The English Language in India since Independence, and its future Role
Twelfth Lecture— by Dr Sarvepalli Gopal
3 November 1988

The place of the English language in India since Independence has to be seen against the background of developments in the years of British rule. Education in the English language had been introduced both to provide recruits for the subordinate services and to teach Indians the rudiments of a culture which was commended as superior to their own. Apart from the question of the impact of foreign influences, the use of the language itself became an issue. The fact that the nationalist idea was being fostered in India by the use of the English language was sufficient evidence to Imperial apologists that India was not a nation. For too many theorists of nationalism in Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries language was the crucial test. But to Indians this was a restricted definition based on European experience. They preferred to think of a nation, in Acton's phrase, as a moral and political being and, far from regarding expression of their sentiments in the English language as demeaning, saw an advantage in strengthening their case by utilizing the resources which knowledge of English opened up.

There is no instance in India of such an incident as that of Jean Joseph Rabearivals, the poet of Malagasy, who killed himself in 1937 because he could not reconcile his nationalism with the French language and culture in which he was obliged to work. Indians, perhaps because for centuries bilingualism had been the accepted norm among the educated, with knowledge of Sanskrit or Persian along with their own mother-tongue being expected, in the days of British rule saw no contradiction between commitment to their own country and culture and total ease in a foreign language. Tagore was primarily a poet in Bengali but himself translated many of his poems into English. Gandhi transformed the national movement by drawing the illiterate masses into politics, and he laid down even in 1921 that one of the essentials of India's freedom was to get rid of what he described as the infatuation for English. But he himself wrote in English clearly and forcefully; and the British authorities in India recognized soon enough to their chagrin that Gandhi expressed himself well in excellent English and had a fine appreciation of the words he used.

Nehru’s first language policy
Nehru took trouble to attain sufficient proficiency in Hindi so as to be able to communicate with large numbers of his people; but it was primarily in English that his thoughts were formulated and expressed. Widely read in English literature, he wrote with tense elegance and control of phrase, was capable on special occasions of superb flights of English prose, and hailed the coming of India's freedom with a passage that has moved into anthologies of English writing. Yet Nehru awaited with equanimity what he believed would be the quick and natural decline of the English language in a free India. Apart from the small Anglo-Indian minority whose mother-tongue it was, to all other Indians English was a foreign language which had spread only because the British had made it the medium of instruction. Like Latin in medieval Europe, and Sanskrit and Persian in pre-British India, English had been learnt by a small number in various parts of the country. A new, linguistic caste had evolved, isolated from the millions of ordinary men and women.

After 1947 Nehru and his colleagues rid themselves of any prejudices born of the feeling that English was the language that had helped the British to hold the Empire together. The first generation of independent India's leadership had no such complexes and were of the view that a language belongs to all those who speak it. As language communicates experience, it can transcend the boundaries of the culture of its origin. When, in 1945, an old Irish revolutionary started a letter lo Nehru in Gaelic and then switched to English with the remark, 'Forgive me for using the language of the enemy', Nehru's reaction was one of mild and amused surprise. To him, language was a part of the history of the people, each word calling up images, and yet alive and expanding to take new circumstances into account. If a

language, while basing itself on its ancient roots and associations, was also receptive to growing needs, it would be strong and vigorous and be an index of the national character. As the whole background of the English language was different and its history unknown to the Indian people, Nehru did not think that it could ever become a living language widely spoken in India. For the educational and cultural development of the masses only the regional languages were suited.

Among them the one with the widest range, covering, with its variations, a large part of northern India, was Hindi, and Nehru felt that it should be promoted as the language linking up the whole country. Basic Hindi, with about five thousand words, and borrowing from Urdu, English and other languages, should be developed and could be picked up easily by most Indians, for the Indian languages are allied to each other. So Nehru was for gradually abandoning the use of English as an official language. He also expected and even desired it to fade out as the link language in India. He felt that there would be a psychological value in this, for, though not worried about its past ties with imperialism, it had hurt him, in his tours as Prime Minister to other parts of the world than Britain and the English-speaking countries, to note the surprise and contempt with which the use of English by Indians in conversing with each other was received. It was regarded as a sign of mental degradation. But Nehru conceded that it would be foolish to drop English altogether. It had already gained ground in India, was becoming an important world language and was indispensable for the advance of science and technology to which Nehru attached such importance in building a modern and forward-looking India. So Nehru wished English to be studied as a second language and for most people as a language of comprehension rather than as a language leading on to the study of English literature. Even from the thirties Nehru had been an exponent of Basic English.

