Imperial designs, post-colonial replications: class and power at Cathedral and John Connon School in Bombay

Susan Dewey
DePauw University, Indiana, USA

Available online: 15 Aug 2006
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Susan Dewey*
DePauw University, Indiana, USA

Utilizing a framework which employs symbolic capital and post-colonial analysis, this paper examines the cultural meanings of English-language education at Cathedral and John Connon School in Bombay, India. The central question this article seeks to address is how power is replicated through education and, more specifically, the ways in which formerly British colonial systems of education are maintained as markers of success and prestige in urban India. This research draws upon intensive participant observation and interviews with teachers, students and parents at Cathedral and John Connon School in Bombay, as well as upon the extensive academic literature on English-language education in India. The discussion of how the politics of language and class intersect in education is divided into three topic areas: class and access to English-language education; the rural/urban divide; and the implications of English as an agent of global hegemony.

Introduction

To note that language and power are intimately connected is to profoundly underscore the ways in which English language schools, commonly referred to in India as ‘English-medium’, function as symbolic capital. This paper examines some of the critical modes through which English has grown to become a language of prestige in India, primarily through the vehicle of English-language education. While numerous scholars have detailed the biases inherent in Indian education using a gendered level of analysis (e.g. Gold & Raheja, 1994; Wadley, 1994; Seymour, 1999; Jeffrey, 2000) or a focus on the cultural politics of English as an agent of global hegemony (e.g. Tollefson, 1999; Phillipson, 1992; Pennycook, 1994; Widdowson, 1994), very little ethnographic work has been done which explores the meanings of English-language education at a specific site in India.

*212B Harrison Hall, Women’s Studies, DePauw University, 313 South Locust Street, Greencastle, IN 46135, USA. Email: susandewey@depauw.edu

ISSN 1745-7823 (print)/ISSN 1745-7831 (online)/06/020215-15
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DOI: 10.1080/17457820600715554
This paper seeks to fill a gap in the literature via its discussion of the cultural meanings of class and English-language education at Cathedral and John Connon School in Bombay. Discursively constructed to be one of the most exclusive schools in India, Cathedral provides an excellent lens through which to gauge how English-language education serves as a tool with which to replicate social class. This discussion is subdivided into three main themes: class and access to English-language education; the rural/urban divide; and the implications of English as an agent of global hegemony.

Cathedral is one of eight English-language schools in Bombay which educate the children of the business and political elite, and was chosen for the purposes of my research because it is consistently rated as the best institution in the city even by those at competing institutions. The other English-language schools of a similar calibre are Bombay Scottish School, The Convent of Jesus and Mary, Campion School, J. B. Petit High School, St Xavier's School, The American School of Bombay and The Alexandra School for Girls. While all of these institutions produce graduates who go on to positions of prominence within the city of Bombay, often after returning to India with an American university degree, it is Cathedral which is the oldest and most established. Cathedral is considered to be such a desirable school that parents routinely bring their infant children for evaluation by the principal in the hope that they will be able to gain admission by the time they are of primary school age.

Cathedral School is particularly interesting because of its entrenchment in India’s colonial past, when it was founded as a site to educate the children of British administrators, soldiers and traders. Discussions surrounding the need for such an institution began in 1860, at the height of British imperial domination of the subcontinent. Just after Queen Victoria was named ‘Empress of India’ and the British sought to consolidate power on the subcontinent, Lord Canning issued a Minute on Education proposing free land and a 50% subsidy for the cost of building schools if public bodies would bear the remainder of expenses and maintain them.

