The (Post-)Colonial Careers of English in India

(c. 1800-2000)

Prof. Dr. H. FISCHER-TINÉ

ETH Zürich

Institute of History

OVERVIEW

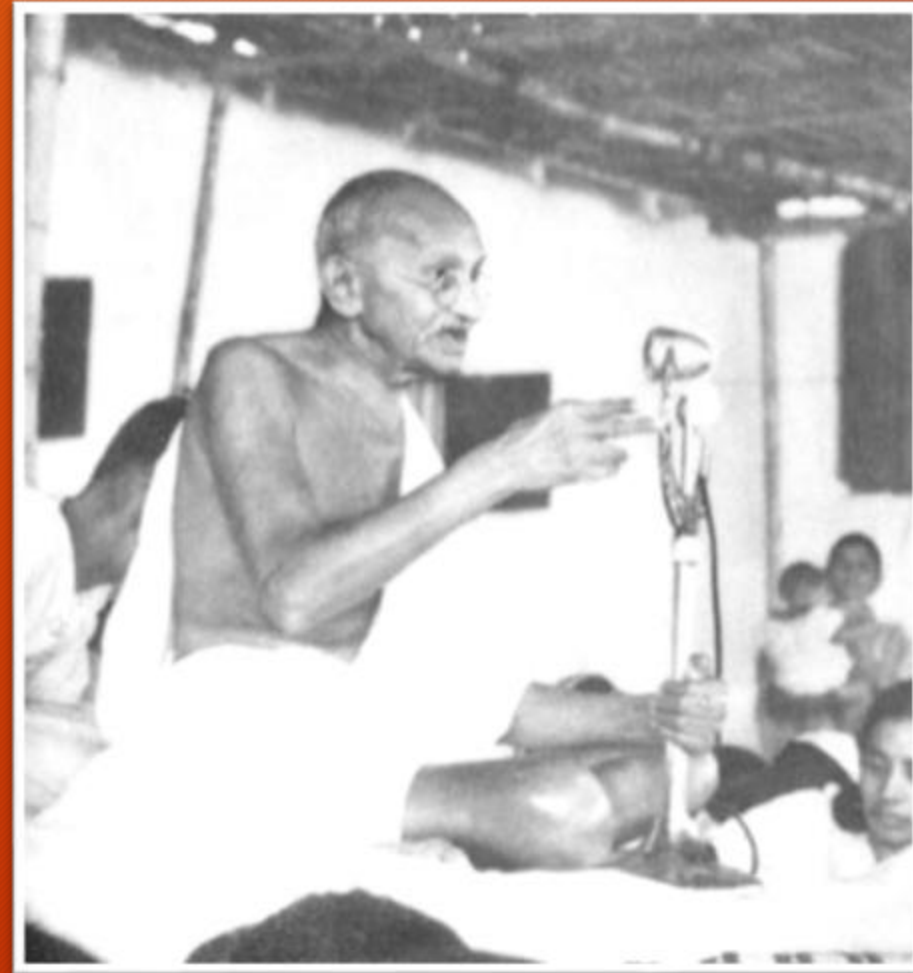The (Post-)Colonial Careers of English in India, 1800-2000

1. Introduction

2. India's complex linguistic landscape

3. Language of commerce to language of command: The shifting role of English under British colonial rule (1800-1900)

4. Anti-colonial nationalism and English: Competing visions of Indian Identity (1900-1950)

5. Language conflict and cultural efflorescence: English in independent India (1950-2000)

6. Concluding Observations

A foreign Medium

«Among the many evils of foreign rule this blighting imposition of a foreign medium upon the youth of the country will be counted by history as one of the greatest. It has sapped the energy of the nation, it has shortened the lives of the pupils, it has estranged them from the masses, it has made education unnecessarily expensive.»

M.K. Gandhi, 'The Curse of Foreign Medium', *Young India*, 5 July 1928


Anglophobe? — M.K. Gandhi (1869-1949)

A foreign Medium?

«Along with religion, the other great divider in the chawls was language. Hindus spoke Marathi, Catholics English. […] English was the thorn in the side of the Hindus. Its absence was their cross, their humiliation and the source of their life-long inferiority and inadequacy. It was a severely debilitating, if not fatal, lack that was not acknowledged or articulated. It was the great leveller. It gave caste Hindus a taste of their own medicine. It made them feel like untouchables. […] Ask any of the Hindus from the CWD chawls in an unguarded moment and he'll tell you that he would give his right hand to be able to speak like the Christians from the top floor.»
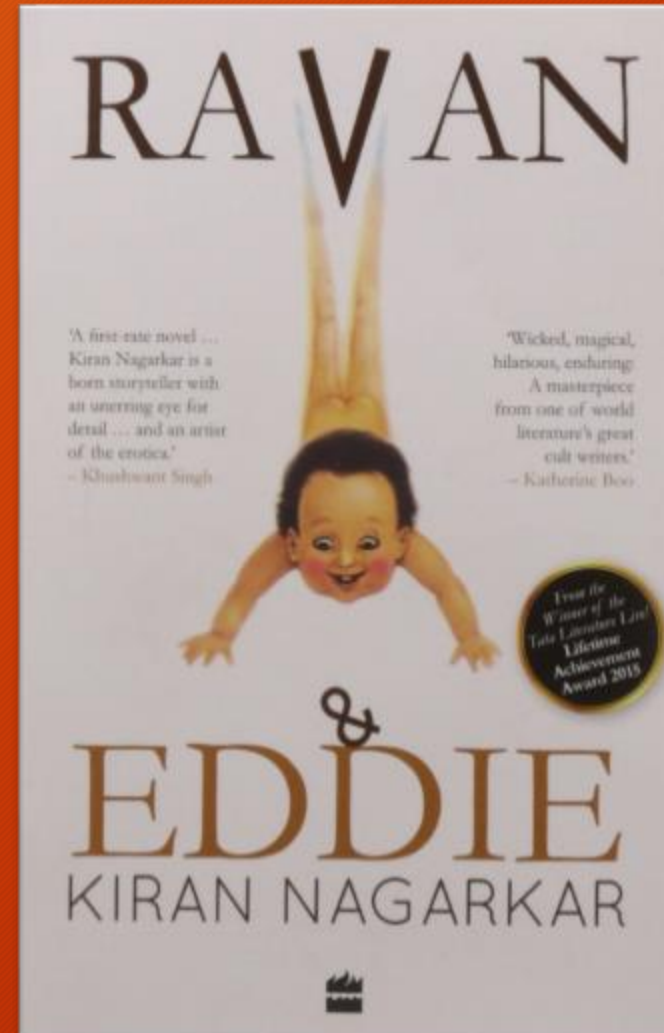
Kiran Nagarkar (*1942) and his bestseller *Ravan and Eddie* (1994)

A foreign Medium?

