



Colonialism, the English Language, and the Decline of Indian Knowledge Systems

Dr. Madhukar Janrao Nikam

*Assistant Professor for English
(IKS Master Trainer)
Athawale College of Social Work Bhandara*

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Abstract

Colonialism had a profound impact on the cultural, educational, and intellectual traditions of colonized nations. In India, British colonial rule systematically disrupted the indigenous education system, replacing it with an English-based Western model. This led to the decline of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), which had flourished for centuries in disciplines such as medicine, mathematics, astronomy, metallurgy, and philosophy. The imposition of the English language as the primary medium of education and governance alienated Indians from their traditional wisdom and created a dependency on Western thought. This paper explores how colonial policies and the spread of English marginalized IKS and examines ways to revive and integrate it into modern education.

Before British rule, India had a rich and decentralized education system that was deeply rooted in regional languages and Sanskrit. Knowledge was transmitted through Gurukuls, Madrasas, Pathshalas, Agraharas, and Buddhist universities like Nalanda and Takshashila. Subjects such as Ayurveda, Yoga, Vedic Mathematics, Astronomy, Metallurgy, Linguistics, and Philosophy were systematically taught. Colonialism and the spread of English education led to the systematic marginalization of Indian Knowledge Systems. British policies erased centuries of scientific, medical, and philosophical advancements by imposing English as the dominant medium of education. However, English can now be used strategically to revive IKS by promoting bilingual education, research funding, and digital translation efforts. A hybrid model—where English is used for global outreach but IKS is restored in academia—will ensure a decolonized, knowledge-rich future for India.

Keywords

Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), Colonial Disruption, Macaulay's Minute (1835), Linguistic Displacement, Traditional Learning Centers, Marginalization, Westernization, Cultural Alienation, Inferiority Complex, Post-Colonial Education,

Decolonization, Revival, Multilingual Education, NEP 2020, Globalization.

I. Introduction

English was strategically used by the British as a tool of cultural domination, restructuring Indian society along colonial lines. Macaulay's Minute on Education (1835) played a pivotal role in shaping the colonial education system, ensuring that English became the primary medium of governance, law, and academia. As a result, indigenous knowledge traditions rooted in Sanskrit, Tamil, Pali, and Persian were systematically marginalized. The imposition of English not only created a Westernized elite disconnected from their own heritage but also led to the decline of traditional Indian education systems. Even after independence, the dominance of English persists in higher education and governance, reinforcing social and intellectual barriers. This essay examines the colonial policies that contributed to the marginalization of Indian languages and knowledge systems while exploring ways to restore linguistic and cultural balance in contemporary India.

The imposition of English in colonial India extended beyond education and governance, reshaping Indian society by altering perceptions of knowledge, identity, and social status. British policies instilled an inferiority complex among Indians, positioning Western knowledge as superior while diminishing the value of indigenous traditions. The emergence of a Westernized elite further deepened this cultural divide, as English proficiency became synonymous with modernity and success. Over time, this led to the erosion of Indian identity, as younger generations distanced themselves from their linguistic and intellectual heritage. Even after independence, English continued to serve as a marker of social and professional prestige, limiting access to opportunities for non-English speakers and perpetuating colonial-era hierarchies. This essay examines how English education influenced Indian self-perception, cultural practices, and social mobility, while also exploring ways to reclaim and



reintegrate indigenous knowledge systems into contemporary discourse.

Colonial Disruption of Indigenous Knowledge

The British imposed their education system, which prioritized Western knowledge while disregarding indigenous wisdom. Traditional learning centers like Gurukuls, Pathshalas, and Madrasas were systematically undermined. Ancient Indian texts in Sanskrit, Pali, and Persian were neglected in favor of English-based education. The British Education System: Prioritizing Western Knowledge One of the most significant blows to indigenous knowledge came with the introduction of the English Education Act of 1835, which was largely influenced by Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay's Minute on Education. Macaulay argued that Indian literature, philosophy, and sciences were inferior to European knowledge and insisted that the British government should educate Indians in English to create a class of individuals who were "Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, opinions, morals, and intellect." To implement this vision, the British: Introduced English as the primary medium of education and administration. Focused on Western subjects like European literature, history, and law, sidelining indigenous sciences and philosophy. Dismantled the traditional education system by withdrawing state support from institutions that taught in Sanskrit, Pali, and Persian. This shift not only disrupted the transmission of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) but also led to a cultural and intellectual disconnect between Indians and their rich heritage.