But English stands its ground

In accord with this reasoning, Nehru supported the provision in the Constitution that Hindi would be the official language of the Union but English could also be used as the official language for the next fifteen years, that is, until 1965. He, like most others, thought that during that period Hindi would gain general acceptance as well as strength and suppleness to serve as the common language of India. But the expected did not happen. Hindi perforce made some headway. In the armed services, for example, where even in British days, a pidgin Hindi had been in vogue, the words of command were now converted to Hindi, as only the officers understood English. But in most areas of public activity the English language stood its ground. In fact, the enthusiasts for Hindi, finding fifteen years far too long and seeking to displace English well before 1965, achieved the contrary result of giving it new life. Hindi itself did not develop in a way that could be understood by the masses and Nehru was driven to complain that it was often beyond his comprehension. Even government agencies like All India Radio used a very stilted and artificial language, and English words, instead of being incorporated into Hindi, were translated in a way that sounded ridiculous.

The non-Hindi-speaking people began to fear that a ban on English even before they had acquired a sufficient knowledge of Hindi would mean that they would be handicapped in the search for employment. The economic dimension of the language problem soon spread out to become a political issue and the agitation against Hindi in southern India posed a threat to Indian unity. To Nehru it was clear that any decision on this question of Hindi replacing English could not be hustled and would have to emerge on the basis of consent; and the maintenance of national unity was more important than anything else. The tensions that encompassed the demands for linguistic provinces and the problems that followed their creation in the mid-fifties made this clearer than ever. The passions roused in all parts of the country by a narrow love of language, and the local language rather than Hindi providing the challenge to English, lessened the sense of community and endangered the national fabric.

This was a problem alien to Nehru's understanding for to him, while language was important, the administrative boundaries of provinces were a marginal problem. But he realized that linguistic rivalries had become a pressing political issue and the stress on regional languages, however justified in itself, was weakening the concept of India. So he was all the more eager to leave alone the matter of Hindi versus English. If, in their anxiety to hasten what would have been a natural development, the supporters of Hindi had adopted poor and self-defeating tactics, Nehru was not pleased with the result but did not regard it as a severe setback. Hindi as it was evolving was neither graceful, artistic nor generally understood, enthusiasm for Hindi was often a cloak for revivalism and Hindu chauvinism; and if, because of resistance to Hindi, the regional languages were to become predominant with no link language at all, it was better to adhere to English as an official language for the whole country, the more so as English was establishing itself as the leading language of the world and was India's main means of access to scientific and technological research.

New policy guarantees status of English

So in 1959 Nehru promised that there would be no imposition of any language by decree and English would remain an associate, additional language for an indefinite period. The final decision on the replacement of English by Hindi would rest with those sections of the Indian people who did not know Hindi. Four years later this assurance was translated into permissive legislation, providing that English 'may' continue to be used after 1965, in addition to Hindi, for the official purposes of the Union and in Parliament, In 1968, four years after Nehru's death, this was further spelt out to stipulate the use of English in addition to Hindi for certain specified official purposes. No time-limit was placed for the supplanting of English by Hindi and it could be used indefinitely unless the legislatures of all the non-Hindi-speaking states by resolution demanded otherwise.

Nehru had not been willing to provide an explicit commitment that English would continue as an official language for ever. That seemed to him unnecessary and even constitutionally improper; but the supporters of English need have no cause to worry. A mature people acts by consensus on such issues and no government would be so foolish as to create the problems and difficulties which would follow from seeking to secure the acceptance of Hindi by force. Nor did his functional compromise seem to him weighted against Hindi. It was only through the Indian languages, which had deep roots in the minds and hearts of the people, that the national awakening which had taken place in the years before 1947 could be consolidated. But the regional languages, with their limited provenance, would have a restrictive effect. The promotion of Hindi was part of the effort of building the nation, and the life of the nation was much longer than one or two generations. So Hindi could afford to wait.