«Because there are only two kinds of people in the world. Those who have English and those who don't. Those who have English are the haves and those who don't are the have nots.
How could you possibly grasp the meaning and value of English before you had a place reserved for you in an English medium school? English is a *mantra*, a *maha-mantra*. It is an 'open sesame' that doesn't open mere doors, it opens up new worlds and allows you to cross from one universe to another»

K. Nagarkar, *Ravan and Eddie*, New Delhi 1995, p. 179 f.

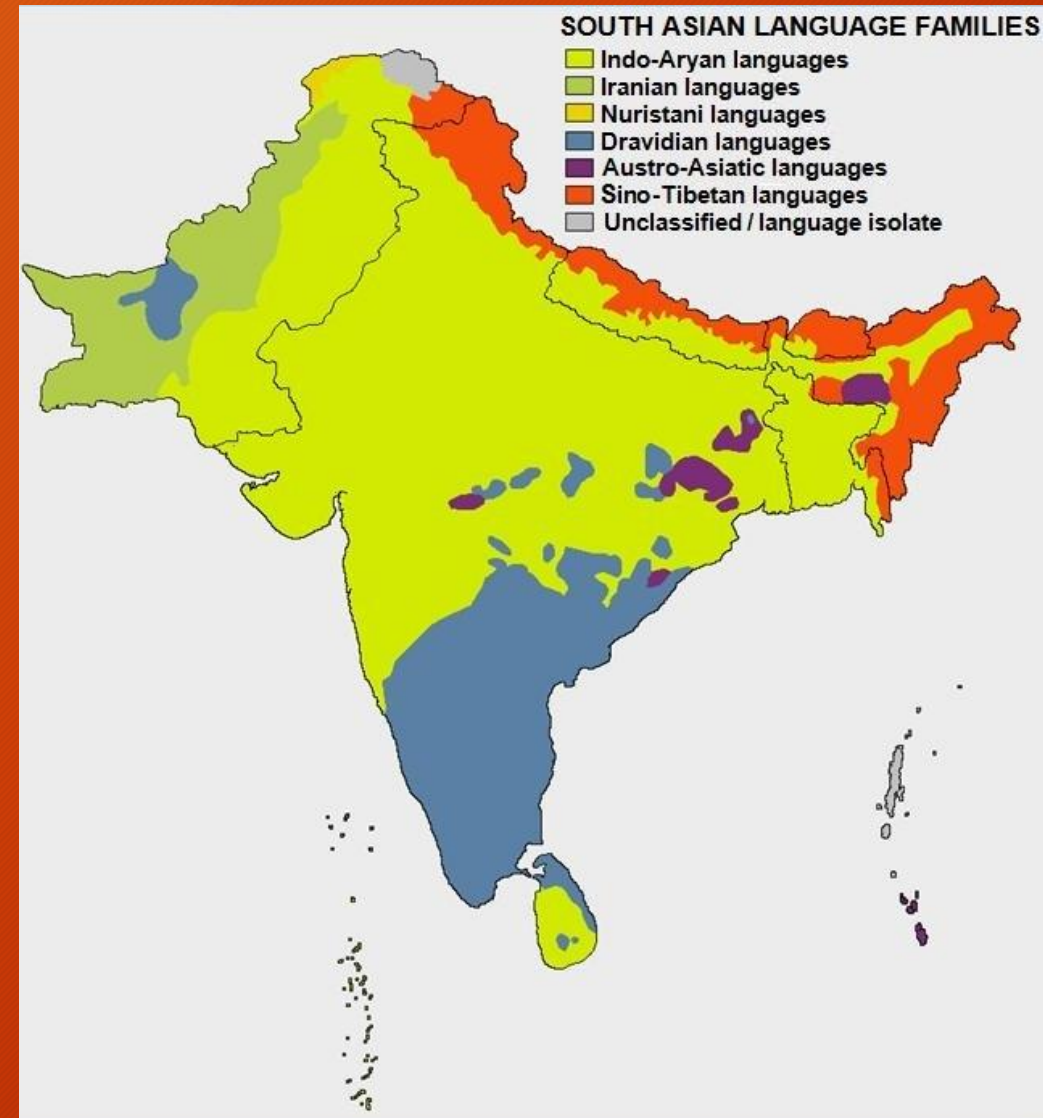

A Bombay *chawl*: the multilingual home of Ravan and Eddie

2. India's complex linguistic Landscape

The (Post-)Colonial Careers of English in India, 1800-2000

India's Languages and Lingu-istic Families

- The subcontinent is home of countless languages and dialects

- In 2001 there were **29 languages** with more than **1 mio speakers**

- There are **five major language families** represented

- Most important: **Indo-European** (74%) and **Dravidian** (24 %) languages

  Deep linguistic/cultural divide

The (Post-)Colonial Careers of English in India, 1800-2000

SOUTH ASIAN LANGUAGE FAMILIES
- Indo-Aryan languages
- Iranian languages
- Nuristani languages
- Dravidian languages
- Austro-Asiatic languages
- Sino-Tibetan languages
- Unclassified / language isolate

Colonial Knowledge of India's Linguistic Landscape

- The Irish scholar ABRAHAM GRIERSON conducts a long-term **Linguistic Survey of India** (1898 -1903)

- He identifies 179 languages, 544 dialects and several dozens scripts

- Results are published in 19 volumes by 1928

➤ **Linguistic data widely available for political mobilisation**
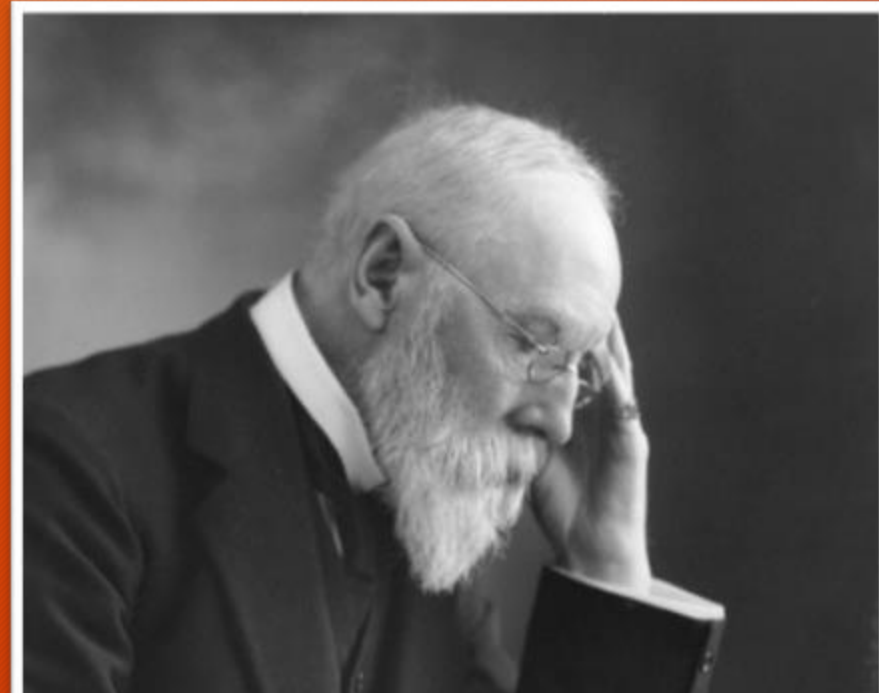
The (Post-)Colonial Careers of English in India, 1800-2000

India's Languages and religious Identity

- In the process of political mobilisation and community building (1870-1940) language issues become highly contested

- Linguistic differences start reinforcing religio-cultural differences and communitarian sub-nationalism

The (Post-)Colonial Careers of English in India, 1800-2000

3. Language of Commerce to Language of Command

The (Post-)Colonial Careers of English in India, 1800-2000

The shifting role of English under British colonial rule (1800-1900)

The slow Arrival of English in India

- English **East India Company** (EIC) starts ist activities on the sub-continent in early 17th century.