Decline of Traditional Learning Centers

Before British rule, India had a well-established education system that catered to various disciplines: A Gurukuls (Hindu Traditional Schools) Gurukuls were residential schools where students (Shishyas) lived with their teachers (Gurus) and studied subjects like Vedic literature, mathematics, astronomy, Ayurveda, and philosophy. The mode of instruction was oral, and students memorized texts before engaging in discussions and debates. With the introduction of British schools, Gurukuls lost state patronage, and their students found fewer

employment opportunities, leading to their decline Pathshalas (Regional Schools in Vernacular Languages) Pathshalas were village-based schools that provided primary and secondary education in local languages such as Tamil, Bengali, Marathi, and Kannada. Subjects included arithmetic, business mathematics (Vyavahara Ganita), Sanskrit grammar, and practical sciences. The British replaced these schools with English-medium institutions, leading to the erosion of education in regional languages. Madrasas (Islamic Centers of Learning) Madrasas were institutions where students learned Islamic theology, Arabic, Persian, mathematics, and sciences. Many madrasas also taught medicine, architecture, and astronomy, preserving knowledge from the Golden Age of Islamic Science. British officials viewed Persian and Arabic as outdated and removed them from government institutions, causing a decline in madrasa education. The decline of these traditional institutions meant that generations of Indians lost access to indigenous knowledge, and English became the gateway to formal education and employment.

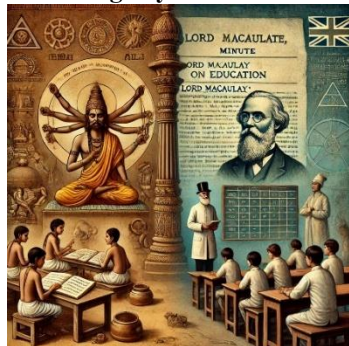
Neglect of Ancient Indian Texts in Sanskrit, Pali, and Persian

Sanskrit Texts and Hindu Knowledge Systems Sanskrit was the language of many scientific, philosophical, and literary texts, including: Charaka Samhita & Sushruta Samhita (Medicine & Surgery) Aryabhatiya & Brahmasphutasiddhanta (Mathematics & Astronomy) Nyaya Sutras & Vedas (Logic & Philosophy) With the introduction of English-based education, these texts were: Not included in school curricula, making them inaccessible to students. Misinterpreted or dismissed by British scholars, who often viewed Indian sciences as inferior. Not translated accurately into English, leading to a loss of original meanings and concepts. Pali Texts and Buddhist Knowledge Pali was the language of Buddhist texts, such as the Tripitaka, which contained deep insights into psychology, logic, and ethics. British education neglected Buddhist teachings, and many Pali texts remained untranslated for decades. The oral tradition of Buddhist monks was disrupted, further isolating this knowledge. Persian Texts and Mughal-Era Knowledge Persian was the administrative language of India before the British, and it contained rich knowledge in history, poetry, and governance. Important works on agriculture, astronomy, medicine, and engineering were written in Persian. When the British abolished Persian as the official language in 1837, these texts were pushed into obscurity, and knowledge from the Mughal period was largely forgotten. The marginalization of these languages severed India's



connection with its historical intellectual achievements.

Impact of Colonial Policies on Indigenous Knowledge Systems



The British education policy had long-term effects on Indian knowledge traditions: Western Science Replaced Indigenous Sciences Ayurveda and Siddha medicine

were labeled as "unscientific," while British medicine (Allopathy) became dominant. Indian astronomy, which had advanced planetary models, was replaced with Newtonian physics-based Western astronomy. Vedic Mathematics, which had advanced techniques for algebra and calculus, was ignored in favor of British mathematical models. Social and Economic Consequences Scholars trained in Gurukuls, Madrasas, and Pathshalas could not find jobs in the new British administration, leading to loss of livelihoods. The intellectual elite of India became disconnected from its own traditions, as English was now the language of progress. Over time, Indian languages lost prestige, and English became the language of higher education, governance, and social mobility. Cultural Erosion and Colonial Mindset The younger generation, educated in English-medium schools, started viewing their own heritage as backward and outdated. This led to a colonized mindset, where Indians began seeking validation from Western institutions instead of valuing their own knowledge traditions.