The result has been that, while Hindi has waited, the number of Indians with a knowledge of English has expanded and amounts to over four per cent of the total population. It is now reckoned that about 35 million Indians speak and write English of some type or other. This English-speaking population is spread across the whole country. So English, besides being an associate official language everywhere and the dominant language in the north-eastern states of Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram, may be described as the only non-regional language in India. It is a link language in more than an administrative sense, in that it counters blinkered provincialism. Though there are at least twenty regional variations of English in India, those who speak and write in these slightly different ways can understand each other and form a cultural constituency of their own. It is the language of communication of the civil services, of the managers and senior employees of the public and private sectors of the economy, and of the professions. A uniform law for the country means that it will continue indefinitely, given the state of development of Hindi, in the High Courts and the Supreme Court. The need to avoid intellectual isolation within India as well as from the rest of the world obliges its retention by the academic community. It is the principal medium of higher education and of advanced research in all fields. While Hindi has been introduced as an optional medium in examinations for

recruitment to the civil services, its limited vocabulary and the lack of adequate textbooks in that language leave the advantage with candidates opting for answering in English.

That knowledge of English is the passport for employment at higher levels in all fields, is the unavoidable avenue to status and wealth and is mandatory to all those planning to migrate abroad, has meant a tremendous enthusiasm since independence to study it. Schools which teach English from the start have proliferated and admission to them is more prized than to those where English is only the compulsory second language. In the years immediately after the British left, standards of English teaching not surprisingly fell; and a quip of those times was that the official language of India was incorrect English. To remedy this, in 1958 an institute for the training of teachers of the English language was set up. Nehru's only proviso in this matter was that the institute should not be headed by an American. Textbooks for teaching in English, adapted to the local context, are now produced in India. Nehru also laid down the policy, which has by and large continued to this day, that no restriction should be placed on the import of books. He overruled recommendations based either on the need to conserve foreign exchange or on the desirability, even on rare occasions, of censorship on moral grounds. He was not happy with the wide circulation in India of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* but vetoed the proposal to ban *Lolita.*

There is also today the practice of importing sheets and binding them in India so that many books are much cheaper in India than they are in Britain. The government also subsidizes the reprinting of standard textbooks. To add to all this, piracy, primarily of pulp novels, is rampant. No traveller by air within India can fail to notice the popularity of Mills and Boon and James Hadley Chase, while children with a knowledge of English depend heavily on Enid BIyton and Western comics. Indian publishers also are not inactive. India ranks as the world's third largest producer of books in English, after the United States and Britain. More books are published annually in English than in all the regional languages taken together. Penguin has this year started publishing in India two books a month, on Indian themes or by Indian authors. Serious journals of science and scholarship manage to survive despite limited circulation, and magazines of popular interest multiply. Of over twenty thousand registered newspapers nearly four thousand are in English and are second in number only to those in Hindi. Both radio and television have regular programmes and news services in English and the University Grants Commission sponsors educational features in English daily for one hour on television. Consumerism is promoted by advertisements in English. The film industry caters to the large majority in Hindi and the regional languages; but a film in English produced in India with Indian actors could be seen in London this summer and Mr Keating's Inspector Ghote and other characters bring home vividly the nuances of Indian English as it is spoken. Amateur theatricals, so prominent in the days of the British in India, survive in the big cities; but more widespread is rock music. In India today, the words of these songs are better known than the works of Shakespeare.

Language of the elite

All this wide and varied use of English cannot cloud the fact that it is essentially the language of the Indian establishment. In India's history language has been a marker of the culture: and of the 'higher' culture, first Sanskrit, then Persian, and, for the last hundred and fifty years, English. It has been associated with modernization, though, as the example of Japan proves, knowledge of a European language is not necessarily for this purpose. Even today, English in India is the badge of privilege of a small minority dispersed over the entire country. It can be said that English is the carrier of a national culture as against the limited stretch of even Hindi, let alone the other regional languages; though even here there is a problem. Any such national culture in the English medium in India tends to get weakened at the roots; for there is a tenacious indigenous culture that goes back to pre-British days, and there are inherent difficulties in understanding one culture in the language of another. Philosophers, for example, have found it difficult to translate precisely into English terms like dharma and nirvana.

