The Rise and Fall of the Bilingual Intellectual

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This essay interprets the rise and fall of the bilingual intellectual in modern India. Making a distinction between functional and emotional bilingualism, it argues that Indian thinkers, writers and activists of earlier generations were often intellectually active in more than one language. Now, however, there is an increasing separation of discourses – between those who operate exclusively in English and those who operate in the language of the state alone. The decline of the bilingual intellectual is a product of many factors, among them public policy, elite preference, new patterns of marriage, and economic change.

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This essay is inspired by an argument between the scholar-librarian B S Kesavan and his son Mukul that I was once privy to. I forget what they were fighting about. But I recall that the father, then past 90 years of age, was giving as good as he got. At periodic intervals he would turn to me, otherwise a silent spectator, and pointing to his son, say: "makku!", "paithyam"! Those were words that Mukul, born in Delhi of a Hindi-speaking mother, did not himself understand. But I did. They meant, roughly and respectively, "imbecile" and "lunatic".

B S Kesavan knew that I lived in Bangalore, that both my parents were Tamil, and that one of my great-uncles had been a Tamil scholar. Thus, when his son's stupidity (real or alleged) could not be adequately conveyed in their shared language, namely, English, he took recourse to his mother tongue, which was also theoretically mine. The emphasis must be on "theoretically". My great-uncle the Tamil scholar used to write postcards asking me to "learn Tamil and lead a simple life". I failed him wholly in the second respect, but have down the years managed to pick up a few dozen words of Tamil, among them makku and paithyam.

B S Kesavan was formidably multilingual. He was fluent in Tamil, Kannada, and English, spoke Bengali adequately and Hindi passably, and had a good grasp of Sanskrit. No doubt his multilingualism came in handy in his work as the first Indian director of the National Library, his nurturing of a national information system, and his pioneering histories of publishing and printing. However, his taste for languages was shared by many other Indians of his generation who did not necessarily require those skills in their jobs or careers. My own father, for instance, who was a paper technologist by profession, speaks English and Tamil well, and Kannada and Hindi passably. He also has a reading knowledge of French and German. On the other hand, Mukul Kesavan and I are essentially comfortable in English alone. We can speak Hindi conversationally, and use documents written in Hindi for research purposes. But we cannot write scholarly books or essays in Hindi. And neither of us can pretend to a third language at all.

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Let me move now from the personal to the historical, to an argument on the question of language between two great modern Indians. In the month of April 1921, Mahatma Gandhi launched a broadside against English education. First, in a speech in Orissa, he described it as an "unmitigated evil". Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Rammohan Roy would, said Gandhi, have "been far greater men had they not the contagion of English learning". In Gandhi's opinion, these two influential and admired Indians "were so many pigmies who had no hold upon the people compared with Chaitanya, Sankar, Kabir, and Nanak". Warming to the theme, Gandhi insisted that

> what Sankar alone was able to do, the whole army of English-knowing men can't do. I can multiply instances? Was Guru Govind a product of English education? Is there a single English-knowing Indian who is a match for Nanak, the founder of a sect second to none in point of valour and sacrifice?... If the race has even to be revived it is to be revived not by English education.[1]

A friend, reading the press reports of this talk in Orissa, asked Gandhi to explain his views further. Writing in his own newspaper, the Mahatma clarified that

> it is my considered opinion that English education in the manner it has been given has emasculated the English-educated Indian, it has put a severe strain on the Indian students' nervous energy, and has made of us imitators. The process of displacing the vernaculars has been one of the saddest chapters in the British connection.

"Rammohan Roy would have been a greater reformer", claimed the Mahatma, "and Lokmanya Tilak would have been a greater scholar, if they had not to start with the handicap of having to think in English and transmit their thoughts chiefly in English". Gandhi argued that "of all the

superstitions that affect India, none is so great as that a knowledge of the English language is necessary for imbibing ideas of liberty, and developing accuracy of thought". As a result of the system of education introduced by the English, "the tendency has been to dwarf the Indian body, mind and soul".[2]

One does not know whether the Mahatma's anonymous friend was content with this clarification. But someone who was less than satisfied with Gandhi's views was the poet Rabindranath Tagore. He was then travelling in Europe, where he received, by post, copies of Gandhi's articles. Tagore was dismayed by their general tenor, and by the chastisement of Rammohan Roy in particular. On the 10 of May 1921, he wrote to their common friend C F Andrews saying "I strongly protest against Mahatma Gandhi's depreciation of such great personalities of Modern India as Rammohan Roy in his zeal for declaiming against our modern education". Gandhi had celebrated the example of Nanak and Kabir, but, as Tagore suggested, those saints "were great because in their life and teaching they made organic union of the Hindu and Muhammadan cultures – and such realisation of the spiritual unity through all differences of appearance is truly Indian".