The British systematically disrupted India's indigenous education system by replacing Sanskrit, Pali, and Persian-based learning with English-medium Western education. This not only led to the decline of Gurukuls, Pathshalas, and Madrasas but also caused a disconnection from traditional sciences, medicine, and philosophy. While English played a crucial role in globalizing Indian education, it also resulted in the marginalization of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS). Today, efforts must be made to revive and integrate.

English as a Tool of Cultural Domination

Macaulay's Minute on Education (1835) argued for creating a class of Indians who were "English in taste, morals, and intellect." English

became the language of administration, law, and academia, marginalizing regional languages and traditional knowledge. Sanskrit, Tamil, and other knowledge-rich languages lost their prestige. The British colonization of India was not just a political and economic endeavor; it was also a cultural conquest. One of the most effective tools of this domination was the imposition of the English language as the primary medium of education, governance, and intellectual discourse. By replacing India's indigenous languages with English, the British ensured that Indian society was restructured along colonial lines, ultimately leading to the marginalization of traditional knowledge and regional languages. The most significant moment in this transformation was the introduction of Macaulay's Minute on Education (1835), which played a pivotal role in shaping the colonial education system in India.

Macaulay's Minute on Education (1835): The Colonial Blueprint

Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay, drafted his infamous Minute on Education. His vision was clear, he disregarded India's traditional knowledge and deemed its literature, sciences, and philosophy as inferior to Western thought. He openly stated that one shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. His goal was not to educate Indians in their own knowledge systems, but rather to create a class of people who were "Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, morals, and intellect." This statement reflected the British strategy of cultural domination. Instead of completely erasing Indian traditions, they sought to transform the educated elite into loyal subjects of the British Empire, who would in turn act as intermediaries between the rulers and the masses. By doing so, the British: Ensured that Indian elites would adopt English customs, values, and political ideals, distancing themselves from their own traditions. Created a Westernized bureaucracy that would help govern India according to British interests. Laid the foundation for a long-term cultural and intellectual colonization, which persisted even after India's political independence in 1947.

English as the Language of Administration, Law, and Academia

Once Macaulay's vision was implemented, English quickly became the dominant language in key areas of governance, education, and law. English in Administration the British replaced Persian (which had been the official language of the Mughal court) with English as the language of administration in



1837. Government jobs, legal documents, and bureaucratic proceedings were all conducted in English. Regional administrators and clerks had to learn English to secure employment, creating a class divide between the English-educated elite and the rest of the population. English in Law British legal institutions followed English common law, which was fundamentally different from India's indigenous legal traditions, such as those based on Manusmriti, Arthashastra, and Islamic jurisprudence. Traditional dispute resolution methods, such as Panchayats (village councils), were systematically weakened. Court proceedings and legal education were exclusively in English, making justice inaccessible to those who did not speak the language. English in Academia Universities established by the British, such as Calcutta University (1857), Bombay University (1857), and Madras University (1857), taught only in English. Sanskrit and Tamil-based education was sidelined, and IKS subjects like Ayurveda, Vedic mathematics, and Indian astronomy were not included in the curriculum. The British education system rewarded English proficiency and looked down upon scholars who studied in regional languages. This led to a cultural and intellectual disconnect between Indians and their own historical knowledge systems, as well as the gradual decline of Sanskrit, Tamil, and other knowledge-rich languages.