Perhaps I might also cite an example from history, where transfer of ideas has given rise to novel situations. At Amritsar the worship is of the Granth Saheb, the sacred scripture of the Sikhs; and the temple was known as the Durbar Saheb. But it was the dome of the shrine that caught the British eye, and the whole complex came to be known as the Golden Temple. The name has continued to the present day, with the result that attention has shifted to the buildings rather than remain with the texts and the sanctum where they are housed. English has also helped to extend the dimensions of the regional languages. Many creative writers in the Indian languages have a knowledge of English and have taken advantage of this. The forms, structure and content of contemporary literature in these languages show the impact of the English language and writing, old and new. Even the novel is an imported literary form.

But these assets are heavily shadowed by the division of India, which the use of English consolidates, between the few who govern and the many who are governed. English is no longer the language of empire or a culture which claims to be superior. But it is the language of the ruling class. While the Indian culture in the English language provides all those responsive to it with a sense of community, it cuts them off from the vast number who do not know the language. The separation is constantly deepened with the medium of English leading to better schools and colleges, greater opportunities and higher economic and social status. This is an unnatural situation in a working democracy based on adult suffrage. With politics in India broadening down from Delhi to the states, and the increasing involvement of the population in the rural areas, English-speaking India and politically conscious India diverge more and more. In itself a healthy development, this adds to the tension between the minority at the top who know English and the many millions, armed with the vote, who do not.
This would soon spell the end of English in India—if politics provided all the answers. Nehru himself believed that English would not so much be atrophied by the democratic process as wither because of malnutrition. A living language has its roots in the masses and any language without such sustenance would rapidly lose vitality. Certainly to many Indians before 1947 English was an alien language in which they were compelled to study a foreign culture. Skylarks and daffodils, sceptred isles and country churchyards meant very little to them and stirred no memories; and it is partly this which Malcolm Muggeridge has in mind when he speaks of enraged and unemployed graduates chasing the British out of India, hurling after them curses and copies of *The Oxford Book of English Verse*.

But with independence English, even if it could not be expected to become a language of mass communication, began to sink roots into the upper layers of the Indian soil. A few Indians still write English as it should be and do so with skill and grace. Why do they wish to do so? Yeats was sure that only in one's own language could one write with music and vigour. Joseph Conrad, among the greatest of those novelists who have written in English which was not their mother-tongue, has a chilling story called 'Amy Foster'. Here a Slav peasant, shipwrecked on the English coast, lives for years in a village in Kent. Everyone shuns him except a dull girl who marries him; but even she takes her child and leaves him when, in a fever, he speaks in his own language. Bertrand Russell, who knew Conrad, thinks there could be something of Conrad himself in this story; the loneliness in his life and the strong will rather than the aptitude which underlay his work.

If, then, writing in a language which is not their own does not come easily even to the best, why do so many persevere in this effort? Joseph Brodsky has placed such writers in three categories; necessity, superhuman ambition and the need for further estrangement. The best Indian writers in English do so out of necessity, not because English was once the imperial and is now an official language or because they are in exile in Britain, but because it is in that language that they can best express themselves. They are not even aware that they are writing in a foreign language. Published recently was a distinguished novel in verse, set in California but written by an Indian; this year we have some highly rated novels by Indians; and most of these authors are very young. So it is not just the old generation, educated in the days of the Raj, that finds English

easy to handle.

The Indianization of English

Brodsky's other two categories claim some Indians, eager to secure a world audience or to distance themselves from their own country, who seek to write what may be called British Standard English and sometimes do not quite succeed. These bring to mind Gordon Bottomley's sneer of 'Matthew Arnold in a sari'. They give up an inherited identity for a literary tradition in which they are not fully absorbed. But most Indians who today speak and write English do so with an authentic Indian voice. To them English is no longer an uncompromisingly foreign tongue. An Australian writer, Sylvia Lawson, has defined what she terms the paradox of her country's culture: 'To know enough of the metropolitan world, colonials must in limited ways at least, move and think internationally; to resist it strongly enough for the colony to cease to be colonial and become its own place, they must become nationalists.' This paradox becomes even sharper for Indians using English, for most of them have a language of their own; but the best of them combine a distinctive feel of the Indian experience with a loyalty to the best traditions of English literature, bring a world view to bear on their home country and keep exclusiveness under control but without betraying their inheritance.