In 1876, the Bombay Scottish Education Society was founded, and routinely fostered discussions surrounding the possibility of creating an institution which would serve the needs of all European children in Bombay. Named Cathedral and John Connon School (henceforth referred to as ‘Cathedral’) after philanthropist and Chief Registrar of Bombay John Connon, the school finally came into being in 1922 with 524 students, 190 of whom were girls. The ethnic makeup of the school was rather predictable for the era, with 404 Europeans and Anglo-Indians, 104 Parsis (as members of Bombay’s Zoroastrian community are known) and 16 ‘others’, whose ethnicity is unnamed in the records. The segregated sex system at Cathedral was abolished in 1965, although few efforts have been made to make the school more economically diverse. As such, Cathedral largely remains an institution dedicated to the replication of class status, which makes it a particularly interesting site from which to examine the cultural politics of class and language in Bombay.
Methodological and theoretical framework

My interest in English-language education in India stems from my first encounter with India as a 16-year-old exchange student, when I found myself suddenly immersed in an English-language curriculum with little or no relevance to the realities I saw around me. Although my English literature textbook had a limited amount of work by Tagore, we as students did far more reading about England than we did about the Indian context in which we lived. As I began my dissertation work on class-related issues in Bombay, I continued to explore the multifaceted nature of class in South Asia. Widely recognized as one of the most socially stratified regions of the world, the boundaries of urban India’s class system are sometimes just as rigid as those of caste.

The central issues this article seeks to address is how power is replicated through education, and the ways in which, over half a century after Indian Independence, those who fill roles formerly held by the agents of empire do so using the same patterns and institutions originally implemented by the British colonial administration. As such, the focus of this study is on how formerly British colonial structures are maintained in Bombay as markers of success and prestige by the post-colonial elite.

Research for this article took the form of nearly six months of intensive participant observation during different periods between summer 2001 and the academic year 2002–2003. This included structured interviews done via a process best described as ‘snowball networking’ with nearly 100 students, teachers, parents and alumni of Cathedral, as well as classroom observations, focus groups and informal discussions designed to gauge understandings of how the school functioned as a marker of social distinction. Members of the administrative and teaching staff at Cathedral were extremely gracious and forthcoming regarding access to their classrooms and their thoughts, and this research could not have been conducted without their thorough cooperation.

Unless otherwise noted, all information analysed in this article is based on primary data, which is couched within a broader discussion of the literature on education. This, in turn, is situated within a framework that is sensitive to both ethnographic and contemporary social realities, so that the way in which English is consistently positioned as a marker of status and prestige is considered social fact rather than ethnographic point of contention.

Framed within the context of theory, this analysis centers largely on Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic capital which ‘functions to mask the economic domination of the dominant class and socially legitimate hierarchy by essentializing and naturalizing social position’ (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 5). Bourdieu postulates that symbolic capital serves as a means by which the dominant social order is maintained. In many ways, English-language education serves as the primary means by which the dominant social order maintains and reproduces itself in India. While Cathedral, and institutions like it, are certainly all unique, they also serve as metaphors rather than simple ethnographic anecdotes for the kind of class stratification that is pervasive throughout urban India.
Social class and access to English-language education

From its inception, the system of English-language education in India was designed both to segregate and create hierarchies based on class that are almost impossible to transcend. Twelve years after the founding of the Bombay Education Society in 1815, the Bombay Native Education Society was established in order to educate non-European and non-Anglo-Indian children. However, these institutions functioned primarily as a means by which to maintain pre-existing social structures and patterns of class stratification.

This is still evident in the selection procedure at Cathedral, where 600 applications are received for the 100 student openings that the institution has. Rather than basing the admission system on merit, Cathedral privileges the children of alumni, albeit in a seemingly democratic manner, via its Byzantine admissions structure. As explained by Principal Meera Isaacs, the admissions process begins when a child is one year old, when it is brought for an ‘interview’ with the heads of the school in order to assess its ‘native intelligence’. Clearly, what is truly being assessed is the parents’ interaction with the admissions directors. As such, it is important to consider parents’ reasons for choosing Cathedral. What follows are the responses of four consultants, three Cathedral alumni and the principal of the school, to my question, ‘What makes parents choose English language schools for their children?’

