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LINGUISTIC COLONIZATION: A COMPARISON BETWEEN THE BRITISH IN INDIA AND THE SOVIETS IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Summary

This article investigates the hegemonic cultural repercussions of linguistic colonization by comparing the language policies of the British in India and the Soviets in Central Asia. It further discusses Anglicist thought and Russification as the policy tools opted by the British and the Soviets and their ramifications on the masses. The article concludes by comparing the current linguistic landscape of post-British India and post-Soviet Central Asia.

Key Words: Linguistic colonization, Sovietization, Russification, the British Empire, the Soviet Union, Anglicists, and Orientalists.

Introduction

The period between 16th C. to the 20th C. is considered as the golden era for European colonizers in terms of their rise in territorial, economic, and political influence. The British emerged as the most successful colonial power, with India being the chief colonial adventure. India was historically susceptible to foreign attacks even before the arrival of Europeans; foreign invasions and rulers were not new for the Indian subcontinent. Before the British colonization of the Indian subcontinent, the Portuguese and French also attempted to capture and rule parts of India but could not sustain against the might of the British. The British in 1757 trampled the French in the battle of Plassey, which proved to be the final blow to the European influence in India. From 1757 onwards, East India Company started consolidating political power and initiated an articulated language

policy, as a prime tool for establishing cultural hegemony in India.

The Bolsheviks took control of Russia in 1922, after the socialist revolution of 1917, and established the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on communist principles. The union was an aggregate of fifteen different states comprising of diverse populations of different ethnicities and religious beliefs. The identity of the USSR was unique; it was neither a nation-state nor a monarchy. The founding fathers denounced monarchy and colonialism and claimed that the union stood on the principles of equality and harmony. In the initial years under the leadership of Lenin, indigenization was promoted; however, after his demise, an abrupt policy change was observed. The Russian language was promoted to create a bridge between the multiethnic population and to address illiteracy. However, an attempt to Sovietize the masses through education turned into a systematic Russification of the non-Russian population.

This paper briefly discusses the background and the reasons for English centric and Russian centric language policies in India and the Soviet Union, respectively. It further looks into the historical linguistic profile of the territories under study; before the arrival of the British in India and the Soviet revolution in the Tsarist Empire. The paper also sheds light on the methodologies opted for the implementation of the linguistic policies by the British and the Soviets to achieve cultural hegemony. The final segment of the article elucidates the merits and demerits of linguistic colonization and concludes by briefly discussing the current linguistic practices of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and the Central Asian republics.

Language Policies before the Rise of British in India

The Persian language enjoyed an elite status throughout Muslim rule in India; it was not only the language of aristocracy but was also the medium of official communication. The most glorious and uninterrupted era for the Persian language was during the Mughal rule, which lasted from 1526 to 1857. Although the Mughals considerably started losing their power owing to the rise of the British East India Company, nevertheless, Persian retained its official status till the 1830s. The post 1830s linguistic policies of East India Company in their areas of influence posed a severe threat to the existence of Persian language in the official corridors of India. (King 55)

The East India Company was tolerant of the indigenous languages during its initial years of rule. However, territorial and political expansion created a need for uniform language policy in order to maintain effective communication with the indigenous population. This policy goal demanded a thorough and articulated language policy conceived through intellectual debate among the British linguistic scholars who were divided into two opposing schools of thought; Orientalists and Anglicists. Orientalists believed that Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic languages were best suited as the mode of education for the Indian populace. On the other hand, Anglicists emphasized the use of English as the medium of instruction both for education and governance. (Pennycook 71) The primary aim of introducing English to the masses was to maintain a smooth flow of information between the rulers and the ruled, a workforce proficient in the English language could serve the capitalistic motives of the company in an effective manner. The indigenous population, although allowed to speak their native language in their personal sphere, realized that the British stay in India was not transient, and therefore to win the blessings of the new rulers adopting English was a wise option. (Montaut 2)

