British speech, culture, and style.
- English became part of India's **own identity**, free from colonial control.
- A new, independent, confident variety — **Indian English** — emerged.

Today, English in India is *Indian-owned, Indian-shaped, and Indian-spoken* — not a colonial remnant but a vibrant language rooted in Indian culture and global aspirations.

“Influence of American English in India”

Influence of American English in India

Introduction

While British English shaped India during the colonial era, American English began influencing India strongly after **1947**, especially after **1991 economic liberalization**. Today, Indian English is a hybrid of British foundations and American innovations. American English influences Indian vocabulary, pronunciation, media consumption, business culture, technology, and youth communication.

Historical Background of American Influence

Post-Independence Educational Exposure

After 1947, many Indian scholars began pursuing:

- Fulbright scholarships
- Higher studies in American universities
- Academic exchanges with US institutions

These interactions popularized American style, spelling, and pronunciation.

Globalization (1991 onwards)

The opening of India's economy brought:

- American multinational companies (IBM, Google, Microsoft)
- Call centers and BPO industry
- Software and IT growth

This created massive exposure to American corporate English.

Digital Revolution

The Internet era is dominated by American platforms:

- Google

- YouTube
- Netflix
- Facebook
- Instagram
- Gmail

This made American English the default online language.

Areas of American Influence in India

Vocabulary Changes

Many American words and phrases replaced British terms:

British English	American English	Used in India Today
lift	elevator	both used, AE rising
flat	apartment	apartment popular in cities
timetable	schedule	schedule common in offices
shop	store	store common online
mobile	cell phone	“phone” also used
petrol	gas	used in movies/media

American slang among youth:

- dude
- awesome
- cool
- bro
- okay / okie

Contemporary English in India

Introduction

Contemporary English in India is a dynamic, hybrid, and rapidly evolving linguistic variety shaped by globalization, technology, media, education, and cultural diversity. It reflects India's multilingual identity while functioning as a major tool for communication, mobility, and socio-economic progress.

Status of English in Present-Day India

- Associate official language alongside Hindi.
- Widely used in administration, judiciary, higher education, media, business, and technology.
- Acts as a **lingua franca** among speakers of diverse regional languages.
- Carries high **prestige value** as a language of opportunity and global access.

Features of Contemporary Indian English

a. Phonological Features

- Syllable-timed rhythm rather than stress-timed.
- Non-aspirated consonants where Standard British English aspirates (e.g., /p/, /t/, /k/).
- Retroflex sounds pronounced more prominently.
- “V–W” interchange in some regions (vernacular influence).

b. Lexical and Semantic Features

Contemporary Indian English incorporates:

- **Indianisms** → *prepone, timepass, out of station, co-brother.*
- Borrowings from Indian languages → *pukka, adda, bandh, chai, guru.*
- Semantic shifts → e.g., *batchmate, hostelite, eve-teasing.*

c. Grammatical Features

- Frequent use of progressive aspect
- Use of direct questions without inversion
- Tag questions reflecting Indian languages

Social Dimensions

a. English and Social Mobility

- Key to higher education and government employment.
- English-medium schooling seen as a path to socio-economic advancement.
- Expanding role in the service sector: IT, BPOs, hospitality, aviation, etc.

b. English in Urban vs. Rural India

- Urban India: widespread fluency, exposure to global accents.
- Rural India: growing but uneven access; emergence of **rural/vernacular Indian English.**

c. English and Identity

- English used to express modernity, cosmopolitanism.
- Coexists with regional languages, creating **code-mixing and code-switching** practices.

Code-Mixing and Hinglish

One of the most striking features of contemporary Indian English:

- Mixing English with Hindi or regional languages: “*Yeh idea bahut cool hai*”, “*Lunch ke baad meeting rakhte hain.*”
- Hinglish is now used in films, advertising, OTT platforms, and social media.
- Exists in multiple regional blends: **Tanglish (Tamil + English), Manglish (Malayalam + English), Benglish**, etc.

Influence of Globalization and Technology

a. American English Influence

- Vocabulary in technology/business: *email, download, network, campus*.
- Spelling and grammar adoption from American usage: *color, program, transportation*.
- Pronunciation shifts due to Hollywood, YouTube, global media.

b. Social Media Impact

- New slang: *LOL, BTW, IDK, bro, vibe, DM*.
- Blurring of formal/informal usage.
- Adoption of global internet English but reshaped with Indian creativity.

English in Education

- Growth of English-medium schools even in tier-2 and tier-3 cities.
- Higher education—especially science, engineering, medicine, management—uses English almost exclusively.
- NEP (National Education Policy) continues to support multilingualism but English remains central.

Literary and Cultural Expressions

- Contemporary writers (Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri, Pankaj Mishra) have global readership.
- English used in:
 - Stand-up comedy
 - Blogs, podcasts
 - OTT series
 - Youth literature
- Increasing acceptance of **Indian English** as a legitimate literary variety.

Economic Role of English

- Backbone of India's **IT and outsourcing** sectors.
- Essential in global trade, diplomacy, consultancy, and multinational corporations.
- English proficiency directly correlates with employability.

Challenges

- Unequal access → English acts as a **class divider**.
- Accent bias → discrimination based on “standard” vs. “vernacular” accents.
- Fear of erosion of regional languages.
- Need for standardization of Indian English norms.

The Rise of Indian English as a Distinct Variety

Linguists now recognize **Indian English (IndE)** as one of the world's legitimate Englishes:

- Stable grammatical features
- Codified dictionaries and research
- Growing recognition in world Englishes studies
- Increasing representation in global literature and media

II.CONCLUSION

Contemporary English in India is not merely a colonial leftover; it is a thriving, evolving linguistic system shaped by Indian culture, multilingualism, technology, education, and globalization. It has transformed from an imposed language of administration into a powerful tool for communication, creativity, and global participation. Today, Indian English stands as a distinct, confident variety—deeply Indian yet globally connected.