Well, I think that parents choose English-medium education because it’s their passport to the world. English is the most commonly spoken language in the world. We were ruled by the British and they sort of laid down, you know, you just can’t reach the same levels in the regional languages that you can with English. All our higher education is in English today, and I think that today everyone aspires to come out of their old environment and rise, and through English they are doing that . . . even my maids today, they will not eat a meal if they have to pay fees for a good English education for their children. (Aruna, 42, ex-Cathedralite, homemaker)

It’s an aspirational thing. Even at the time when I started, in the late sixties, it was THE school to like, if your kids were going there, then you’d arrived in Bombay. (Rajeev, 34, ex-Cathedralite, winery owner)

Well, for me, since my Mom was an ex-Cathedralite, it was just the order of the day, you know, the mothers of the children I went to nursery school with spoke together and it was kind of like, it was probably a very natural decision . . . We pretty much walked in. (Rishad, 35, ex-Cathedralite, event manager)

Well, it has first its reputation for good education . . . After all it’s 142 years old, and many of the heads of commerce, industry, and the people who have made modern India, or I should say modern Bombay, are all alumni of this school. That’s one of the reasons that people want to come here, and then we have a huge number of people who have passed out and they want their kids to come back here, and from that we get the younger generation. (Meera Isaacs, principal, Cathedral School)

All four of the respondents focus on the importance of English as a tool of social mobility, as a ‘passport to the world’. Aruna’s comments emphasize not only an acceptance of the reality of English as part of India’s colonial heritage, but also the way in which even those with little possibility for upward mobility, such as domestic
workers, are willing to make great personal sacrifices in order to educate their children in English. Additionally, Rajeev and Rishad’s observations on the social statement sending one’s children to Cathedral makes speak to the school’s function of maintaining the status of a family. This concept of Cathedral’s ‘legacy’, as it were, is similarly addressed by Principal Meera Isaacs, who specifically mentions the large number of alumni who want their children to attend the school.

Given the respondents’ emphasis on English-language education and social class, it is clear that the word ‘choice’ is perhaps not the best one to use in this case. Although scholars such as Woolard (1985) and Swigart (2000) have criticized Bourdieu’s approach by arguing that symbolic capital can take different forms, the above responses are fairly representative of what individuals from all class backgrounds say about English-language education: that it offers access that other languages do not. As part of a larger system of class replication, very little individual agency is actually involved in which language a child will study in. Dyson (1993) notes that, as a ‘product of the dual heritage of the British Empire and the Indian Renaissance’, there was no question of her not learning English as a child: ‘what had begun as a requirement of Empire was replaced after Independence by the continuing importance of English as a link language within India and its accelerating importance in the international arena’ (p. 171).

This lack of agency is especially important as it underscores the way in which existing patterns of class stratification are replicated via attendance at Cathedral. During one focus group I conducted with a group of 15-year-old students, they were adamant that it was ‘only natural’ that they maintain the ties they established at school in order to enter into business alliances after graduating. One student was especially adamant that attendance at the school was important to one’s future in corporate India, as ‘Cathedral has a tradition and a history’. Yet this ‘tradition’ and ‘history’ are problematic at best. Simultaneously eerily historical and yet decontextualized from contentious analysis in popular discourse, British-implemented institutions such as Cathedral point to the way in which the colonial encounter is not simply a project of wholesale domination.

Indeed, Cathedral School is part of a series of buildings targeted by The Foundation to Preserve Heritage Buildings, an organization founded largely by Cathedral alumni. This group works to preserve structures built in the Indo-Saracenic style, characterized by languorous arches and angular minarets, favored by the British architects who designed Bombay during the economic boom fostered by the cotton trade in the mid-1860s. Known as the Kala Ghoda Crescent, this area extends from the southern end of Mahatma Gandhi Road to Bombay University, an area which can be walked across in under an hour. The Kala Ghoda Crescent, located in the southernmost part of Bombay, has the most expensive real estate in the city, as well as the most visual reminders of the Raj.