Language Policies before the Soviet Union in the Tsarist Empire

The linguistic policies of the Tsars before the 1830s were not significantly Russo-Centric as the church and urban societies controlled the school system. In the Western part of the Russian Empire, German, Polish, and Swedish languages enjoyed a dominant role as the medium of instruction in schools, to which the Russian language could not even distantly compete. However, after the failed Polish uprising of 1830-31, Nicholas I punished the disloyal Polish elite by initiating administrative Russification of Congress Poland, the government made it mandatory for incumbents to obtain certification of Russian language proficiency to fill any administrative position. This attempt was not very successful until the reign of Alexander II, which lasted from 1855 to 1881. In the wake of the national movements and to promote his aims of modernizing and unifying Russia, Alexander II escalated the Russification process in the Empire to diminish the influence of German, Polish and Tatar languages. The systematic Russification continued until the revolution attempt of 1905, after which retrenchment in linguistic policy was observed as the Tsars initiated a policy of restraint and acceptance of the indigenous languages. (Pavlenko 338-343)

Central Asia during the Tsarist Empire was known as ‘Turkistan,’ as it mostly constituted of various Turkic ethnicities. The majority adhered to Islam as the religious belief system, which gave Arabic language prime importance to the extent that Arabic alphabets were used in the writing manuscripts of local languages. Till the nineteenth century, there were mainly two types of school systems available in Turkistan, the first was called *mekteb*, while the other one was known as *medresseh*. The education system in both the school systems had religious connotations, with the former dealing with memorization of the Quran while the latter was meant for higher education and trained the students who aspired to become *mullahs*. There was a large number of *mektebs* while there were only a few *madrassas* and were only found in large cities. (Dietrich 146)

The end of the Tsarist era after the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 was the start of a new form of Russification with different motivations. The socio-economic paradigm shift owing to the communist revolution, called for a concrete linguistic policy to keep the proletariat aligned with the newly born country under Marxist Leninist ideology. This aim could only be realized through uniform education policy, focused on forming unity and harmony among the people. However, the most significant hurdle in this process was the ethnic diversity of the masses compounded by a low literacy rate. The Soviet linguistic policy-makers had two primary aims for promoting Russian as the lingua franca; first was to create harmony among different ethnicities by removing barriers from the interethnic communication and second to use the Russian language as a mode of communication for nation-building based on communist principles. (Grenoble 35)

Levels of Implementation

English Language

To discern the reasons behind the desire to implement English as lingua franca in India, the British mentality can be best understood through the words of Lord Macaulay, “*We must at present do our best to form a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.*” (Waseem, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan 135) The British designed their linguistic policies with three main aims in mind. First was to form a representative class that

proliferated the capitalist agenda of the British in India, and governed the masses by acting as an extension of the masters. (Baldrige 15) The second was to maintain British supremacy over the people under the guise of civilizing the so-called illiterate masses. The third reason was to study and understand the diverse society, the prevalent class system, and varied cultures that existed in India. All the aims could be achieved through the creation of a linguistic bridge between the rulers and the ruled. The common denominator in all the aims mentioned above was the desire to strengthen a systematic British influence in the country, designed to fit the cultural needs of the people. (Pennycook 112)

Although after defeating the Nawab of Bengal along with his French allies in the Battle of Plassey in 1757, the British East India Company attained unchallengeable powers, instead of coercing, they took a subtle trajectory in their linguistic policies. It took decades for the British to enforce English as an official language in Bengal. They conducted extensive research before implementing English as an official language. The British were well-aware of the potential resistance they could face against their linguistic policies, and to avoid such a scenario, they tried to persuade the people to accept the linguistic changes by presenting them for various reasons. They propagated that Persian was not only a foreign language for Indians but was also primitive in terms of absorbing modern and scientific literature. Moreover, Persian lacked effectiveness in official and legal correspondence as neither the administrators and the judiciary nor the people were native Persian speakers, which could create communication barriers. On the other hand, they presented English as the language of the future and the sole representative of the modernity of science, literature, and arts. (Ramezannia 41)

The new linguistic policy created a sense of insecurity amongst the Muslims who enjoyed a dominant position in India due to their rule, which spanned hundreds of years. The Muslim populace of India held the Persian language in high esteem, not only because it served as a source of pride and as the remnant of their lost glory but also presented them with an identity that was superior to the non-Muslims of India. On the other hand, Hindus and other non-Muslim populace who had endured the Muslim influence for centuries did not care much about the replacement of Persian with English. Infact they wholeheartedly accepted the language of the new masters. (Murshid 743)