In learning and appreciating English, argued Tagore, Rammohan Roy had merely carried on the good work of Nanak and Kabir. Thus "in the modern age Rammohan Roy had that comprehensiveness of mind to be able to realise the fundamental unity of spirit in the Hindu, Muhammadan and Christian cultures. Therefore he represented India in the fullness of truth, and this truth is based, not upon rejection, but on perfect comprehension". Tagore pointed out that

> Rammohan Roy could be perfectly natural in his acceptance of the West, not only because his education had been perfectly Eastern, he had the full inheritance of the Indian wisdom. He was never a school boy of the West, and therefore he had the dignity to be the friend of the West. If he is not understood by modern India, this only shows the pure light of her own truth has been obscured for the moment by the storm-clouds of passion.[3]

Tagore's letter to Andrews was released to the press, and read by Gandhi. His answer was to say that he did "not object to English learning as such", but merely to its being made a fetish, and to its being preferred as a medium of education to the mother tongue. "Mine is not a religion of the prison-house", he insisted: "it has room even for the least among God's creation." Refuting the charge that he or his non-cooperation movement were a manifestation of xenophobia, he said:

> I hope I am as great a believer in free air as the great Poet. I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off by any.[4]

These words are emblazoned in halls and auditoria across India, but always without the crucial first line: "I hope I am as great a believer in free air as the great Poet". In truth, despite this argument in theory, in practice Gandhi and Tagore were more-or-less on the same side. Gandhi wrote his books in Gujarati, but made certain that they were translated into English so as to reach a wider audience. And when required he could use the conqueror's language rather well himself. His first published articles, that appeared in the journal of the Vegetarian Society of London in 1891, were written in the direct and unadorned prose that was the hallmark of all his work in English, whether petitions to the colonial government, editorials in his journals *Indian Opinion, Young India*, and *Harijan*, or numerous letters to friends.[5]

Early Bilingual Intellectuals

In writing in more than one language, Gandhi was in fact merely following in the footsteps of those he had criticised. For Bal Gangadhar Tilak's mother tongue was Marathi, a language in which he did certainly publish essays. On his part, Rammohan Roy had published books in Persian and essays in Bengali before he came to write in English (he was also fluent in Sanskrit and Arabic). As for Tagore, this man who shaped and reshaped the Bengali language through his novels and poems, made sure that his most important works of non-fiction were available in English. His major political testament, *Nationalism*, was based on lectures he wrote and delivered in English. His important and still relevant essays on relations between east and west were either written in English or translated by a colleague under his supervision. Tagore understood that while love and humiliation at the personal or familial level were best expressed in the mother tongue, impersonal questions of reason and justice had to be communicated in a language read by more people and over a greater geographical space than Bengali.

By writing in English as well as their mother tongue, Gandhi and Tagore were serving society as well as themselves. They reached out to varied audiences – and, by listening to their views, broadened the bases of their own thought. This open-minded-ness was also reflected in their reading. Thus Gandhi read (and was influenced by) thinkers who were not necessarily Gujarati. The debt he owed to Ruskin and Tolstoy was scarcely less than that owed to Raychandbhai or Narsi Mehta. Gandhi was also enriched by the time he spent outside Gujarat – the several years in England, the several decades in South Africa, the millions of miles travelling through the Indian countryside.

On his part, Tagore was widely read in European literature. When he visited Germany in the 1920s at the invitation of his publisher, Kurt Wolff, his host remembered the "universal breadth of Tagore's learning", their conversations revealing "without doubt that he knew far more of the West than most of the Europeans he encountered knew of the East". Tagore had spoken, among other things, of the work of T S Eliot. "It is quite remarkable", said Wolff, "that someone born in India in 1861 should display such an interest in and grasp of an Anglo-American poet thirty years his junior".[6]

Like Gandhi, Tagore learnt as much from his travels as from his books. He spent long periods in Europe, visited Japan and the United States several times, and also went to China, south-east Asia, Iran, and Latin America.