Interestingly, the question of whose ‘heritage’ the buildings contain was not felt to be at all problematic in any of the focus groups I led. In fact, the vast majority of students responded to my queries regarding their school’s colonial legacy with some variation of ‘but that was so long ago!’ Following Foucault (1980), this speaks to...
human agency as part of a complex schema of power, so that individuals are not simply targets for the imposition of power, but also ‘the elements of its articulation’ (p. 131).

Just as ‘heritage buildings’ are far from being simply an imperial legacy but rather institutions which house the contemporary Indian elite, English, rather than being a colonial imposition, has emerged as the language of choice in education among the Indian middle and upper classes, and as a means by which the dominant social order reproduces itself (Surber, 1998). Dyson is correct in calling English a ‘link language’, as English serves as India’s connection with the non-Hindi and non-regional language-speaking world, as well as across regions within India where languages are not mutually intelligible. As a result of this, English is a necessity for those in India who wish to gain positions of power and it is, of course, social class which plays the most crucial role in who will have access to power and who will not. With English, it is commonly believed, individuals become not only more cosmopolitan, but part of a social class which privileges the global over the local.

‘Class’ is a term that is characteristically difficult to define, as it has as much to do with self-identification with ideology as with economics. Although it is certainly not within the scope of this paper to problematize class, nor to analyze what it means to place individuals into certain class groups, it is important to give some general framework within which to situate individuals. In order to avoid possible conflict over the precise definition of who does and does not belong in each class group, I will use the Finance Ministry of the Government of India’s definitions of income levels as a means by which to simplify groupings.

The Government of India (2000) classifies families with an income below 50,000 rupees per year (roughly $1000) as families who do not need to pay tax. The next group earns between 50,000 and 60,000 rupees per year, followed by those termed ‘middle-class’ who earn between 60,000 and 150,000 per year). Beyond income levels, class descriptors are commonly used in all languages in Bombay; from the pejorative ‘middle-class mentality’, which serves as a signifier for a worldview obscured by notions of propriety to the more condemnatory ‘those Cathedral types’, which speaks to the perceived pretension that the school produces, it is self-evident that class is an important part of everyday life in Bombay. While class is inherently political and its oversimplification potentially dangerous, it remains a very useful construct in terms of how English-language education is viewed as symbolic capital throughout India.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Cathedral’s replication of social class and, simultaneously, a culture of noblesse oblige, is a program the school requires all its students to participate in, known as Socially Useful Productive Work (SUPW). As part of SUPW, the economically privileged students who attend Cathedral are brought into direct contact with slum children. Numerous administrators at Cathedral emphasized the importance of this program; one senior member noted that it was crucial because ‘in India we have the tragedy of the very rich living side by side with the absolutely destitute’. Indeed, over half of Bombay’s 15.4 million residents live in slums which occupy a mere 6% of the city’s land.
While I observed numerous sessions of SUPW, the most interesting were those conducted by Akanksha, which means ‘sunrise’ in Hindi. Akanksha is a charity organization managed by female alumni of Cathedral. In the words of founder Shaheen Mehta, they ‘teach basic health and hygiene, and social and civic responsibility to the poor’. Echoing British colonial discourses surrounding tropical medicine and the imperative to educate the local populace about hygienic matters, Akanksha exemplifies the sense of patronage inherent in SUPW. Shaheen Mehta was emphatic that she felt a keen sense of responsibility toward the poor upon her return to India after several years of living in London, noting ‘when I came back and saw how the poor children were living, I said to myself, “I am so educated, I must do something for these poor people”.

Akanksha sustains itself by using Cathedral as a base for instruction after the enrolled students have left for the day, albeit using the space in markedly different ways. Instructors are female alumni who instruct the children in English and ‘hygiene’ as they sit on the floor, rather than using the desks, in yellow shirts which, largely torn and dirty from wear, read ‘Akanksha’ with an illustration of a sunrise. All of the Akanksha students have numbers, rather than names, pinned to their shirts.