- From 1720 onwards it becomes a **major economic player** and from the 1740s a military force to reckon with

- In the 1760s it becomes one of the **contender**s of power in a disintegrating of the Mughal Empire

- By 1820 Military and political hegemony is a fact – nonetheless, EIC still predominatly commercial interests

The (Post-)Colonial Careers of English in India, 1800-2000
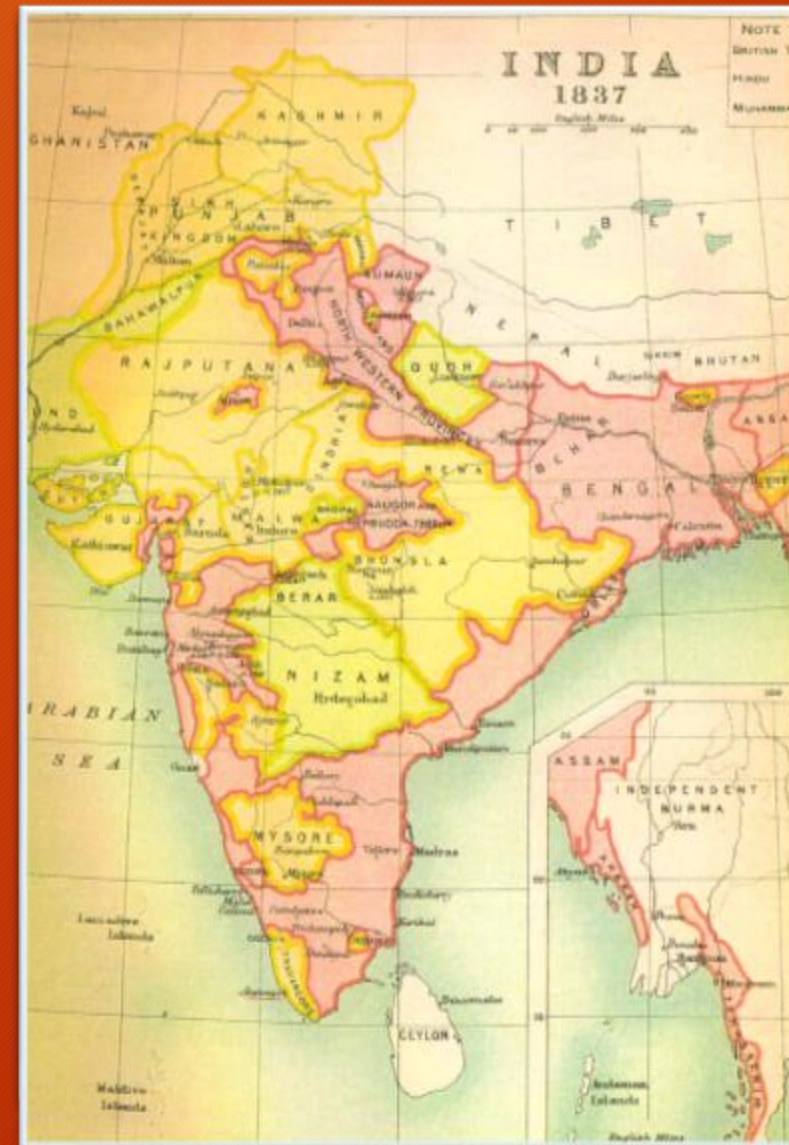
The Beginnings of EIC rule (1765-1837)

The slow Arrival of English in India

- From the outset, EIC interacts with (and depends on) local sepoys, traders, merchants and bankers → need to acquire local languages

- Initially, EIC servants take private lessons with local pundits or hire *dubashes* (interpreters)

- After taking over political responsibility in 1765, local fiscal & legal institutions are largely untouched → Persian remains the language of administration and jurisdiction until 1837
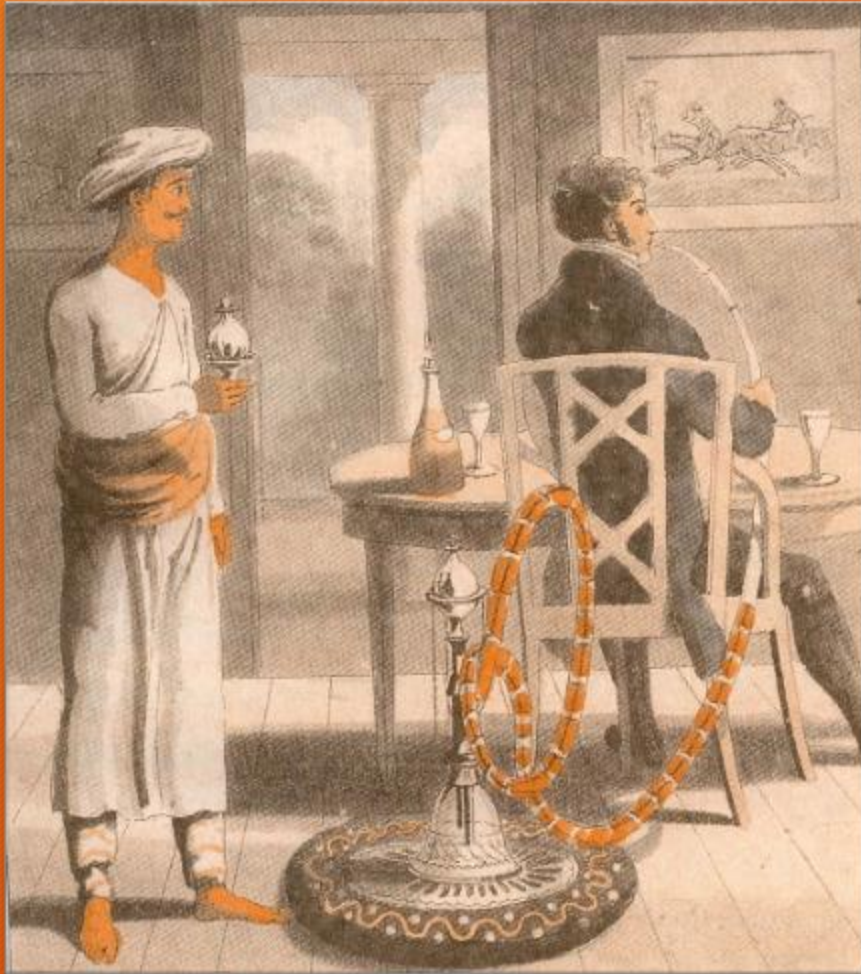
Doing Business - learning languages

The slow Arrival of English in India

The (Post-)Colonial Careers of English in India, 1800-2000

Linguistic and intercultural competence: EIC servants around 1800

The slow Arrival of English in India

- To professionalize training in local languages (Persian, Arabic, Sanskrit, Hindustani, Bangla & Marathi) Ft. William College is established in Calcutta in 1800

- In the orientalist spirit of the day, local educational institutions (e.g. Calcutta Madrassah, Sanskrit College) are sponsored

- Nonetheless, in the 1810s an 1820 a growing number of young locals learn English to better the chances in the business world meanwhile dominated by the British (→ go-betweens & clerks)

Strategic multilingualism

The (Post-)Colonial Careers of English in India, 1800-2000

Centre of Oriental learning: The EIC's Fort William College (est.1800)

The Turn towards 'Anglicism'

The (Post-)Colonial
Careers of English
in India, 1800-2000

- The first major intervention in favour of India's anglicisation stems from Charles Grant, EIC collector turned Evangelical

„The true cure of darkness is the introduction of light. The Hindoos err because they are ignorant; and their errors never have been laid fairly before them. The communication of our light and knowledge to them would be the best remedy for their disorders... it is perfectly in our power to impart to the Hindoo our language, afterwards throgh that medium make them acquainted with the simple elements of our arts, philosophy and religion."