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For Gandhi, and for Tagore, the foreign language was a window into another culture, another civilisation, another way (or ways) of living in the world. For them, the command of a language other than their own was a way of simultaneously making

themselves less parochial and their work more universal. Their readings and travels fed back into their own writing, thus bringing the world to Bengal and Gujarat, and (when they chose to wrote in the foreign language) Bengal and Gujarat to the world. Bilingualism was here a vehicle or something larger and more enduring – namely, multiculturalism.

In these respects Gandhi and Tagore were wholly representative. Before them there was Syed Ahmad Khan, who moved between Urdu and English as he strove simultaneously to make the British more sensitive to Muslim interests and Muslims more willing to engage with modernity. After them there was B R Ambedkar, who wrote in Marathi for a local constituency; and in English for the rest of India and for the world. Ambedkar knew his Tukaram, but also his John Stuart Mill. To take another example, C Rajagopalachari is still admired for his English style; but few now know that he was a pioneering essayist and short-story writer in Tamil.[7] He knew his Kural, but – as he once reminded an interviewer – he had also read Thoreau well before he met Mahatma Gandhi. Rajaji's contemporary V D Savarkar also wrote books in English, as well as plays and polemical tracts in Marathi. From the other end of the political spectrum, consider the communist Hiren Mukherjee, who was a prolific writer and polemicist in both Bengali and English.[8]

Lohia and Multilingualism

A thinker-politician who, at first glance, may seem to have been an aberration is Rammanohar Lohia. To be sure, Lohia called for the abolition of English from educational institutions and in public life, and, at the same time, for the countrywide promotion of Hindi. However, Lohia advocated not monolingualism but multilingualism. He asked for school instruction to be provided in the mother tongue, but insisted that children must, in addition, learn two other languages – Hindi, and either a foreign language or another Indian language. He saw the need for an international language, to be used in communications between nations, but was not convinced that this had necessarily and for all time to be English. The role had been played by French in the past; and would, he thought, perhaps be played by Russian or Chinese in the future. Lohia himself knew German (he had taken his PhD at the University of Berlin), while some of his finerst polemical essays against the use of English were written in that language itself.[9]

So in fact Lohia was not an exception after all. Bilingualism and multiculturalism came naturally to him, as it did to the other leaders of his generation. It also came naturally to the social scientists who were their contemporaries. Of those active in the 1940s and 1950s, the anthropologists Nirmal Kumar Bose and Irawati Karve, the economist D R Gadgil, and the sociologist D P Mukerji – all made a name for themselves for their work in English as well as for their writings in their mother tongue. They tended to publish academic papers in English, and more popular or literary essays in Bengali or Marathi. Sometimes the work in the local language was translated into English, and made a considerable impact (as for example with Karve's re-rendition of the Mahabharata, *Yuganta*). As with Gandhi and Tagore, the process of enrichment was two-sided – they themselves became less parochial, while through their writings they allowed their parish to feel palpably part of a wider world.

The bilingualism of the politicians and scholars was matched by the writers and critics. It was, I think, Harish Trivedi who first noted that many of the finest creative writers of the middle decades of the 20th century were professors of English, yet wrote their poems and stories in other languages. His essay is not at hand as I write, but among the names Trivedi may have mentioned were the poet Gopalkrishna Adiga and the novelist U R Anantha Murty in Kannada; the poet Harivanshrai Bachchan and the short story writer Nirmal Verma in Hindi; and the poet Firaq Gorakhpuri in Urdu. All taught English literature; some even had PhDs in the subject from the best British universities. Literary historians could doubtless add many other names to the list – of established writers in Assamese, Oriya, Bengali, Tamil, Telugu, etc, who made their living teaching English yet wrote in the mother tongue in order to live.