In Bengal, a faction of the press was also aligned with the British linguistic aims, one of the leading newspapers of Bengal 'Samachar Darpan' suggested that Persian was a foreign language to both the new rulers as well as the ruled. Hence, the people of Bengal should file a petition for voluntary enforcement of the English language, which was at least well known to one of the parties. Another newspaper, 'The Reformer', argued that when Muslims held power in India, they ruled out 'Sanskrit' by implementing Persian as an official language. The non-Muslim population, who already saw Persian as a bleak memory of the Muslim rule, realized that since Muslim rule was over, there was no point in letting the Persian language enjoy its official status. In addition to this, the growth of Persian language had adversely affected the growth of literature in the local languages, especially Sanskrit. As a result, in 1835, 6945 Hindu residents of Calcutta presented a memorandum to Lord William Bentinck demanding the same privileges for the English speaking populace of Bengal as was afforded to the speakers of the Persian language. (Ramezannia 49)

The British further brought in missionaries to preach Christianity in order to create religious alignment of the locals with the rulers. This cultural hegemony created through the use of soft tools led to the creation of a strata in the society, which firmly believed that adopting British customs, especially grasping a command over the English language, was the sole guarantee of growth. (Studdert-Kennedy 95) The emergence of this new elite class brought a cultural revolution in India,

considering Indian culture as primitive-*Sandhu* and replacing it with the so-called advanced English culture. This perception was an extension of the sentiments that the British held for the Indian culture which are best represented in T.B Macaulay's words, "*I have never found one who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth more than the whole native literature of India and Arabia.*" (Somay 63-68)

Russian Language

When Bolsheviks took over, they found illiteracy as the first and foremost hurdle to the Soviet ideological state-building. They introduced the social policy of *korenizatsija* (nativization and indigenization) intending to integrate the ethnic and religious minorities under the identity of socialism. As early as the 1920s, the Soviets categorized the Central Asian population into five primary groups, such as the Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik, and Uzbek, in order to standardize the respective languages of each ethnicity. (Dietrich 150)

The Soviets made education mandatory for citizens between the ages of 8 to 50, with an option to opt for Russian or a local language as the medium of instruction. In addition to this, the Soviets carried out rigorous research in order to develop the alphabets for the indigenous languages that would enable them to absorb modern knowledge. For this purpose, they replaced the Arabic alphabets with the Latin alphabets; a move made to modernize the languages in order for them to be compatible with the scientific terminologies. This change did not meet the desired goals, and later they switched from Latin to the Cyrillic alphabets. Instead of translating the terminologies into the Central Asian languages, the Russian words were integrated into the local languages replacing the Arabic and Persian words. (Dicken 9)

Although it was optional to either choose Russian or the regional languages as the medium of instruction, the Russian language was introduced as a compulsory subject in 1938. As higher education was only available in Russian, the majority accepted the language, thus unofficially making it the official language of the Soviet Union. The strategy of not offering higher education in local languages elucidates the intention of the Soviets to Russify the Central Asians instead of Sovietizing them. Nevertheless, these efforts resulted in positive outcomes in terms of improving the literacy rate in Central Asia; for example, by 1939, the literacy rate in Kazakhstan reached 83.6%, Kyrgyzstan 62.8%, Turkmenistan 77.7%, and Uzbekistan 78.7%. (Dicken 6)

Implications in India

Before the arrival of the British in India, illiteracy was rampant among the masses. Only the elite classes were entitled to higher education, which was offered in the Persian language. Persian was thus the language of the upper classes and was unfamiliar to the masses, besides it offered a limited amount of modern knowledge due to lack of scientific research publications. The claim that the introduction of the English language to the natives of India did not yield positive outcomes would be an understatement. In 1858, the dissolution of the East India Company and the transfer of power to the British Crown brought about a considerable paradigm shift in the education policies. It led to the establishment of a large number of English medium schools across British India to ensure the provision of education to the masses. English as a lingua franca further helped to bridge the linguistic gap among multiethnic populations. (Pennycook 90)