C. Grant, *State of Society among the Asiatic Subjects of Britain*, 1792

OBSERVATIONS

On the State of Society among the *Asiatic* Subjects of *Great Britain*, particularly with respect to Morals; and on the means of improving it.—Written chiefly in the Year 1792.

Dissenting voice: Clapham sect Member Charles Grant

The Turn towards 'Anglicism'

▪ In Delhi, Bombay and Calcutta a culture of exchange and mutual translation and cross-fertilization crystallizes around higher educational institutions

• In particular the English-language schools are enthusiastically received by some Indian intellectuals

➜ „Bengal Renaissance" & „Delhi Renaissance"

„A Sangscrit school under Hindoo pandits… can only be expected to load the minds of pupils with grammatical niceties of little or no practical use to society. … [it ought to] promote a more liberal and enlightened system of instruction, embracing mathematics, natural philosophy… with other useful sciences ."

Rammohan Roy, *Letter to Lord Amherst*, 1823
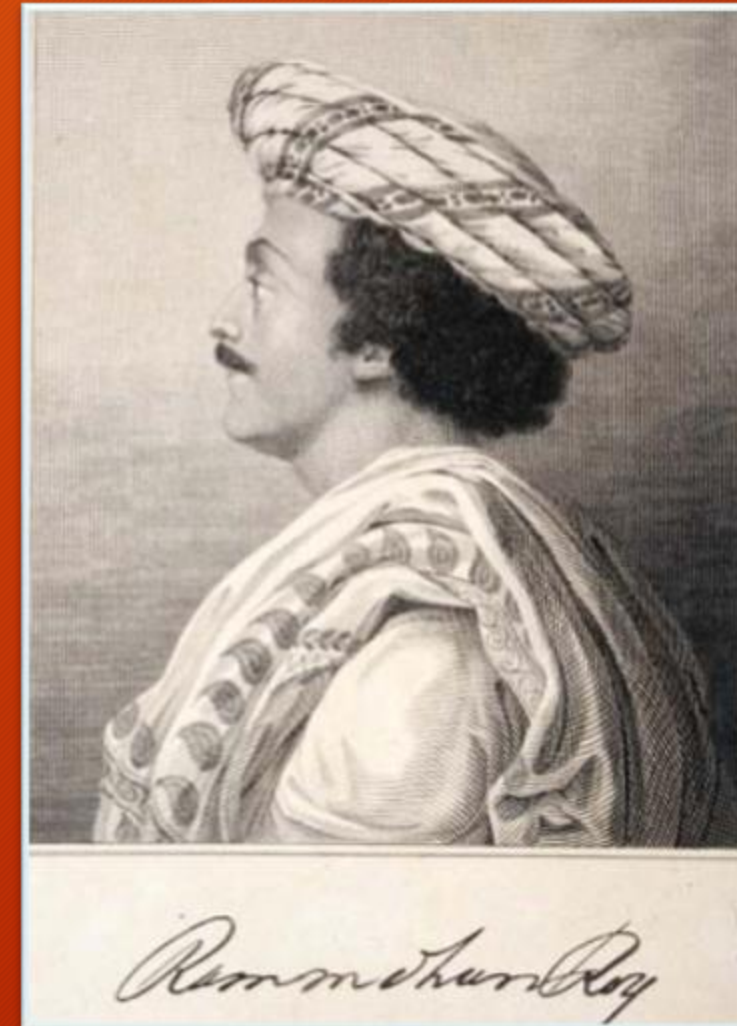
Indian champion of anglicisation:
Raja Rammohan Roy (1772-1833)

The Turn towards 'Anglicism'

- 1835 is the Govt. of India is led by young reformers influenced by the teachings of Utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham → reformist zeal

- Against veneration of 'eastern cultures' of their orientalist compatriotes they advocate a transfer of western knowledge and values as only means to 'uplift' a benighted country

- In his famous 'Minute on Education' (1835) T.B. Macaulay discredits all branches of 'native' knowledge and pleads for the education of a thin class of go-betweens that must be completely anglicised

➡ **Restructuring of the education system**

The (Post-)Colonial Careers of English in India, 1800-2000
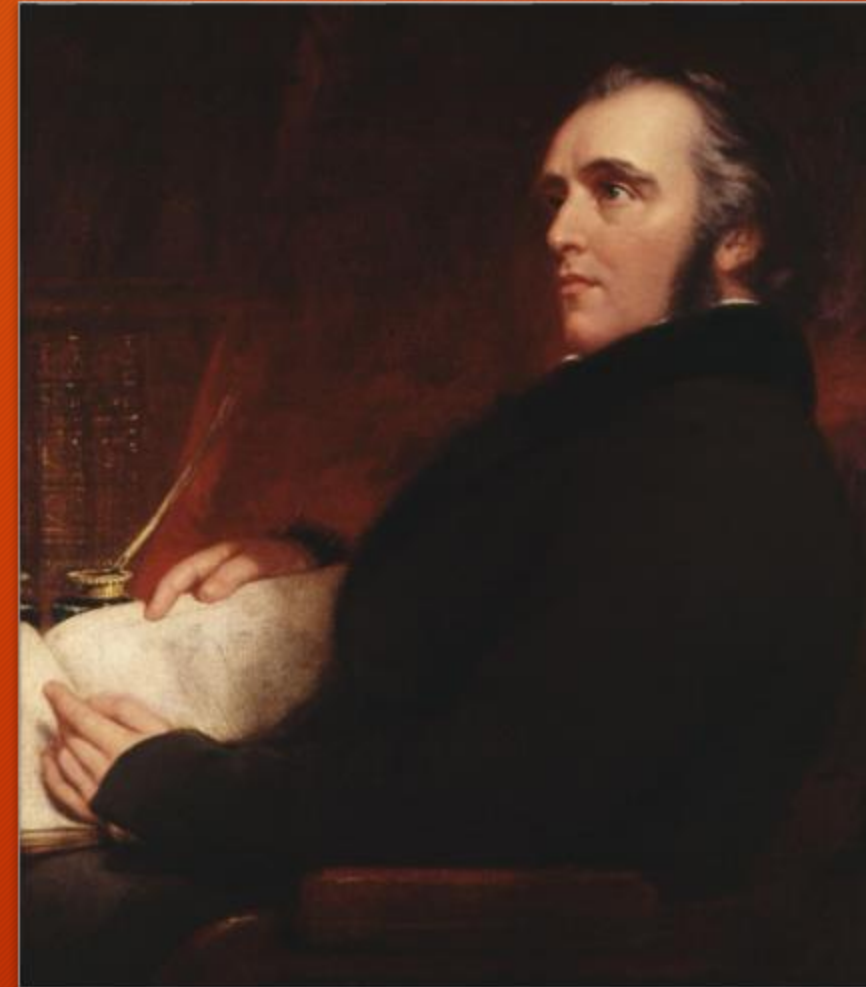
Historian, imperial administrator and Utilitarian reformer
Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859)

The Turn towards 'Anglicism'