Here, too, facility with more than one tongue was a matter not just of skill but also of sensibility. The writer, his work, and his audience, all benefited from the fact that the person in question was in command of more than one linguistic or cultural universe. Surely Bachchan's Hindi verse must have at some level been influenced by, or been a response to, his doctoral work at Cambridge on W B Yeats. By the same token, his classroom teaching and the occasional essays he wrote in English must certainly have been enriched by his immersion in the world of Hindi letters.

(Perhaps the most striking instance of this bilingualism concerns the crafting of Premchand's *Godan*. This work, published in 1936, is considered the very archetype of the modern Hindi novel, yet the author first outlined the plot in English!)

Multilinguality in Mysore

In the inter-war period, no Indian town better expressed this multilinguality than the town where B S Kesavan spent some of his best years, Mysore. Among the town's residents then were the Kannada poet K V Puttappa (Kuvempu), who wrote political essays in English; the English novelist R K Narayan, who was equally fluent in Tamil and Kannada; and the journalist H Y Sharada Prasad, who thought and wrote in Kannada, but whose command of English was later put to good effect in the very many speeches he ghosted for successive prime ministers of India. A somewhat younger resident was A K Ramanujan, who later recalled that, growing up in Mysore, he had necessarily to become equally familiar with the language of the street (Kannada), the language of the kitchen (Tamil, spoken by his mother), and the language of the study upstairs (occupied by his father, who liked to converse in English). Ramanujan was an accomplished poet in both Kannada and English, and achieved undying fame for his translations into English of Kannada and Tamil folklore and folk poetry-work that was enabled, in the first instance, by his growing up in the multilingual intellectual universe of Mysore.

Mysore was here representative of other towns in colonial India. The intellectual culture of Dharwad, Cochin, Allahabad, etc, was likewise bilingual, with writers and professors operating both in English and in the language of the locality or

province. There was a cultural continuum that ran between *qasba* and *mahanagar*, between the smaller urban centres and the great cities of the presidencies.

The bilingualism I have described was a product of a particular historical conjuncture – namely, the advent first of colonialism, and later, of nationalism. The British required some Indians to learn English, to interpret between them and their subjects, and to assist in governance and administration (as well as in commerce and trade). However, over time the language of the rulers also became a vehicle to demand equal rights from them. Thus, from being an accessory in the process of conquest and control, English became an ally in the process of protest and profanation. It was the language in which Indian nationalists chasisted the British for not living up to their own best traditions. Simultaneously, it also became the language in which intellectually or politically minded Indians could communicate across the different linguistic zones of the Empire. Notably, even as they acquired a working knowledge of English (or better), these reform-minded Indians continued to operate in their mother tongue. The latter served best for creative literary expression, and when focusing on the abolition of reactionary social practices; the former was necessary for nurturing or deepening cross-provincial networks of political action.

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Between (roughly) the 1920s and 1970s, the intellectual universe in India was – to coin a word – "linguidextrous". With few exceptions, the major political thinkers, scholars and creative writers – and many of the minor ones too – thought and acted and wrote with equal facility in English and at least one other language. It appears that this is no longer the case. The intellectual and creative world in India is increasingly becoming polarised – between those who think and act and write in English alone, and those who think and write and act in their mother tongue alone.

West Bengal an Exception

The state of West Bengal appears to have held out best (and longest) against this separation of literary and intellectual discourses. At least in Kolkata, there are still very many intellectuals who are properly linguidextrous. Earlier this year, Ranajit Guha was awarded the prestigious Ananda Puraskar for a book on Tagore in Bengali. Coincidentally, his collected essays in English were published in the same week. Ranajit Guha is of course a *prabasi*, but of those still resident in Kolkata, Supriya Chaudhuri, Sukanta Chaudhuri, Partha Chatterjee, and Swapan Chakravarty are all world-renowned scholars for their writings in English – and they have written first-rate essays and books in Bengali as well. These scholars are all the wrong side of 50, but there are, I am reliably told, some Bengali men and women now in their 30s and 40s who likewise move effortlessly between the language of the world and the language of the locality.