On the darker side, the influence of the English language resulted in the demise of a large number of local languages and their literature. Indians did not study English just as a language; instead, they saw it as the sole guarantor of success and growth. Elitism, which emerged in the wake of the British linguistic policies, morphed into a full-fledged class system. The absence of scientific literature in local languages deprived the non-English speakers of any kind of exposure to modern knowledge. In addition to this, change in the medium of instruction declared people educated in the Persian language illiterate. The benefits of the English language were a byproduct of the real aim of the British that was to maintain a smooth flow of information between the ruler and the subjects, recruit local administrators representing the Queen, and keep the local English speaking elites aligned with the Raj. (Waseem, *The Legacy* 136-141) The priority of the British was not to educate the natives just for the sake of educating them, a claim that is supported by the evidence that the curriculum comprised of disciplines such as English literature, philosophy, and metaphysics rather than focusing on subjects such as economics, politics, and pure sciences. In the absence of any technical education, the locals could only secure lower ranks in the administrative jobs. (Qazi 58)

Implications in Central Asia

Before the Soviet revolution, the Central Asian population was limited to religious education. Under the Tsarist rule and as late as the 19th C, the region of Turkistan was treated as primitive due to drastically low literacy rate, it was as low as 1.0% in Kazakhs, 0.6% in Kyrghyz, 0.7% in Turkmen and 1.9% in Uzbeks. (Dietrich 148) It was nearly impossible for the Soviets to fight illiteracy while developing each local language enough to absorb modern knowledge. Hence, they invested all the efforts in modernizing Russian and teaching it as a second language to the non-Russian speakers. The education in the Russian language played a vital role in dramatically improving the literacy rate in Central Asia because it created a possibility for the masses to access modern scientific knowledge and liberal arts. The Russian language served as a bridge among the people of diverse ethnicities and helped the Soviets to achieve the goal of spreading communism in every corner of the USSR. (Winner 134)

Apart from educational improvements in Central Asia, the Soviets had two primary aims to promote Russian as a language of instruction. The first one was the indoctrination of the masses on socialist ideological grounds, and the second was to Russify the Muslim population in order to keep it away from the West and Turkey. The second aim was achieved through the introduction of Cyrillic alphabets to systematically keep the youth away from the literature published in Arabic and Latin alphabets and to create a disconnect with their ancestors' history. The Soviet Russification was an extension of the Tsarist prejudice in favor of the Russian language. Despite propagating equality and indigenization, the Soviets contradicted themselves by turning Russian into the language representative of the USSR. The compulsory education of Russian language as a second language, the availability of advanced research sources only in Russian, and post-World War-II concentration of Slav ethnicity in Central Asia turned Russian into a de facto official language of the region. (Ismailova 26-28)

Post-British India Pakistan and Bangladesh Today

In the case of Pakistan, Urdu held a predominantly influential status during the independence movement as it was presented as the language of Indian Muslims. After the independence, the East

and West Pakistan were not just geographically distant but also had significant differences in their ethnic population. The Western half was an agglomerate of multiethnic people with a large number of languages, while the Eastern half primarily comprised of the Bengali ethnic group, which was quite cognizant of its ethnicity and culture. West Pakistan, comparatively more politically powerful than its Eastern counterpart, imposed Urdu as the national language for the entire country and ignored the wishes of the East Pakistani population. As the debate whether to declare Urdu or Bengali as the official language remained contested by the two halves, English provisionally stood in as the official language and Urdu as the national language of the country. English was to enjoy the status of the official language only till the Urdu and Bengali issues were resolved. However, the conflict remained unresolved until the independence of East Pakistan to become Bangladesh in 1971. The English language still enjoys its official status and blatantly challenges the populist slogans of the independence movement, which presented Urdu as the language of the Indian Muslims. *“English in Pakistan is more the language of Macaulay than of Shakespeare.”* (Haque 8)