The (Post-)Colonial
Careers of English
in India, 1800-2000
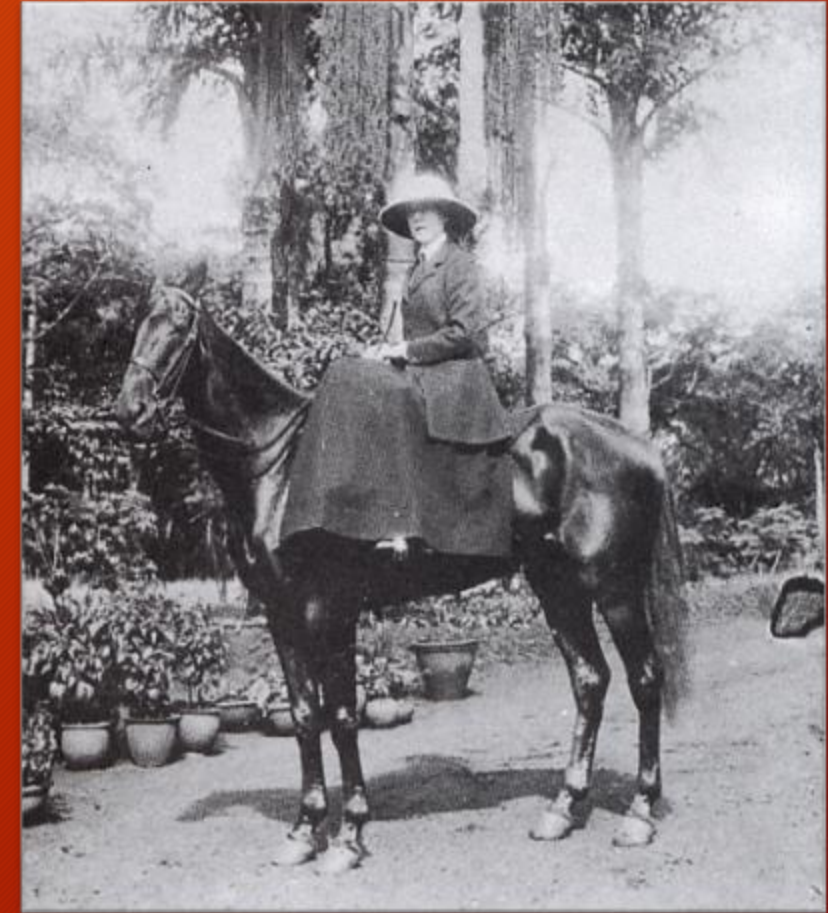
Towards a 'rule of difference': the anglicisation of administrative practice

The Turn towards 'Anglicism'

The (Post-)Colonial Careers of English in India, 1800-2000

1835 'Oriental education' no longer funded

1837 Abolition of Persian as the official and court language

1854 Wood's Education Despatch: Introduction of "grants-in-aid" for schools that accept the Govt. curriculum

1857 Establishment of the first three universities in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras

BUT: until the end of the British Rule, only a very thin (Hindu-) elite is affected by the policy of anglicization (< 1%)

Bombay University in the building   (1863)

The Turn towards 'Anglicism'

The (Post-)Colonial Careers of English in India, 1800-2000

De-Orientalization: the architecture of Calcutta Medical College does not borrow from Indian but Greek models (1870)

4. Anti-colonial Nationalism and Language

The (Post-)Colonial Careers of English in India, 1800-2000

Competing visions of Indian Identity (1900-1950)

English Education at Work

The (Post-)Colonial Careers of English in India, 1800-2000

- Simple English language schools train clerks for service in postal offices railways etc.

- Higher educational institutions (→ often sponsored by local entrepreneurs) become hubs of upward social mobility and career making → Legal professions, journalism, academia etc.

- Curricula are heavily humanities-oriented: English literature and classics as 'civilizing instruments'

An emerging 'hybrid elite': teachers and students at Elphinstone High School (Bombay, 1873)
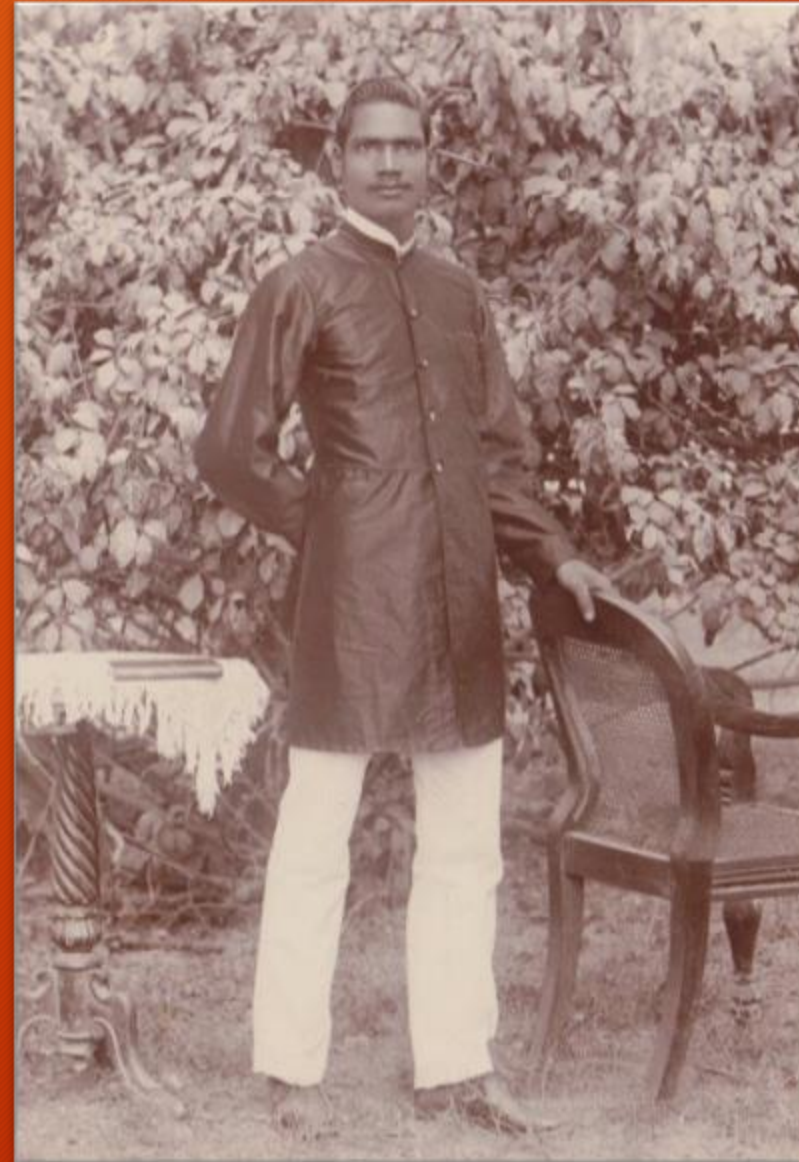
English Education at Work

- Lack of adaptation and alleged 'bookish-ness' of English education soon provoke criticism from various sides → alienation of new elites from indigeous life-world

«Those who have profited from the educational opportunities do not find much scope for their new attainments. ... the English education they have received finds little, if any, use . There is thus a want of sympathy between them and their countrymen. There is also little sympathy between them and the foreign rulers of the country, because ethey feel that they have been raised out of one class of society without having a recognized place on any other class»

William Adam, *Report on the State of Education in Bengal*, Calcutta: G.H. Huttmann, 1835, p. 191.