The Marginalization of Sanskrit, Tamil, and Regional Languages

Before British rule, India had a diverse linguistic landscape, with knowledge being preserved in Sanskrit, Tamil, Pali, Persian, and many regional languages. Each of these languages was deeply tied to specific knowledge traditions, but under colonial rule, they lost their prestige and institutional support. The Decline of Sanskrit was the language of India's ancient scriptures, sciences, and philosophical texts, including the Vedas, Upanishads, Charaka Samhita, and Aryabhatiya. Under British rule, Sanskrit schools and institutions lost funding, while English-medium schools received state support. The British promoted the idea that Sanskrit knowledge was outdated, leading to a decline in Sanskrit education. Even today, Sanskrit is considered a "dead language", and very few institutions teach it at an advanced level. The Marginalization of Tamil and Other Regional Languages Tamil, one of the oldest surviving classical languages, was a rich source of literary and scientific texts, including Sangam literature and Siddha medical texts. However, Tamil and other regional languages were not given the same status as English, forcing scholars to write and publish in English if they wanted recognition. Many Tamil

medical texts, astronomical records, and historical accounts were left untranslated and ignored in British academic institutions. Even today, English remains the preferred medium of higher education, while Tamil and other regional languages are often used only at the primary level. The English-Language Barrier in Modern India English is still the language of higher education, government, and law in India, making it difficult for people educated in regional languages to access opportunities. Research in Ayurveda, Indian astronomy, and traditional engineering is often published in English-language journals, making it inaccessible to those trained in indigenous languages. The social status of English speakers remains high, creating an elite class that continues the British legacy of cultural division.

The Psychological and Cultural Impact of English Domination

The dominance of English in India did not just impact education and governance; it transformed Indian society by: Creating an inferiority complex among Indians, where Western knowledge was considered superior to Indian knowledge. Encouraging the elite to imitate British customs, leading to a cultural alienation from Indian traditions. Undermining Indian identity, as younger generations grew up thinking that progress and modernity were linked to English, not their own languages. Even after independence, India continued to rely on English as a marker of social and intellectual prestige, making it difficult to fully reclaim indigenous knowledge.

Creating an Inferiority Complex Among Indians

Macaulay's Influence (1835): His Minute on Education dismissed Indian knowledge as inferior and advocated for the teaching of Western subjects in English. This led to a decline in the prestige of Sanskrit, Tamil, and Persian texts. Gandhi's Critique of English Education: Mahatma Gandhi, in Hind Swaraj (1909), criticized the British education system for making Indians feel ashamed of their own culture and traditions. Shift from Ayurveda to Western Medicine: Even though Ayurveda had a deep-rooted scientific basis, British policies promoted Western medicine as "modern," leading to the decline of traditional healthcare practices. Encouraging the Elite to Imitate British Customs Westernized Indian Elite: The British education system produced English-speaking elites who adopted British manners, dress codes, and lifestyle, often looking down on traditional Indian practices. Bengal Renaissance (19th Century): Many reformers, such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, supported Western-style education but at the cost of devaluing traditional



Indian learning. Indian Civil Service (ICS) Exams: Indians who aspired to join the British administration had to master English, reinforcing the idea that success was tied to Western education.

Undermining Indian Identity

Neglect of Sanskrit and Vernacular Literature as British policies removed Sanskrit, Tamil, and Persian texts from mainstream education, making young Indians unaware of their literary and philosophical heritage. Replacement of Indigenous Legal Systems: British law replaced Dharma-based legal traditions, and court proceedings were conducted in English, alienating common people. Impact on Clothing and Lifestyle: British officers and Indian elites discouraged traditional clothing such as dhoti and saree, while Western suits became the preferred attire in official settings.

Post-Independence Continuation of English as a Prestige Marker Government and Higher Education in English: Even after independence, Indian Parliament, Supreme Court, and universities continued using English as the primary language, limiting access for non-English speakers. Social Status Linked to English: People fluent in English in India today enjoy higher social mobility and job prospects, reinforcing colonial-era hierarchies. Bollywood and Media Influence: Many Bollywood films portray English speakers as sophisticated and intelligent, while characters speaking regional languages are often depicted as rural or backward.

