

# Democratising English in India

*“We came to the conclusion that an understanding of, and a command over the English language, is perhaps the most important determinant of access to higher education, employment possibilities and social opportunities.”*

*Sam Pitroda, Chairman, The National Knowledge Commission, writes to the PM*

## Introduction

This article attempts to look at the various ways in which the English Language becomes an indicator for class privilege, and how this is accentuated by the spread of Information and Communication Technologies, and the growing size of the Services Industry. First, that the recent rise of the services sector has helped a middle class minority, characterised by education in the better schools and colleges, educated parents, and the acquisition of English Language skills. This same class is at a position now to most benefit from the fruits of the liberalised economy, and the ICT revolution. The origin of the current state of affairs in the unfair residency of employable skills with a minority, lies in the education delivery system devised to define a ‘unity in diversity’, where most of the disadvantaged people bear the burden/honour of local culture, while the minority enjoys the fruits of the language and culture of world trade.

Due to the importance of English as an international language, and due to the advantages offered to the people who were comfortable in it, English continued to be used as an official language in independent India. The status of Hindi as a national language is not without its complications. People whose mother tongue is not Hindi, could justify a lot of resentment upon choosing Hindi as the national language, on grounds of discrimination. However, English continues to be the dominant language of instruction at the college and university level. The importance of English rises in direct proportion to the level

of education. Pupils who are adept at the mother tongue and not in English, find themselves at a comparative disadvantage as far as higher education is concerned. At the same time, since English is not the social language for most pupils, the mother tongue is the language for most effective learning.

The recognition of English as a language of power and prestige has been made from the beginning of the twentieth century. Critical attention is warranted to the equitable acquisition of English Language Skills, which can be seen as a tool for empowerment, both economic and social, in modern India. The importance of English is only going to grow in the coming times. And this is not going to be the

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English of the Elite, the Queen’s English, but its going to be a new Global English, influenced by English, in post-colonial countries like India.

## ICTs, employment, and English

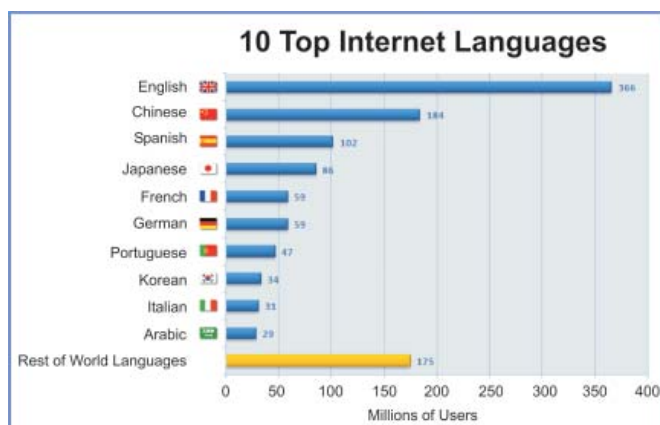
Scholars of all dispositions would agree that new Information and Communication Technologies are increasingly crucial to economic and social well-being, and, therefore, every individual irrespective of nationality and class, is entitled to free access.

Most initiatives to correct the digital divide focus on the notion of access alone without spelling out the miracle of access should be able to accomplish. Also, despite the new rise of the services industry, employment in India has shown a downward trend, considering that the growth in employment can be attributed to the rise in self-employment due to distress conditions in regular employment. So the high paying jobs being generated are cornered by a buoyant middle class minority, standing tall on the benefits of good education and socio-economic advantages. It is important that the fruits of employment generation in this sector are made available to a larger section of the population and therefore, there is a need to impart a special skill status to English.

English is not only important to partake in the employment being generated currently, but it also grows in importance as trade with English speaking countries becomes even more entrenched. The new jobs created by the IT and the ITeS in-

dustury have largely been cornered by an elite middle class which is comfortable with English. There is a school of thought which believes and is fighting for a more multi-lingual Internet. This can only be achieved if most content on the Internet is translated, and more importantly translatable, and even more importantly this process should be able to arrest the growing importance of English as the global language. Those who are bilinguals have a distinct advantage and most research shows that bilinguals tend to use English rather than the mother tongue, as far as the Internet is concerned. So while the world awaits the multi-lingual Internet, English proficiency will continue to dominate for a long time to come.