The (Post-)Colonial Careers of English in India, 1800-2000

Arrogant and culturally uprooted?
A college student in Bareilly, (*c.* 1880)

English Education at Work

The (Post-)Colonial Careers of English in India, 1800-2000

«Talking shop for frustrated job hunters»? The first session of the Indian National Congress in Bombay (1885)

Mimic men? – The *Babu*-Phenomenon

- Hybrid-elites have been observed with distrust by the British from the 1860s onwards (→ competition for top jobs)

- Development of a specific genre of jokes, satire and songs targeted at the Babu, i. e. the 'queer' product of English education

- Due to growing anti-British sentiment and economic competition Babus are also increasingly targeted by nationalists and secondary 'native' elites

The (Post-)Colonial Careers of English in India, 1800-2000

Young middle class couple in Calcutta (*c.* 1925)

Mimic men? – The *Babu*-Phenomenon

The (Post-)Colonial Careers of English in India, 1800-2000

Popular themes of Babu Satire: The Babu as Drunkard and sweating pseudo-Sahib (*c.* 1890 / 1915)

Mimic men? – The *Babu*-Phenomenon

The (Post-)Colonial Careers of English in India, 1800-2000

Baboo-English

"Wherefore your honour's unfortunate petitioner falls upon his family's bended knees and implores to you of this merciful consideration to your damnable miserable servant. My family is consisting of five female women and three masculine, the last of which are still taking milk from mother's chest and are damnably noiseful through pulmonary catastrophe in their interior abdomen. Your humble petitioner has always been pious and dutiful to his numerous family, the last of whom is still milking parental mother."

Arnold Wright, *Baboo English 'Tis Writ': Being Curiosities of Indian Journalism,* London 1891), p. 81.

Typical British Babu-Cartoon (*c*. 1910)

Mimic women? – Variations on the *Babu*-theme

The (Post-)Colonial Careers of English in India, 1800-2000


Students of a convent school in Bombay (*c.* 1875) and Hindi-filmstar Sulochna as 'overeducated woman' in *Indira, M.A.* (1934)

Anti-colonial Politics and the Quest for a national Language

The (Post-)Colonial Careers of English in India, 1800-2000

- When the quest for a national language begins, in the 1890s, English is an indispensable *lingua franca* of the political class but does not seem to be a neutral alternative (→ problem of vertical solidarity)

- Most likely contender is *Hindustani*, understood throughout Northern and central India

- Divide is created between speakers of Dravidian languages and the proponents of the Indo-European Hindi/Hindustani → feminisation and deification of languages
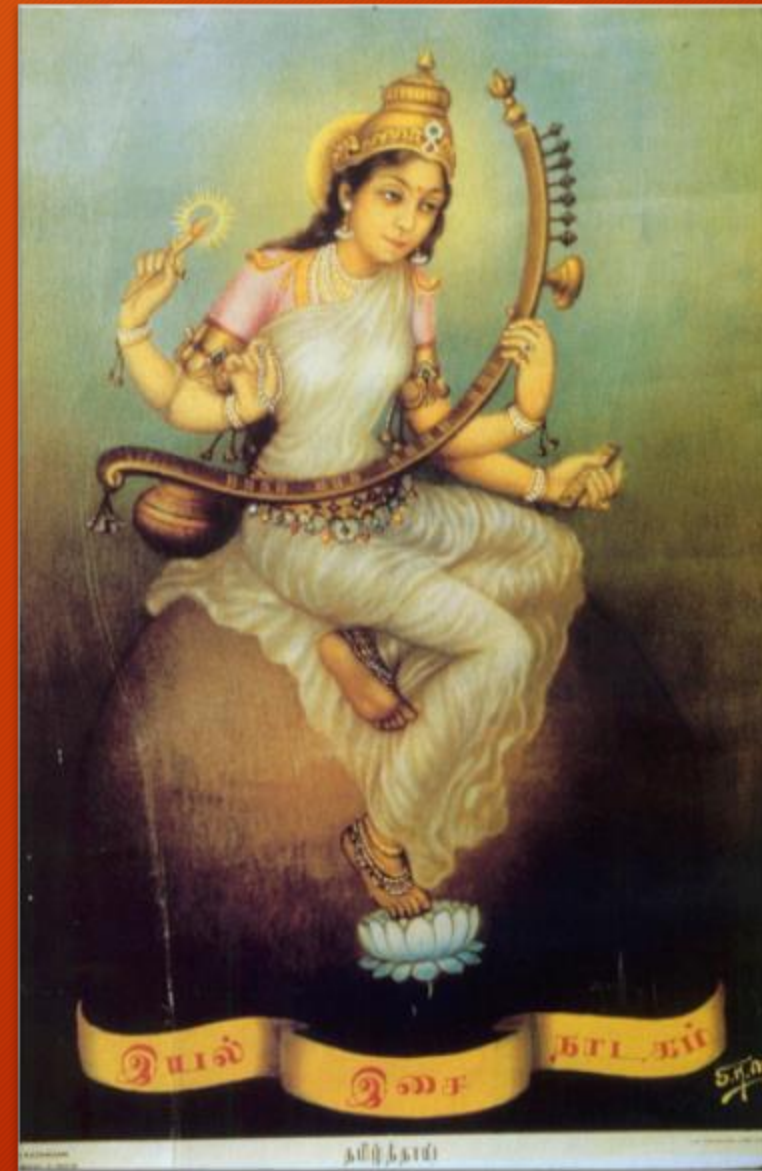
Undergirding Dravidian sub-nationalism: Tamilttay, Goddess of the Tamil language

India's Languages and religious Identity

- E.g. Hindi, Urdu, and Punjabi are standardised and 'purified' by communalists between 1870 and 1930 → multiple symbol congruence (BRASS)

- Activists on all sides (Arya Samaj, Urdu Defence Association, Singh Sabha etc.) use aggressive polemics to discredit the rival language (→ Urdu as courtesan)

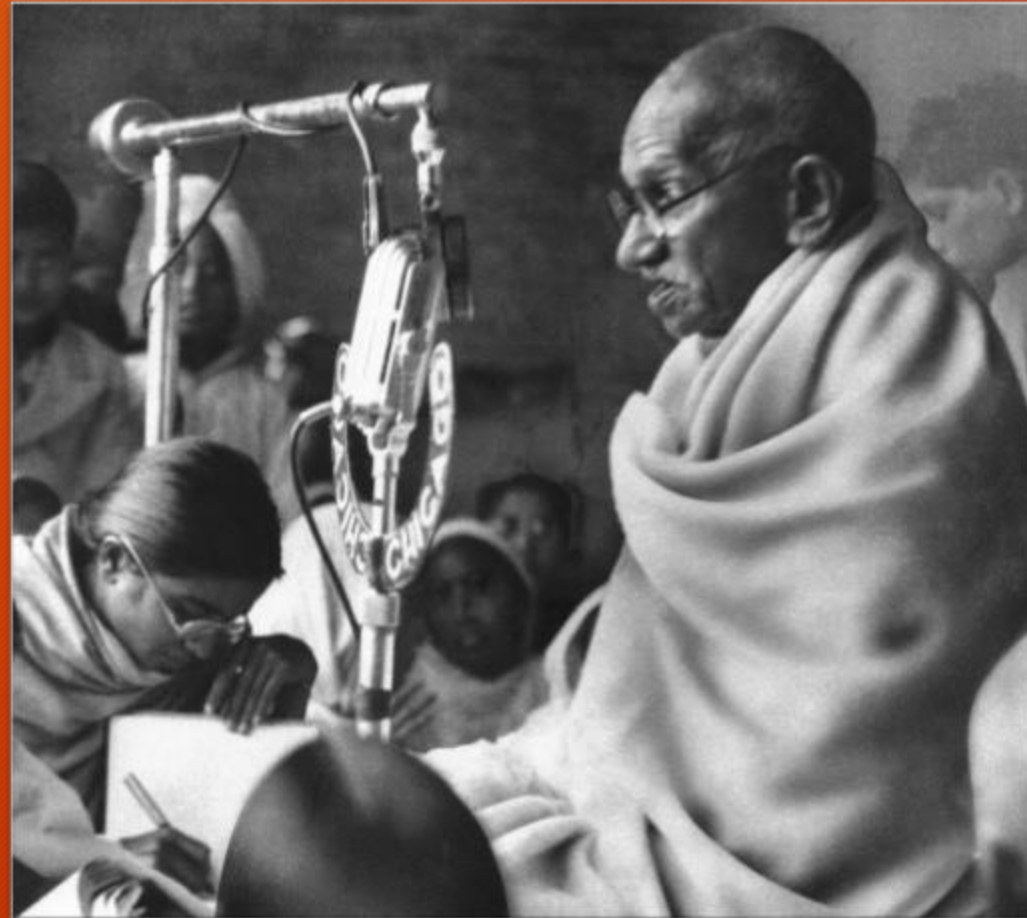The (Post-)Colonial Careers of English in India, 1800-2000