India is not a country with a large community of British settlers who might have resisted the influence of the local context. Nor is English in India, as in the Caribbean, the sole means of communication. The languages of India have a history which, in most cases, goes back over a thousand years; and, just as English has influenced them during the last hundred years, they now influence English. They give it an indigenous flavour and promote a new idiom. Gandhi, for example, spoke of a Himalayan blunder. A character in one of R. K. Narayan's novels says he is fond of the sound of curds falling on warm rice. An Indian author based in the West has told us that in a novel published this year, he first wrote of a peg to hang ideas on and then, realising that a peg had no meaning to Indian readers, revised it to read a bamboo pole to hang ideas on. Some politicians in India are described as crocodiles in loin-cloths, a phrase that would evoke no real image in Britain. Glossaries are now being published of words of common usage in Indian English, such as bed-sheets, shirting, suiting—the list is constantly growing. Many such words and even the grammar often used, rouse associations with the Indian background. The load of English literature is put down and there is no servitude to Fowler. The inability to keep in touch with the changes taking place in English usage in Britain is compensated by changes taking place in various parts of India. It is Indian literature that is written in the English language. It is also a new chapter in English literature.

In 1901, when Queen Victoria died, an anonymous loyalist published a couplet in an English newspaper in Calcutta:

Dust to dust, ashes to ashes.
Into the grave the great Queen dashes.

Here a knowledge of words is combined with a total lack of sense of the English language. Over seventy years later an Indian poet, capable of writing correct idiomatic English, published what he termed 'Very Indian Poem in Indian English':

You are all knowing, friends,
What sweetness is in Miss Pushpa,
I don't mean only external sweetness
But internal sweetness,
Miss Pushpa is smiling and smiling
Even for no reason
But simply because she is feeling ...

There is, of course, an element of parody in this, reminiscent of a performance of Peter Sellers; but the poem also conveys the confidence of Indians capable of writing standard English but deliberately using English not for Western audiences but to talk to each other, drawing from Indian life and extending English, as James Joyce had done, to convey their own experiences and consciousness. Perhaps there is an advantage in this even for readers in Britain. Graham Greene has said that it was by reading R. K. Narayan that he knew what it was like to be an Indian; for it could be that no one can write in depth about a foreign country. Even E. M. Forster could only write about the effect of India on his fellow countrymen and women.

Demand for it will increase...?

What of the future? It is manifest that English with its variants has found a permanent place in India. There will always be a few who will speak and write it by the highest standards, with a full understanding of English literature and an awareness of the historical and social contexts. These writers and scholars ask for no concessions. But many more will use English as a matter of convenience, for communicating across the country, keeping in touch with the outside world and remaining abreast of developments in all fields. Indians find English pliable enough to convey their own moods and approaches. Recourse to English no longer suggests deracination or cultural displacement. There is no strong counterpart in India to the growing feeling in parts of Africa that writing in English is irrelevant to African culture. Plenty of Indian writers of talent and passion find English a language in which they can deal adequately with the special realities of the country. Standard English it may not always be; but alive it is and will continue to be.

The demand for knowledge of English will increase and, to cater for this, in addition to convents, international schools and private schools with English as the medium of instruction, the government have begun to set up model secondary schools in every district, with teaching in both Hindi and English. Over two hundred such schools have already been opened and the rest are expected to start functioning within the next two years. If the scheme works well—and it is too early yet to say that it will—it will ensure the spread of English to the rural areas and bring within its reach bright students who could not normally afford an English education. In the schools already established, nearly half the number of pupils are on scholarships and from families below the poverty line. The English language taught here is a language of comprehension, to enable the students to read quickly, speak with facility and write with accuracy rather than make them conversant with English history and literature. The effort is to move away from the British cultural background, relate the English language to the Indian setting and concentrate on the learning process. Like the teaching of foreign languages in the European Economic Community, teachers of English in India are encouraged to attach greater importance to fluency than to proficiency in grammar. The main purpose of knowing English is to understand and to be understood. So, in consequence, while standard English is taught, the drift of the students is towards Indian English.