In a life lived in-between the interstices of the academy and the press, I have had the privilege of knowing and befriending many linguidextrous intellectuals. Some are prabasi Bengalis, such as those remarkable couples Tanika and Sumit Sarkar, Kalpana and Pranab Bardhan, and Meenakshi and Sujit Mukherjee. Others have come from more subaltern linguistic zones, for example, Kumar Ketkar, Madhav Gadgil and Rajendra Vora (Marathi), Shahid Amin (Hindi), Girish Karnad and D R Nagaraj (Kannada), C V Subba Rao (Telugu), Jatin Kumar Nayak (Oriya), and N S Jagannathan (Tamil). Like me, all these writers have written a great deal in English; unlike me, they have published important work in their other language too. In countless conversations down the decades, I have been to them what the readers of Gandhi and Tagore were to those great Indians – namely, a grateful recipient of knowledge and understanding derived from languages that I do not myself speak or read.[10]

Notably, the individuals mentioned in the preceding paragraph are over 50 years of age.[11] Speaking of the younger generation, linguidextrous intellectuals run more thinly on the ground – at least outside of Bengal. Of scholars in their 40s, I can think easily of only three who would qualify – A R Venkatachalapathy, Tridip Suhrud, and Yogendra Yadav. All have considerable and independently won reputations for their writings in their language (Tamil in the one case, Gujarati in the second, Hindi in the third) as well as English. A fourth name might be that of the young historian Arupjyoti Saikia, who writes in both Assamese and English.[12]

In general, though, the gap between the generations is telling. Consider thus the career of Sadanand More, whose major works include a reception history of the poet-saint Tukaram and a study of the transition from Tilak to Gandhi in the politics of western India. As I have discovered on several visits to Puné, he is something of a cult figure in Maharashtra, because of his books and his columns in newspapers. Had he written in English, he might have been considered the Partha Chatterjee of Maharashtra – he is comparable in the range of his interests and the originality of his mind. I base this judgment in part on several long conversations with Sadanand More, and in part on having read the first half of an English translation of one of his books, which is being undertaken – as a labour of love and disinterested scholarship – by one of the last properly bilingual intellectuals in Maharashtra, the septugenerian poet-editor Dilip Chitre.

Intellectually and Emotionally Bilingual

A distinction must be made here between reading a language and knowing it through and through. There are those who are *functionally* bilingual; and yet others who are *intellectually* and *emotionally* bilingual. I use letters and news reports written in Hindi for my research, raiding them for facts and opinions. But I do not read Hindi for pleasure, nor could I think of writing an essay in Hindi in a quality journal. In this I believe I speak for many other social scientists of my age or younger. These too may be able to use an Indian language as source material, but – unlike their predecessors N K Bose and Irawati Karve – cannot see themselves as contributing to literary or academic debate in that language. They, and I, are admittedly cosmopolitan, but in a somewhat shallow sense, knowing the world well without knowing the locality much – or at all.

At the same time, at the other end of the linguistic spectrum, many – perhaps most – of the best poets and novelists in Tamil, Kannada, Hindi, Oriya, Gujarati, etc, are likewise completely comfortable in one

language only. They may occasionally read a novel or tract in English, but most of their reading – and all their writing – is confined to a single language, their own. No Kannada novelist of the younger generation has anything like the acquaintance with western literature and social theory once commanded by U R Anantha Murty. The Hindi writers I meet are all deeply rooted in their environment, yet few follow Nirmal Verma in his curiosity about, or knowledge of, the wider world.

My evidence is somewhat anecdotal, but I believe most observers will agree with the thrust of my conclusions – namely, that there has been a decline in the number and visibility of scholars and writers who are properly linguidextrous. The third class of bilingual thinkers, the politicians, is wholly depopulated now. In my view, the last active politician to have any serious claims to intellectual originality was Jayaprakash Narayan, who, of course, wrote and thought and argued in both Hindi and English. (Critics with more lax standards may offer the names of Mani Shankar Aiyar and Arun Shourie. In any case, whether intellectual or not, original or not, they operate in English alone.)