The British strategy of imposing English education and cultural values led to a deep-rooted psychological and social transformation in India. Even after independence, English remains a dominant force in education, governance, and social mobility, often at the expense of indigenous knowledge and languages. The British colonial imposition of English as the dominant language of education, governance, and intellectual discourse had a profound and lasting impact on India's cultural, educational, and knowledge systems. Traditional centers of learning such as Gurukuls, Madrasas, and Pathshalas were systematically dismantled, and indigenous knowledge preserved in Sanskrit, Tamil, Pali, and Persian was marginalized. This not only alienated Indians from their own intellectual and cultural heritage but also reinforced the perception that progress and modernity were intrinsically linked to English. Even after independence, the dominance of English persisted, continuing to shape social mobility and intellectual hierarchies in India.

However, while English was historically used as a tool of cultural domination, it can now be

strategically leveraged to revive and globalize Indian Knowledge Systems. A balanced approach—where English facilitates global outreach while indigenous languages reclaim their rightful place in academia—can help restore India's intellectual legacy. Efforts such as bilingual education, research funding for traditional sciences, and digital translation initiatives can bridge the gap between ancient wisdom and modern knowledge. By decolonizing education and embracing linguistic inclusivity, India can reclaim its rich heritage while remaining globally competitive.

English Language and Its Impact on Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS)

The imposition of English during colonial rule played a crucial role in dismantling Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS). While English became the dominant medium of education, governance, and intellectual discourse, it also led to the decline of indigenous languages and traditional knowledge. Macaulay's Influence: Thomas Babington Macaulay's infamous statement: "A single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia." reflects the colonial mindset that dismissed Indian knowledge. This led to the systematic marginalization of Vedic, Buddhist, and Jain scholarship. Suppression of Indigenous Learning Before British rule, India had a decentralized education system, with Gurukuls, Pathshalas, Madrasas, and Agharhas preserving oral and written traditions in Sanskrit, Tamil, Pali, and Persian with English as the primary language, traditional schools lost state funding and collapsed subjects like Ayurveda, Mathematics, Astronomy, and Metallurgy were devalued because they were not taught in English.

English was made the language of administration, law, and higher education, sidelining Indian languages. Many technical and philosophical terms in Sanskrit and Tamil lacked direct English translations, leading to a loss of depth and nuance in ancient Indian sciences. The colonial system labeled Indian texts as mythology rather than scientific knowledge, which discouraged serious academic study. English and the Fragmentation of Knowledge Before colonial rule, science, philosophy, and spirituality were interconnected in Indian education. The Western education system, imposed through English, fragmented knowledge into rigid disciplines. This reductionist approach neglected holistic sciences like Ayurveda and Yoga, which combine multiple disciplines (biology, psychology, and spirituality).



Colonial Hangover: The Continuing Dominance of English Even after independence, English remained



the primary language of higher education and research, further alienating IKS. Scholars trained in English often dismissed indigenous knowledge as unscientific due

to the lack of English documentation. The prestige of English-medium education continues to create a divide between IKS scholars and the global academic community.

Reviving IKS in an English-Dominated World National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 aims to promote multilingual education and revive IKS. IITs and universities are integrating Ayurveda, Vedic Mathematics, and ancient Indian technologies into their research. Digital platforms and AI are helping translate ancient texts into multiple languages, bridging the gap between IKS and global academia. The dominance of English disrupted India's indigenous knowledge traditions, replacing them with a Eurocentric educational model. However, IKS can still be revived by promoting regional languages, interdisciplinary research, and decolonizing the curriculum while strategically using English for global

Case Studies: How English Replaced IKS-Based Learning

English led to the decline of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) in various fields:

1. Ayurveda vs. Western Medicine

Before English Education Ayurveda was the primary system of medicine in India, with texts like Charaka Samhita and Sushruta Samhita detailing advanced surgical procedures, herbal treatments, and holistic healing. Medical education was conducted in Sanskrit, and practitioners were trained through the Gurukul system. After English Education The British established Western medical colleges in English and labeled Ayurveda as "unscientific." The Indian Medical Service (IMS) excluded Ayurvedic practitioners from government employment. Many Ayurvedic texts were ignored, and British hospitals promoted only Western medicine. Today, Ayurveda is being revived, but MBBS degrees in English are still more prestigious.

