
Reviewed by Mukti Sanyal

This edited volume of scholarship presented at two different seminars at the University of Hyderabad will be of interest to all those who wish to understand the complex trajectories that multilingualism has had in our country. Especially for those of us who have invested our time and effort in learning and teaching English and consequently suffer from pangs of guilt of having been somewhat anti-national and hindered the growth of the bhashas, this volume is a must read!!

Very importantly, the well-argued articles go into social and political histories of several regions and communities elaborately substantiating the complex nature of coexistence, cohabitation that languages and cultures have had through the ages in this large subcontinent. This is especially important when often very simplistic opinions are strongly stated as the truth. As the editors explain, several languages had knowledge systems in India before the English came: Arabic, Persian, Urdu and Sanskrit among others. But their reach was confined to specific domains of use, while English was dispersed through a centralized system of education and administration that made its impact both overwhelming, rapid and complex.

Shreesh Chaudhury argues that India had a long and rich tradition of learning foreign languages which was “mostly bilingual, teacher-centred, memory-based rather than script-based (p. 148)”. Another myth that Chaudhury explodes is that it was not Macaulay’s Minutes but the decision of using English as the sole language of the Court in 1783 that spurred the popularity of English among Indians. For nearly three decades, the East India Company had tried to administer justice through Sanskrit and Persian interpreters. In fact, several essays in this volume strongly refute the by now popular—Gauri Viswananthan et al., anti-
colonial discourse of English literature being brought in to “colonize our minds”.

Alok Mukherjee calls this view “one dimensional”. His incisive argument is that English in India was not a matter of colonial imposition alone, nor a matter of English relegating the regional languages. Through a meticulous study of documents, institutions and personalities, he demonstrates that there were many players with diverse agendas and contestations that we find in such complex issues even today.

Divided into three parts, the volume begins with essays on the “English Encounter”, moves on to its impact on the “Vernaculars” and ends with those on “Textbooks and English Teaching”.

Part two of the volume presents revealing studies on the different ways in which the *bhashas* impacted each other and English in India. Cumulatively, the essays point to the multi-pronged “war of positioning” that was taking place in the nineteenth century, not necessarily between English versus the vernaculars, but the dialogue between Indian languages, and at times varieties of same language, “interlocked in a complex network of negotiation and competition”.

For instance, in tracing the transformation of Malayalam into a modern language, E.V. Ramakrishnan goes back to the literary world of India during the thirteenth to the eighteenth century that was marked by a deep multilingualism. Muslim, Hindu and Jaina intellectuals produced works of tremendous interest that were circulated around India, through the Persianate and Arabic worlds, and also between India and Europe. He argues that Malayalam’s encounter with European languages and the emergence of “missionary Malayalam” rooted in the experience of the community ended the hegemonic hold of the Sanskrit-centred kavya tradition.

There are essays on developments in Hindi, Urdu, Odia, Bengali, Gujarati, and interestingly, Marathi—in Hyderabad during the Nizam’s rule. What comes out loud and clear through many of these essays that speak about different linguistic groups and communities, is the decisive roles that individuals have played in steering the fate of a language. Besides, Lord Bentink, Macaulay, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Lord Curzon, Maulvi Abdul Haq, Prem Chand, Tagore who are fairly well-known, there are a host of others we get to learn about. Given my penchant for activism, I would specially recommend readers to N. Venugopal
Rao’s “Revisiting the ‘Modern’ Telugu Debate A Century Later”. It is a graphically moving account of how the convictions, actions, strategies of a single votary of modern spoken Telugu—Gurajada Appa Rao and his ‘Minute of Dissent’ took one hundred years to become the voice of the popular demand. It is a heartening narrative of how logicality, conviction, sincere efforts and perseverance pay!!! It is an essay I have returned to several times.

Similarly, Probal Dasgupta traces the role of Haraprasad Shastri who had been mentored by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and commended the efforts of Rabindranath Tagore to modernize Bangla which was being vehemently opposed by the traditionalist. Linguists theorize the dichotomy of an archaic written standard and a popular spoken variant as diglossia. What emerges forcefully is the role that groups of opinion makers in the public space had in the process.

Part three is of special interest to understanding the evolution of language pedagogy in India. The processes of anglicization, sanskritization and vernacularization are too intricate to go into a short book review. It needs serious perusal. I will end with Shreesh Chaudhury’s observation that the kinds of methods and books that were used ensured that in India “English did not end as a pidgin like in African and many Pacific islands” (p. 162).

Mukti Sanyal retired as Officiating Principal, Bharati College, University of Delhi. She supports social work and research in language teaching.
muktisanyal@gmail.com


Reviewed by Nupur Mittal

The first quarter of 2020 was marred by the outbreak of Coronavirus which rapidly metastasized into a global pandemic causing widespread disruption across all sectors, especially in the field of higher education. Public health mandates forced face-to-face (f2f) classes and non-