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There is still a certain amount of functional bilinguality among India's intellectual class; but emotional or intellectual bilinguality, once ubiquitous, is now present only in pockets, these too of chiefly older women and men. What are the reasons for this? A key reason, in retrospect, was the creation and consolidation of linguistic states after 1956. I have argued elsewhere that linguistic states have helped save the unity of India. Had we not allowed states to be constituted around language, and had we instead imposed Hindi on the whole country, we might have gone the way of a now divided Pakistan and a wartorn Sri Lanka.[13]

I believe that on balance, linguistic states were indeed a good thing. Even in the particular context of intellectual work, they have had good as well as bad effects. The expansion of the school network, and the entry into the political system of previously excluded groups, has greatly deepened the social bases of the intellectual class. Literature and scholarship across India were once dominated by brahmins, Banias, Kayasths, and well-born Muslims. But from the 1950s, very many dalits and members of the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) began entering schools and colleges. Some went on to become professors and writers, taking to jobs and careers that would have been closed to men and women of their background half a century previously.

Removal of English

In most states, however, instruction in government schools was conducted in the official language of the state alone. There was little room for English – sometimes, no room at all. English was removed from Gujarati schools in the 1950s and from schools in West Bengal in the 1970s – each time, at the instance of men (Morarji Desai in the first case, Jyoti Basu and Ashok Mitra in the second case) who were themselves superbly fluent in English. It has been claimed – not altogether implausibly – that the parochialism and xenophobia that underlies the rise of a certain

Gujarati politician is not unrelated to the banning of the one language which, to quote that other and more broad-minded Gujarati politician, would have best allowed the cultures of other lands to be blown freely around and about the west coast of India. Similarly, the decline of West Bengal as a centre of science and scholarship is not unconnected to the equally misguided decision to ban English-teaching in the state-run schools of the province.

In the 1960s and 1970s, at the same time as the subaltern classes were producing their first major crop of scholars and writers, the elites were choosing to patronise English-language schools alone. In the north Indian public school I studied in, Hindi was verboten – the boy most badly ragged in my time spoke ungrammatical English with a Hindi accent. The experience was representative – in other towns and cities across India, upper caste children whose fathers may have, in colonial times, studied in government schools where both Sanskrit and the local language had an important place, were sent to "convent" or public schools where English was the preferred language of communication, with Hindi (or its equivalent) allotted a minor, residual and contemptible place in the curriculum.

Role of Inter-Community Marriages

English in post-colonial India was the language of status and prestige. With the opening of the economy after 1991 it also became the language of economic and material advancement. The spread of English was further helped along by the growing number of inter-caste and inter-community marriages in urban India. If, for example, a Tamil-speaking girl met a Bengali-speaking boy in an office which functioned in English, and the two fell in love and later married, the chances were, and are, that the home language would, by default, be English, this becoming, in time, the first, preferred and perhaps also sole language of the children of the union. Cases like these must, by now, number in the hundreds of thousands. And it is from professional unions such as these that some of India's most prominent scholars and writers have been and will be born.

This separation of discourses is reflected in the growing distance – cultural as much as geographical – that now exists between the qasba and the mahanagar. Smaller towns tend to produce thinkers and writers who operate in the local language alone, whereas professors and students in the elite colleges of the metropolis are often comfortable only in English. In a cultural and linguistic sense, Karnatak College, Dharwar, is worlds removed from Christ College, Bangalore; DAV College, Dehradun, from St Stephen's College, Delhi.

Notably, the decline of intellectual bilingualism has been accompanied by a rise of functional bilingualism among the population at large. Many more Indians now speak more than one language than they ever did in the past. The universe of the farm and village is classicaly monolingual, whereas the universe of the office and factory emphatically is not. Thus, industrialisation and urbanisation have brought together millions of people speaking different languages at home. Migrants to cities and towns find that the lingua franca of their workplace is, as often as not, something other than their mother tongue. Bihari labourers in the informal sector in Kolkata have perforce to speak Bengali, while Malayalam workers in public sector units in Bangalore have necessarily to learn some Kannada.

Meanwhile, Hindi and English have emerged as pan-Indian languages of communication and conversation. Where official attempts to promote Hindi in southern and eastern India conspicuously failed, the language has nonetheless spread through the more informal, and hence more acceptable, medium of television and film. In cities like Bangalore and Hyderabad, in Mumbai, and now even in Kolkata, Hindi is widely used as the default language of conversation between two Indians reared to speak other tongues. The spread of English owes itself to more instrumental factors – the fact that it is the language of the international marketplace, and of the larger companies and firms that operate in it. Since the best-paying and often most prestigious jobs demand a knowledge of English, there is a huge incentive to acquire it.

