



Culture of Proximity | Designing a Script as Post-Colonial Linguistic Discourse

Mudita Pasari¹

The Design Village, India¹

Abstract

Expanding on the common knowledge that many colonised nations have adopted the language of their colonisers as prominent means of communication— the author delves into aspects of post-colonial knowledge propagation from the point of view of India. The positions of power held as traders and eventually administrators by the few British residents of India, has affected how the language itself has been perceived locally, over generations. As a direct result of lineage, economic background and social standing, the author among numerous others has been raised with a revering mindset towards English. Despite her unease with the colonial history of the language, the author acknowledges that the impact of English in India, as a language and script, should not be perceived as all bad— it is a very important means of communication for the country as often English is the only common language between people from different parts of the country. This aspect of the colonial language is often omitted from post colonial linguistic discourse.

As we walk this tightrope, our post-colonial knowledge propagation and production has been a curious one— about 1-2% of the Indian population is fluent in English more than other local languages, these few now take pride in the standardisation through knowledge and seek to run a Nation of many languages. Not just the language, but the script too has evolved into a symbol acquired through privileges of family and/or education. As a counter, the author has created a pseudo script, Setu— bridging the gap between some local scripts with the Roman alphabet. One can read about it on <https://muditapasari.com/portfolio/setu-a-pseudo-script/>. The constructed script is a representation of everyday experiences being navigated by many Indians. The paper unpacks how a diverse nation correlates its methods of knowledge propagation and dissemination, with a colonial language as a vehicle of exchange. The author believes languages and scripts hold the power to change perspectives and hopes to raise awareness about the bizarre by creating something bizarre. This paper outlines the morphology of the Setu script and the impact it can have on native, post-colonial knowledge structures.

Keywords: *post-colonial, navigating languages, knowledge creation, linguistic discourse.*

1. Context

“India has been a country of many languages. If we dig into the past, we will find that it has not been possible for anybody to force the acceptance of one language by all people in this country.” - Syama Prasad Mookherjee [9]

As of today, the Indian Constitution lists 22 official languages for the Republic of India, as compared to 14 in 1950. English has been among 38 other languages waiting to achieve official language status.

As per the constitution, the use of English for official purposes was to cease post a 15 year transition period. Due to the unease observed in many non-Hindi speaking parts of India, the Official Languages Act 1963, allowed for the continued use of English alongside Hindi for all official purposes. The fear of exclusion, resulted in the spread of Anti-Hindi Imposition protests across the country.

After multiple attempts to shift to Hindi as the language of parliamentary and official functioning, we have realized that English is here to stay. It's been 70 years hence and we continue to navigate this strange dichotomy presented to us.

1.1 Hindi and English

The founding members were aware of language diversity becoming a concern. There are large parts of northern and central India which are comfortable in using Hindi, but many others are not. These possibilities of contention were brought up during the Constituent Assembly Debates, to ensure that



Hindi would not act as yet another imperial factor forced on the rest of the nation.

In TT Krishnamachari's words from the debate on November 5th, 1948: "There are various forms of imperialism and language imperialism is one of the most powerful methods of propagating the imperialistic idea... " The use of Hindi, which was an alien language to his Tamil speaking people, would "also mean the enslavement of people who do not speak the language of the legislature, the language of the Centre..." [7]

This unease was true for many others across the country, who would prefer the use of English- the language inherited from our colonizers.

Another example can be seen from a Debate on the 13th September, 1949, where Lakshmi Kanta Maitra is speaking in English. His stance is that Sanskrit should be adopted as the official and national language of India. When asked to speak in Sanskrit, he said:

"I am not here to parade my knowledge of Sanskrit. I am not going to commit the blunder of some of my friends, who, in their zeal,—despite the request of others to speak in English so that they might be understood by everybody, persisted in the language of their bobby. I am not going to do that. I want to make myself understood by every single honourable Member in this House." [9]

This itself tells us a lot about communication across state boundaries in the Indian subcontinent. To understand this further one must look at the creation of identity around the idea of languages in India.

2. Multiplicity of Language Exchanges

Language has multiple faces, some good and some we would rather overlook.

For those of us, trained in it, the English language leaves us in a double bind. While it gives us larger access and encourages interrelationships within the nation, it also increases the socio-economic divide based on vestigial colonial ideas of competence and relevance.

While one seeks to decolonize the mind, is one also willing to give up access and communication?

2.1 Language as Identity

The founding members of the Indian Republic working on reorganizing internal state boundaries suggested against language being the main deciding factor for fear "it would 'create new minorities'". The JVP Committee "concluded that language is 'not only a binding force but also a separative force', thus endangering national unity and security." [6]

Keeping this in mind, the state boundaries were to be drawn creating heterogeneous language states, but due to widespread protests across the country, the committee reluctantly decided otherwise. After 14 such states were formed, "the most feared danger of 'balkanization' induced by the creation of new minorities again came to the fore with violent language riots", which has resulted in many future bifurcations. [6]

According to DeVereaux, "a hybrid society is characterized by diversity, with a wide range of social and cultural influences contributing to mixed-identities. In the negative sense", he described the possibility of "prejudicial behavior, or favoring the in-group over the out-group." [3] This is precisely what was seen manifesting within a multicultural and multilingual young nation like India.