2. Mathematics: The Decline of Vedic Mathematics

Before English Education Indian mathematicians like Aryabhata, Brahmagupta, and Bhaskaracharya had developed advanced concepts like zero, algebra, and trigonometry. The Sanskrit-based system of Vedic Mathematics was widely used for calculations. The decimal system and zero, fundamental to modern math, originated from India. After English Education The British introduced their curriculum based on Newtonian mathematics, sidelining Indian contributions. Sanskrit texts on mathematics were neglected, and Vedic Mathematics was removed from mainstream education. Even today, mathematics in Indian schools is taught from a Western perspective in English, while Vedic Math is treated as an "alternative method."

3. Astronomy and Cosmology: Before English Education Indian astronomers like Varahamihira and Bhaskara II had advanced knowledge of planetary motion and eclipses. The Surya Siddhanta, an ancient Indian text, had calculated the Earth's diameter and orbits of planets with great accuracy. After English Education Western astronomy was introduced in English, and Indian texts were dismissed as mythology. The British promoted the Gregorian calendar, sidelining the Indian Panchang (Hindu calendar), which was based on precise astronomical calculations. Today, most students study Western astronomy in English, with very little exposure to India's rich astronomical traditions.

4. Water Management: The Decline of Indigenous Systems Before English Education India had sophisticated water conservation techniques, such as stepwells, tank irrigation, and rainwater harvesting. Ancient texts in Sanskrit and regional languages documented hydraulic engineering and sustainable water management. After English Education British engineers, trained in English-based Western engineering, ignored traditional Indian water management methods. Large-scale British-built dams replaced traditional water systems, leading to ecological damage and water shortages. Even today, Indian engineering education follows a Western model, and traditional water conservation methods are not part of the mainstream curriculum.

5. Legal System: Replacing Dharma-Based Laws with English Common Law Before English Education India had a well-developed legal system based on Manusmriti, Arthashastra, and Islamic legal texts. Dispute resolution was handled by Panchayats, which used customary laws rooted in Indian traditions. After English Education the British imposed English common law, replacing India's indigenous legal traditions. Indian legal education



became entirely English-based, and traditional dispute resolution systems declined. Today, most lawyers and judges operate only in English, making the legal system inaccessible to many Indians who speak regional languages.

II. Conclusion

The imposition of English during British colonial rule profoundly altered India's intellectual, educational, and cultural landscape, leading to the systematic decline of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS). Macaulay's Minute on Education (1835) played a pivotal role in replacing indigenous education with a Eurocentric model, marginalizing disciplines such as Ayurveda, Vedic Mathematics, Astronomy, and traditional water management. The linguistic displacement of Sanskrit, Tamil, Pali, and Persian resulted in a loss of depth and nuance in India's vast repository of scientific and philosophical knowledge. Moreover, the fragmentation of holistic disciplines under Western education led to the neglect of integrated sciences like Ayurveda and Yoga. Even after independence, the colonial preference for English persisted, creating a cultural divide where English-medium education was equated with modernity and progress. This led to the continued alienation of IKS scholars and the exclusion of indigenous knowledge from mainstream academia. However, recent efforts, including the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, digital translation initiatives, and the integration of IKS into institutions like IITs, indicate a shift towards restoring India's intellectual traditions. While English played a key role in suppressing IKS, it can now be strategically used to revive and globalize India's ancient wisdom. A balanced approach—where indigenous languages regain prominence in education and research while English facilitates international collaboration—can help bridge the historical divide. By decolonizing curricula, promoting interdisciplinary research, and restoring the prestige of traditional knowledge, India can reclaim its rich intellectual heritage while remaining globally competitive. The British colonial imposition of English reshaped India's educational and knowledge systems, leading to the decline of traditional learning centers and the marginalization of indigenous languages like Sanskrit, Tamil, Pali, and Persian. Macaulay's Minute on Education (1835) reinforced Western dominance, creating a Westernized elite and fostering an inferiority complex among Indians. Even after independence, English continued to influence social mobility and intellectual hierarchies. However, English can now be used strategically to revive Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) by promoting bilingual education,

research funding, and digital translation efforts. A balanced approach integrating English for global outreach while restoring indigenous languages in academia can help India reclaim its intellectual heritage and remain globally competitive.

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