And so, while intellectuals tend increasingly to operate in a single linguistic sphere, millions of Indians in other jobs, trades, and professions are acquiring proficiency in tongues other than their own.

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In those essays of 1921, Gandhi had hedged his opposition to English with a series of caveats. "I am opposed to make a fetish of English education, I don't hate English education", he said. "I know what treasures I have lost not knowing Hindustani and Sanskrit", he continued. We may endorse these sentiments while recognising, 60 years after Gandhi's death, that an equal danger lies in making a fetish of the opposition to English. Those who banned English in West Bengal deprived millions of schoolchildren of a wider education. Now, to those Kannada writers who ask for instruction in the mother tongue alone, the dalits answer – first you did not allow us to learn Sanskrit, now you want to deny us access to English.

The decline of the bilingual intellectual in contemporary India is thus a product of a combination of many factors: public policy – which emphasised the mother tongue alone; elite preference – which denied or diminished the mother tongue altogether; social change – as in new patterns of marriage; and economic change – as in the material gains to be had from a command of English.

Opposite Trend in Europe

The temporal sphere of my arguments is restricted to the 20 century; the spatial sphere, to my country alone. Those who know the history of precolonial India may have interesting and important things to say about the multilingual nature of intellectual discourse in past times.[14] Meanwhile, as someone who has a casual acquaintance with contemporary Europe, let me suggest that the intellectuals in that continent have gone in exactly the reverse direction to ours. Once, they operated mainly or even exclusively in the language that defined their nation – the French in French, the Spanish in Spanish, etc. Now, with the emergence of the European Union and the growth of English as a global language, these French and Spanish and German thinkers have abandoned their opposition to the foreign tongue without disavowing their own. The best (or at rate

most successful) French thinkers now are linguidextrous, writing essays and books in their own language as well as in English. Scholars in other European nations have gone even further. Thus, the distinguished ecological thinker J Martinez-Alier writes in English for a global audience, in Spanish for his compatriots, and in Catalan for the people of his own province.

I shall end this essay with two stories which illustrate the sometimes unanticipated glories of the best kind of linguidextrousness. When H Y Sharada Prasad died last year, a letter-writer in *Outlook* magazine complained that in all his years in New Delhi, serving prime ministers and earning their trust and respect, Sharada Prasad had never lifted a finger for a single Kannadiga. The parochialism was characteristic of our times. For what the letter-writer did not recognise is that by translating the novels of Shivarama Karanth into English, Sharada Prasad had done a far greater service to the Kannada language, and to Kannadigas, than had he got some of them 10 minutes with Indira Gandhi or an out-of-turn gas connection.

Sharada Prasad spoke Kannada, Tamil, Telugu, and English very well – and knew some Sanskrit and Hindi too. The other Indian of my acquaintance who comes closest to this multilingual dextrousness is the current governor of West Bengal, Gopalkrishna Gandhi. Literary critics know Gopal Gandhi as the translator into Hindi of Vikram Seth's novel *A Suitable Boy*. He has also written his own books, in English. However, these are only two of the languages this good man can fluently read, write, and speak. I recently discovered that his first literary production was undertaken as a boy of 17, when he translated the memoirs of Manu Gandhi from Gujarati into English. He speaks Tamil, which was the language of his mother, quite beautifully. More recently, he has acquired an adequate knowledge of Bengali.

For all his achievements, among Indian intellectuals at any rate, Gopal Gandhi can only be known as the younger brother of the philosopher Ramchandra (Ramu) Gandhi. Although he wrote several important books, Ramu Gandhi was at his best at the lectern. I have never heard a more brilliant lecturer – a judgment that would, I think, be endorsed by most people who heard him speak in either Hindi or English, among them the very many students he trained and inspired at the universities of Rajasthan, Delhi, Hyderabad and Santiniketan. After he quit academic life, Ramu Gandhi's main theatre of operation was the India International Centre (IIC), where he would lecture occasionally in the auditorium, and more informally – if to equal effect – in the lounge or the bar.

Ramu Gandhi was the son of Mahatma Gandhi's youngest son, whereas his mother was the daughter of C Rajagopalachari. In the mid-1950s, when Ramu was entering university, Rajaji took an extended holiday from politics to write modern renditions of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. He wrote them first in his native Tamil, and then translated them into English.