2.2 Language as Communication

Summarising the concept of languages in the time of globalization, Lo Bianco talks about three kinds of processes leading to nationing, "vertical effects as the young of the nation grow into citizenship, horizontal effect as the new comers are admitted into citizenship and extra national effects through processes of FL (foreign language) study". [1]

In the Indian context, this phenomenon is observed within state boundaries. As Ramalingam Chettiar said in 1949, "because Hindi is no more national to us than English or any other language." — each state governed by a language sees the following processes:



1. learning the most prominent dialect of the state language,
2. learning of English, as a required language,
3. learning Hindi as an FL elective.

This act of learning English, has allowed people from across the country to communicate with one another. Maybe compulsory learning of Hindi would have done the same, but would it have infringed social liberties of the many non-Hindi speaking Indians?

Like Errington said, "Actions of colonial agents outran their own intent". [4] Once used to oppress and rule, seeing English as a vehicle of unification and allowing for blurring of cross cultural boundaries, is a strange phenomenon.

"The need to communicate cross-culturally is now a given in the world." [3] - DeVereaux's words hold true within the international context, but for India, this has been a bone of contention for over 70 years. Unable to agree on a common language of communication, we seem to have made peace with using the multiplicity of languages offered to us. To be able to access places and knowledge created within different parts of the nation, we often use English as a translation pitstop, which allows for easy transfer of information and understanding.

If not for English, today we would be miscommunicating with and misunderstanding our co-citizens. This aspect cannot be disregarded when considering the language our oppressors have left behind.

2.3 English as a Privilege

Having discussed the advantages that English allows within the Indian context, one must sober down and look at the obvious problems it leaves behind.

From a post-colonial lens, one would want to strive to decolonize the mind by training it to think like one's native originality, rather than in the ways and language of the oppressors long gone. But for an urban, middle class Indian, this point of view does not hold water. English continues to hold a position of power in the country, allowing those of us with a command on the language to be able to access knowledge and discourse which still remains veiled from the masses. As predicted, it has increased the divide between the population, which cannot be simply willed away.

Nieto has keenly observed, "Language is the entry to participation in the social discourse, which leads to membership in society at large." [8] By conducting legal and official communication in English, many are excluded from contributing to a healthy democratic process. The language still holds colonial power, only now it is working from within the nation, instead of without.

3. Setu as Discourse

During the debates while drafting the Indian Constitution, some speakers suggested the adoption of the Roman script to write the Indian languages as an official way ahead. Although then considered outlandish, what if we were to imagine a writing system which represents the double bind navigated by many Indian citizens today.

"Given the discourse of "identity" such hybridity can be an articulation or fusion of two or more disparate elements to engender or create a new distinct identity." [2] says Gei on the ideas of the indigenous. *Setu* is a script designed to represent this very existence.

3.1 Limitations of Setu

Setu in Hindi means bridge. Despite trying to make visible a bridge between English and Indian languages, I am limited by my knowledge of few scripts, hence the language is influenced by the descends of the *Nagari* script. This is not an attempt to subvert the importance of other Indian scripts, it is merely a limitation of knowledge. If required, this script could be adapted further or redesigned.

Setu is designed to be written both left to right and right to left, to accommodate the two writing patterns on the subcontinent. It takes into account only the two writing movements, not all letter forms.

No aspect of the script means to disrespect or disregard any written form of knowledge on the



subcontinent. Rather the attempt is to throw light on the continued multiplicity of our lived experience which often gets missed during linguistic discourse.

3.2 Designing Setu

Setu uses 9 distinct forms derived from *Nagari* and then applied additive methods to create letter forms using “a semiotic approach, stressing non-linguistic aspects of the structure and use of writing (as in Wrolstad 1976).” Whereas when using the letter to form words, like many Indian languages, “the representational conventions of writing as a mapping from speech to script” is used. [5] Together, this technique is meant to expose the experience of living in the binary of the local and colonial, which now has adapted itself to everyday lives.

Using sound and letter form understanding of the Roman script and *Nagari*, each letter has been designed to be written with fluidity and comfort. Tested in upto 18 Indian languages, the script is additive and logical. Easy to learn for those who write languages descended from the *sanskrit* alphabet system.

Although can be used to write English, phonetic languages from the Indian subcontinent are easier to scribe. Script manual or samples of writing can be requested, but are beyond the scope of this paper.

3.3 Using Setu

For a moment let us look beyond intellectual discourse. Let us indulge in wishful thinking instead. If one were to map the possibilities that such a script could bring, what would they think of?

Imagine *Setu* being used as a script all over the national highways in India. All text is in local languages; yet as I drive through, I am able to navigate with ease. I do not speak the language, but I would read proper names with directional signs and understand. This would be very similar to the experience one would have in Europe, to not be able to necessarily understand all words but make sense of the written form.

It would grant access, start communication and slowly break down structures designed to exclude. It would give us a common ground to start on, to appreciate our differences under the umbrella of similarity this script has to offer. It would help us navigate our multiplicity through a thread of familiarity.

Or maybe as DeVereaux said, “On the positive side, it is about embracing one’s multiple identities to form a coherent sense of self.” [3]

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