But not as language for the masses

However, even Indian English is not, and can never be, the first language in India, and no one expects that at any time all the millions of the Indian people will speak and write it. English is, and will remain, the pan-Indian language of the elite; it cannot function as the vehicle of mass culture. This in itself restricts the scope for the growth of English, for it cannot develop in the ordinary circumstances of the day-to-day life of the common people. The contrast is clear when one looks at the vitality of the regional languages. It is also these languages, the mother-tongues of the masses that form the best media for primary as well as adult education. That a child is best taught at the start in its own language is now not disputed. Lord Bullock, in his report in 1975 on education in Britain, has stated this clearly: 'No child should be expected to cast off the language and culture of the home as he crosses the school threshold.'

A language is most easily learnt when it is in tune with the social context. To teach an Indian child in English at the primary stage perpetuates a segregative system of education,

strengthens distinctions of class and status and warps the mind. Failure to resort to regional languages in literacy campaigns also hampers their success. The oral tradition of learning is very strong in India, not in the limited sense of memorizing texts, but the open oral tradition of transmission of epics, myth and social meaning, with constant additions and amendments in tune with historical change. English cannot fit into this form of oral tradition. If priority be not given to the regional languages at the primary and adult levels, one may well find that, by the year 2000, while those speaking English in India are almost as many as the total population of Britain, more than half of the world's illiterate population in the age-group of fifteen to nineteen will be in India.

English will continue to be spoken in the two Houses of Parliament and some legislatures in the states; but it will gradually give way, as the main medium of Indian politics, to the local languages. The natural culmination of democracy is the general use of the mother-tongues. But paradoxically, even as English recedes as the language of politics, the question of language is cooling down as a political issue. The radio, and television even more, are diffusing knowledge of English, Hindi and the language of the area and thus achieving imperceptibly what governments and politicians had struggled in vain to do. Hindi as the single official language of India is the receding goal; but its spread through the air and on the screens does not arouse aggressive antagonism. Basic Hindi, or Hindustani, spoken in these films is now being understood throughout the country.

Nehru was right not to seek prompt and permanent solutions but to let events shape themselves. Political, economic and social developments determine the spread or arrest of languages. So India moves pragmatically and quietly to the greater use of regional languages in democratic politics, primary education and the battle against illiteracy. Basic Hindi becomes more widely known in areas where it is not the mother-tongue, but does not oust English. With the languages not competing with each other, English comes into the picture as a compulsory second language at the stage of secondary education, and children come to its study with the added advantage of familiarity with their own language and literature. Indians will also continue to use English, with their own accents and idioms, as an additional official language, and as the language of higher education and advanced research. It will serve as a vehicle for transcultural understanding and as a catalytic agent for other Indian literatures; and it will remain the chief means for the growing middle class of communicating among themselves across the vast expanse of India.

These possibilities need also to be set in the wider context of the future of English in the world—and in Britain. We live more and more in a visual age. With computer programmes, cognitive revolutions and artificial intelligence, non-verbal language may grow in significance. Already in India young film-makers tend to rely more on images than words; and recently a popular film has been made which dispenses almost wholly with a script. The silent movies are with us again. An organization in the United States is today campaigning to have English made the national language by an amendment of the Constitution and the campaign is meeting with resistance. And in Britain itself, now a multicultural society, with a variety of ethnic groups, some of them speaking their mother-tongues and each developing its own version of English, notions of British identity are changing; and standard English may itself suffer marked changes, and its use contract. For, as Raymond Williams repeatedly pointed out, it is the spoken rather than the written language which is the real source of authority, and the other derives from it. Who knows—sometime in the next century a speaker in Cambridge may be struggling to deal for one hour with the topic: "The English language in Britain—and its future role'.