Lakshmi Devadas Gandhi

These modern versions of the epics proved so popular that a demand arose for translations into other languages. Rajaji's daughter, Lakshmi Devadas Gandhi, volunteered to do them in Hindi, a language she knew well in part due to long residence in New Delhi. The Hindi versions sold briskly and continuously – they were still selling in the 1960s, and well into the 1970s. Sometimes towards the end of that decade Lakshmi Devadas Gandhi decided to make a will. However, as the daughter and daughter-in-law of ascetic and incorruptible politicians, she had no worldly possessions to speak of.

Except, of course, for the royalties from those translations. Who then to will them too? Lakshmi Devadas Gandhi had three sons. The first, Rajmohan was a journalist and author of popular works of biography and history – surely the Fourth Estate and his publishers would take care of him were he ever in distress. The youngest son, Gopal, was a member of the Indian Administrative Service – he would, in time, get a sarkari pension linked to the cost-of-living index. That left the middle son, the dreamy philosopher who had left six jobs and declined to accept six others.

So it was to Ramu Gandhi that the royalties were willed, and to him, after his mother's death in 1983, that they came. Every year, without fail, Ramu would get a cheque for several thousand rupees, that would comfortably cover the cumulative bills, for that year, from the IIC bar. And, so, in this manner, works originally composed in Sanskrit, then rendered in Tamil and still later translated into Hindi, were to fuel the belly and the mind of the most brilliant man to have walked the lawns or entered the bar or spoken in the auditorium of the IIC.

The story may be apocryphal, but it deserves to be true. For it illustrates like nothing else the beauty and potency of intellectual and literary bilingualism – practised, in this case, across three successive generations – father, daughter and grandson.

NOTES

1 "An Unmitigated Evil", *Young India*, 13 April 1921.
2 "English Education", *Young India*, 27 April 1921.
3 Rabindranath Tagore, *Letters to a Friend: Edited with Two Introductory Essays by C F Andrews* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1928), p 165.
4 "English Learning", *Young India*, 1 June 1921.
5 Cf Sunil Khilnani, "Gandhi and Nehru: The Uses of English" in Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (ed.), *The Illustrated History of Indian Literature in English* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003).
6 See Michael Ermarth, ed. *Kurt Wolff: A Portrait in Essays and Letters* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991 – translated by Deborah Lucas Schneider from a German text published in 1966), pp 116ff.
7 A state of affairs (or of ignorance) that can now be redeemed by Vasanthi Srinivasan's fine book, *Gandhi's Conscience-Keeper: The Political Philosophy of C Rajagolalachari* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2009).
8 Possible exceptions to this trend are M A Jinnah, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Subhas Bose, who were also all thinker-politicians, albeit of a monolingual variety. Jinnah, as is well known, was not exactly fluent in Urdu. Nehru could give a public lecture in Hindustani and Bose in Bengali; however, their major writings, like Jinnah's, are all in English.
9 See the writings and speeches collected in Rammanohar Lohia, *Language* (first edition, 1956: revised and expanded edition, Hyderabad: Rammanohar Lohia Samata Vidyalaya Nyas, 1986).
10 This list, based on personal experience, is merely illustrative.
11 The youngest is Jatin Nayak, who is 54. D R Nagaraj and C V Subba Rao would also have been in their mid-50s were they alive. Their deaths were a deep personal loss to this writer, and a greater collective loss for intellectual life in general. What they would have accomplished had they lived another 10 or 20 years beggars the imagination. Subba Rao died in 1994, Nagaraj in 1996 – I miss them still.
12 Also just short of 50 is Sanjay Subrahmanyam, whose other main scholarly languages are Portuguese and French, in both of which he writes and lectures. He also knows Dutch and Italian, and grew up speaking Tamil and Hindi. Had he chosen to focus to more narrowly on Indian history rather than on wider issues of global and comparative history, he might now be writing in Tamil (or Hindi) apart from English.
13 See Ramachandra Guha, *India after Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy* (Delhi: Picador India, 2007), Chapter IX and epilogue.
14 Cf Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007). Also Sheldon Pollock, editor, *Literary Cultures in History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004).