हिन्दी–उर्दू ।

Stepmothering English

- Hindu nationalists but also the Gandhian INC mainstream propagate a *swadeshi* (indigenous) solution of the language question

- English is castigated as inauthentic symbol of the colonial oppression

«The educated classes have unfortunately fallen under the spell of English and have developed a distaste for their own mother tongue. The milk one gets from the former is adulterated with water and contaminated with poison, while that from the latter is pure. It is impossible to make any advance without this pure milk. But a slave does not know how to break his fetters.

M.K. Gandhi, *Speech at Hindi Sahitya Sammelan*, March 29 1918.

The (Post-)Colonial Careers of English in India, 1800-2000

Cutting English down to Size

- Gandhi and the the Hindu right emotionalise the language debate, INC leader and future prime minister J. Nehru favours Hindi/Hindustani for pragmatic reasons

- For his thorough social reform programme a language spoken by 0,7 % of the Indian population is mot a viable option as national language

- English has its place as language of diplomacy, science and international commerce

The (Post-)Colonial Careers of English in India, 1800-2000
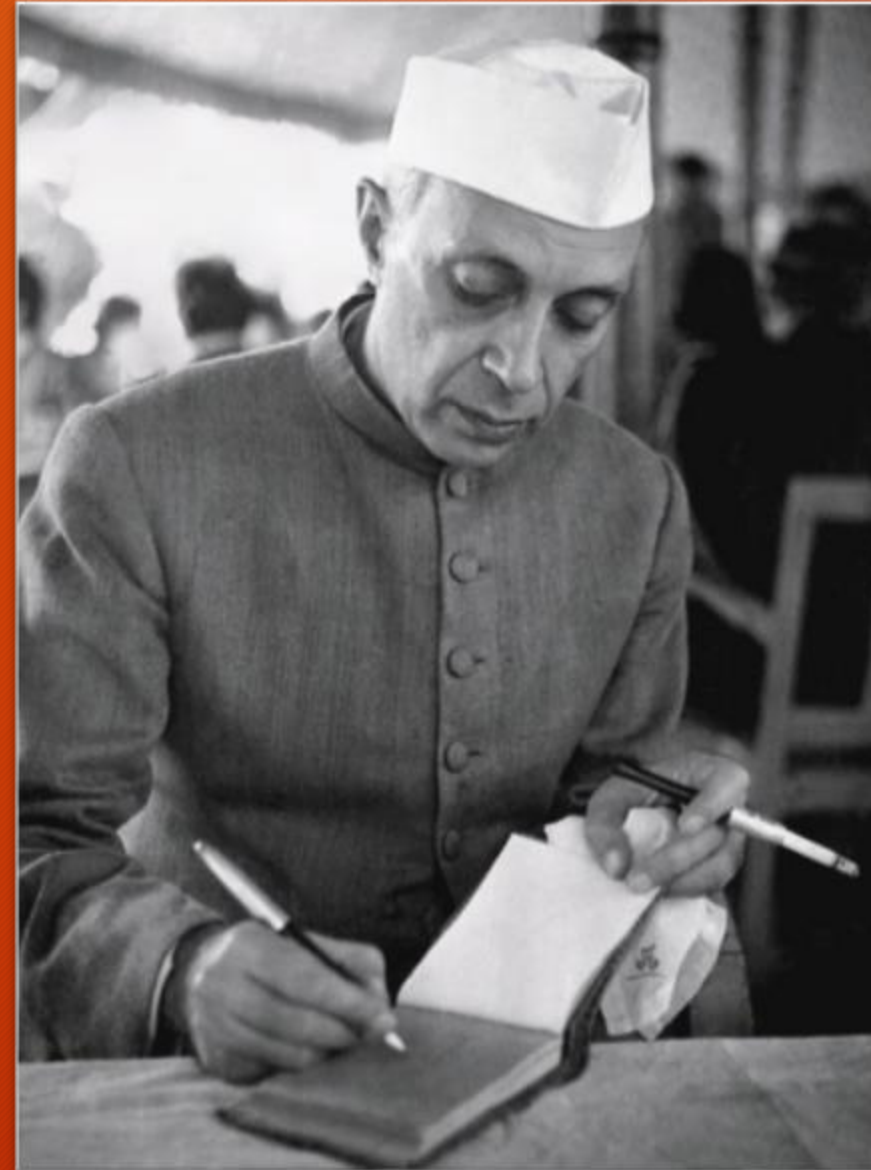
Calculating the pros and cons of English:
Cambridge graduate Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964)

5. Language conflict and cultural efflorescence:

English in Independent India (1950-2000)

A colonial Language for a post-colonial Nation

The (Post-)Colonial
Careers of English
in India, 1800-2000

- In 1946 the Constituent Assembly of India starts working out a constitution → fierce debate over national language lasts more than three years

- 1949 a compromise is reached → no national language but Hindi as **official language**; English retains the status as second official laguage for 15 years

- While Hindus is being 'developed' artificially, English continues to dominate important sphere (academia, military, legal system etc.)

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Father of the Indian constitution:
English as language of power and empowering language

A colonial Language for a post-colonial Nation

The (Post-)Colonial Careers of English in India, 1800-2000

o India's heterogeneous linguistic character creates problems from the outset → claim for new provinces

o 1955 Nehru appoints Language Commission and reorganisation of provinces along linguistic lines