Although, the following graph shows the consistent decline in number of web-pages in English, as well as users whose first language is English, a large part of this decline can be claimed by the Chinese language, and marginal increase in shares of German, Spanish, Japanese, and French.



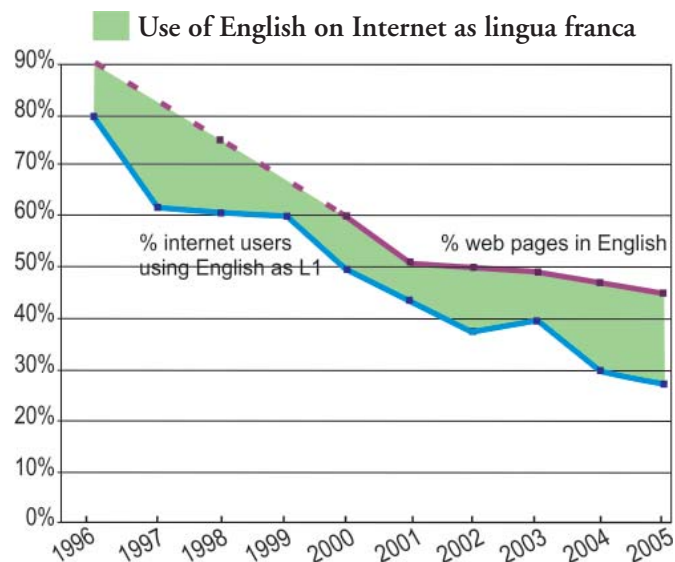
Source: [www.internetworldstats.com](http://www.internetworldstats.com)

However this decline should not cloud out the fact that in most countries knowledge of English will continue to be the key skill, and it will retain its position as the language of international communication. Having said this, the attempts at localisation should continue with even greater vigour, but the efforts to impart English Language skills should also intensify, as English is unlikely to lose its position as the language of the elite, unless it is democratised.

### Vernacular chauvinism

Most Indian states need to immediately get rid of sterile debates about safeguarding the mother tongue, and pay more attention to the language of power. In any case the vernaculars in India are not natural languages as opposed to a language like English. The vernaculars seem to be the foremost concern of politicians who want to rake up issues of cultural identity, in a typical Indian-Western dualism.

Although it can be argued that English is as much a pan-Asian language as any other, vernacular chauvinism of this sort has resulted in keeping a large section of the population, usually poor, from acquiring skills in English, which keeps them out of the elite circles, and also makes higher education less accessible and profitable.



Source: Declining use of English on the Internet, based on data from the Latin American NGO Funredes

In this manner the exclusion of a large section of the population from the knowledge and use of English is a major parameter in defining the power hierarchies in Indian society. Vernacular chauvinism is a major roadblock in making sure that the most needful get access to and education in English. Although there are genuine concerns about the medium of instruction, a bilingual approach to teaching has become indispensable in the current scenario. There is need for a national policy on English education in the country. This is in no way a suggestion to dispense with mother tongue instruction, but to enhance the facilitation of English Language Learning to all, and not to a cultural and economic elite.

### Democratising English

English as said earlier, is a clear class marker, and proficiency in the language can be directly related to economic health of the family. Throughout the country though, people would agree that knowledge of the language is a force for upward social mobility.

There is sufficient research to show that the middle-class and even the lower-income households mark a big part of their earnings on getting their children educated in English Medium Schools, which throughout the country are run on illicit donations. It is imperative that the government satisfy the demand for English Language skills irrespective of the economic condition of the students and ensures that English does not remain the resident skill of the elite, while the economically backward majority has to bear the responsibility of the mother tongue. ■

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