India took a different ideological trajectory after independence. The newly born country wanted to erase the memory of its British colonizer, and even considered adopting the Soviet language policy, an idea which was rejected in the end. Owing to its ethnic diversity and in the absence of a common regional language that could serve as lingua franca, India adopted English as its official language. In the end, the shadow of the British and their language was too strong to be discarded. The case of Bangladesh is comparatively different, as a nation-state, the constitution identified Bangla as its official language. Although Bangla holds an official status, English still enjoys the preferred status as a medium of instruction in higher education. (Basu 143)

Post-Soviet Central Asian Republics Today

After the dissolution of the USSR, the roots of the Russian language and culture were so deeply entrenched that the most crucial challenge for the Central Asian republics was to create a unique national identity based on their local languages and indigenous cultures. The supremacy of the Russian language had restrained the advancement of the local languages, hence abruptly switching to indigenous languages could prove counterproductive. Additionally, there was a considerable Russian population living in Central Asia, and enforcing local languages on them was similar to making them a foreigner in their own country. Nevertheless, all Central Asian countries initiated legislation to enforce local linguistic policies. Turkmenistan adopted the Latin alphabets and declared Turkmen as its official language in 1993 while keeping Russian as a language of instruction in the school system till 2002. Uzbekistan replaced the Cyrillic alphabets with Latin first in 1993 and later in 1995 intending to discourage the use of the Russian language. Kazakhstan declared Kazakh as the state language in 1995 but showed a more tolerant behavior by keeping the Cyrillic alphabets and giving its citizens a grace period of fifteen years in which to learn the Kazakh language before making it the official language. To date, Russian is still widely used in Kazakhstan for interethnic communications. Tajikistan took this even a step further, and although Tajik was proclaimed as the official language of the county in 1994 but as a state policy bilingualism is encouraged considering the multiethnic population of the country. Kyrgyzstan is the only country from the Central Asian republics that still recognizes Russian and Kyrgyz both as to its official languages. (Dietrich, Language Policy 1-37)

Conclusion

The British claimed to civilize their colonies by educating the natives in modern sciences and arts, but this claim disguised their real intent, which was to create a local subclass that would protect their interests. The debate between the Orientalists and Anglicists was meant to find the most appropriate way to subdue, shape, and control the Indian subjects. Although, after 1858, a considerable change in educational policy was seen; however, the real intent was never meant for the betterment of the people, and like before, it too had a subterfuge aim and that was to create a submissive workforce. The after-effects of the British linguistic policies are still evident in today's India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. The 190 years long supremacy of English language pushed local languages and literature in depravity and primitivity so much so that English is still the official language and representative of the elite in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Proficiency in the English language leads to a substantial brain-drain of fertile minds to the developed countries in the form of the readymade workforce.

On the other hand, the Soviets, despite believing in socialistic equality and claiming to protect the indigenous cultures and languages, took the path of Russification in the guise of Sovietization. Undoubtedly the literacy rate improved dramatically in Central Asia but at the cost of local languages, which created a disconnect of the youth from their ancient history and religious beliefs. The roots of the Russian language were so deep in Central Asia that even after independence, it took decades to develop the local languages that could be used in an official capacity. The newly born Central Asian countries right after independence initiated a nation-building process by glorifying local heroes and local historical events in order to revive their culture that was buried in the dust of Russification and Sovietization.

This article elucidates the similarities and differences between the linguistic policies adopted by the British in India and the Soviets in Central Asia. Evidently, the most significant similarity of the linguistic aims of both the British and the Soviets is that it is politically motivated. But the deviation lies in the subtle differences in the motivations themselves. Where the British linguistic colonization had an overarching intention of subjugating the native population but guised itself as a benevolent force that civilized the barbarian. The Soviets linguistic colonization intended to create a collective socialistic identity of the people, which turned into a systematic Russification of the Central Asian republics. This elusive difference in the motivation of the linguistic colonization of both Empires has manifested itself very differently in the current scenarios of both areas under study. While we see Russian as a unifier of multiple ethnicities in the Central Asian republics, we notice the role of English in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh as a divider of people into classes with the English speakers in these countries enact the role of the ruler while the non-English speakers are relegated to the role of the ruled.

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