A colonial Language for a post-colonial Nation

The (Post-)Colonial Careers of English in India, 1800-2000

o When the end of the transitional 15 years status of English as official language approaches → violent protest in Tamil Nadu in 1965 → result in 60 casualties

o English remains official language

o 1968 Three language formula: provincial language + Hindi + English
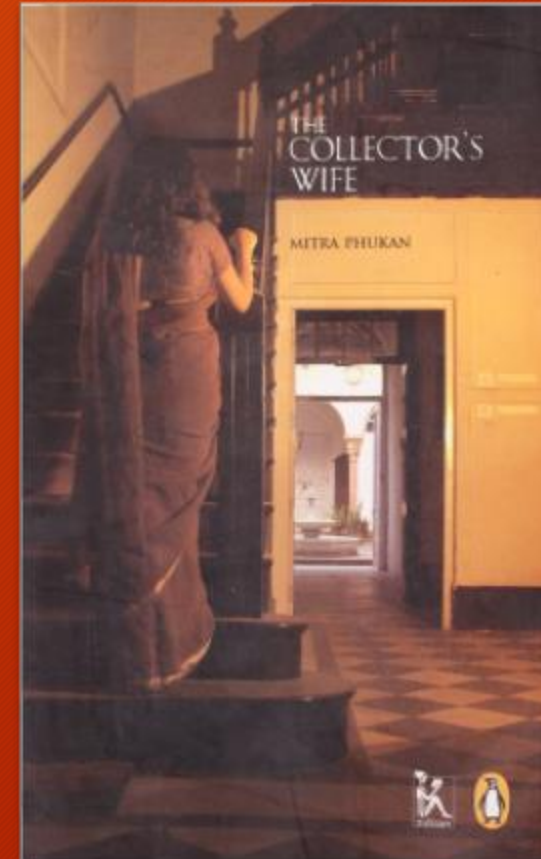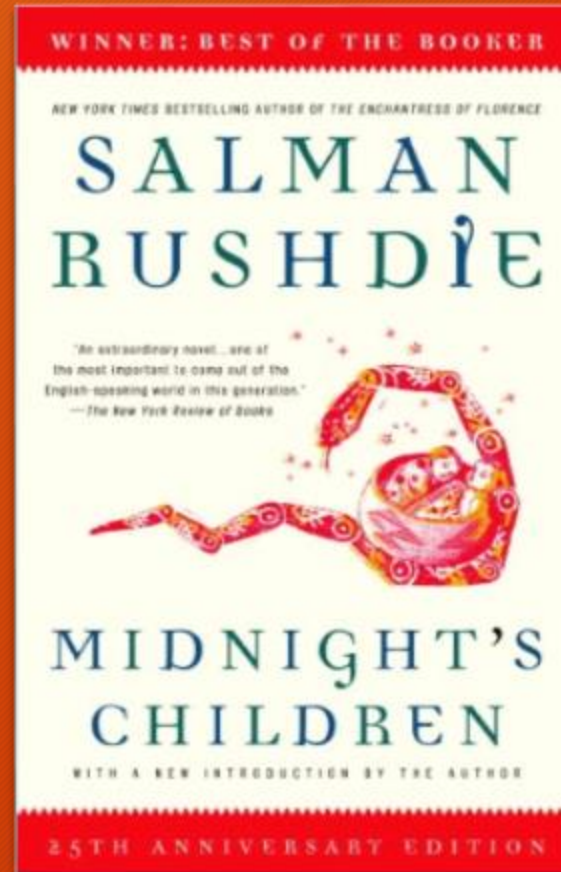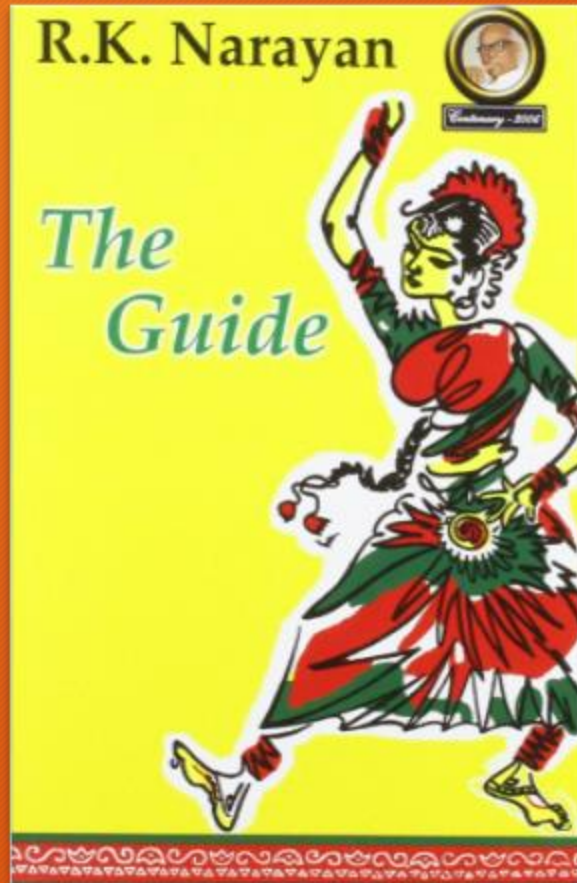

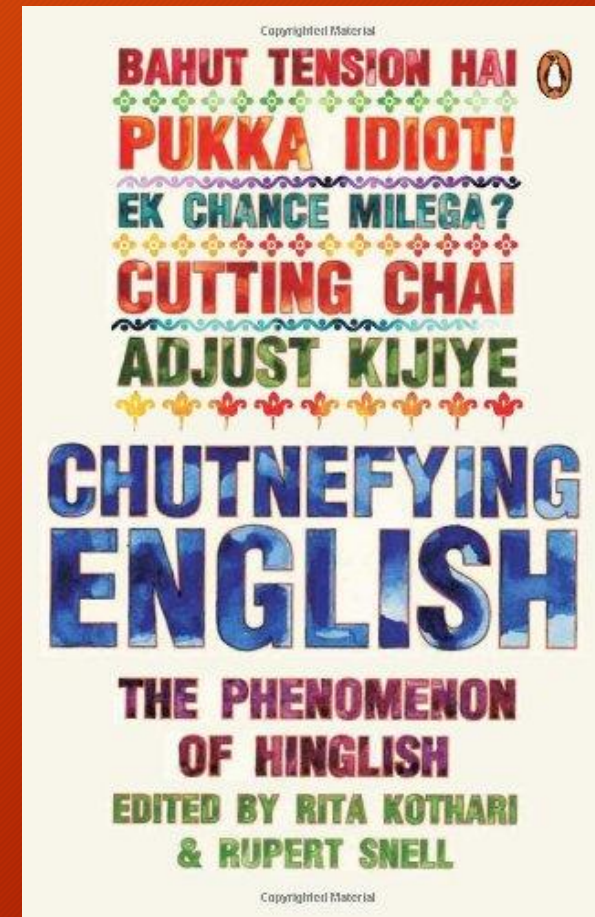Anti-Hindi Demonstration in Madras 1960:

Cultural Efflorrescence

The (Post-)Colonial Careers of English in India, 1800-2000

Three generations of Indian fiction in English

Cultural Efflorrescence? – Hinglish

The (Post-)Colonial Careers of English in India, 1800-2000

Hindi या Hinglish किस भाषा में blogging शुरू करें? Explained

BAHUT TENSION HAI
PUKKA IDIOT!
EK CHANCE MILEGA?
CUTTING CHAI
ADJUST KIJIYE
CHUTNEFYING ENGLISH
THE PHENOMENON OF HINGLISH
EDITED BY RITA KOTHARI & RUPERT SNELL

6. Concluding Observations

The (Post-)Colonial Careers of English in India, 1800-2000

Concluding Observations
(language as medium and language as marker)

1. **Complexity**
    - no straightforward imposition / cultural imperialism but
         dialogical process
    - nothing 'natural' about the adoption of English
    - uneven reach (geogrhaphically, socially, ethnically)

2. **Contingency**
    - Indian multilinguism and increasing conflation of linguistic
         and religious identities

3. **Ambiguity**
    - Many Englishes spread in India
    - language of science, of economic opportunity but also
         the language of class-distinction, 'inauthenticity' and 'immorality'