A typical afternoon of observation at an Akanksha session began with 29 children aged between seven and 12 years old sitting on the floor, the words in English to ‘Que Sera, Sera’ written on the board in an almost grim statement of irony. After singing the song, which all of the students enthusiastically participated in despite not knowing the meaning of the words, the volunteer instructor began the hygiene section of the program.

‘Do you wash your hands before and after eating?’ she asked the students, who grew silent. ‘You all have such dirty hands, and you’ll all get worms, because you eat food from the streets, with flies all over it.’

Students’ postures began to change, and no one seemed to be enjoying themselves anymore, not least of all because they could not understand the language in which the volunteer was speaking.

‘What is diarrhoea?’ she continued, to puzzled expressions, before adding, in Hindi, ‘jab aapke pet kharab ho jata hain’ (when the stomach is upset).

Noticing the lack of engagement students revealed with the hygiene session, the volunteer noted ‘You should drink ten glasses of water in a day’, to which a puzzled seven-year-old asked, ‘at a time?’ Sighing, the volunteer said that one should do so throughout the day, before adding that the students should demand that their mothers boil water before consumption. This advice speaks to the vast economic gulf that exists between students and volunteers: in ignoring the reality that the expense for gas fuel to boil drinking water is outside the means of all of the students’ families, the volunteer reveals her lack of practical knowledge about their lives.

This is certainly part of the somewhat surreal disconnect between Akanksha volunteers, all of whom come from economically privileged backgrounds, and the students they ostensibly seek to help through their charity work. The children who are students in the Akanksha program are the very individuals who clean the homes of those who pay to send their children to Cathedral, yet these economically
privileged individuals have very little, if any, idea about the realities of the dynamics of the poverty which defines their lives.

Despite the alienation evidenced by both parties, especially in terms of the way the Akanksha students are silenced during the hygiene sessions through shame about their poverty, it is notable that their parents will insist that they attend in order to learn at least some English. That those who speak English are those who hold power is evidenced both by popular opinion and scholarly literature on the subject; Sharma (1982, p. 17) notes that ‘even a beggar can earn more money if he speaks English’. Attending an English-language school is as much a requirement to maintain social status as it is a potential tool for mobility, and educational institutions are ranked accordingly. LaDousa (1999) observes that ‘English and other Indian languages thus form an evaluative frame that casts universities in a comparative evaluative relationship that is predicated onto every learning institution beneath them’ (p. 2). Working within this evaluative frame, most, if not all, parents who are financially able to do so send their children to English-language schools.

Of course, not all English-language schools afford the same degree of symbolic capital. This echoes Bourdieu’s description of France’s *grandes écoles* and the prestige they accord their students, especially in the way in which ‘academic title ceases to be a statutory attribute and becomes instead a genuine entry pass’ (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 285). Indian English-language schools also essentially function as a means by which to perpetuate the status quo, while simultaneously functioning in the same way as Bourdieu’s ‘entry pass’. In this light, the Indian education system is perhaps best viewed as a three-tiered structure, on the top of which are English-language private schools. These are often administered and taught by Indian Catholic nuns, and are thus often referred to as ‘convent schools’. Extremely expensive for most Indians, middle-class families often make sacrifices in order to send their children to such institutions. On the second tier are the mother-tongue schools, which are taught in one of India’s 17 official languages, which vary by state and region. Subsidized by the government, these are not as prestigious as English-language schools, and most students are from families who are struggling economically. On the third tier are government schools, which are notorious for bad administration and lack of facilities including, sometimes, the absence of even a classroom.

It is these rigid hierarchies surrounding education that Akanksha seeks to address at Cathedral, albeit in a somewhat misguided fashion. In addition to the sense of *noblesse oblige* evidenced by volunteers, the students are routinely made to feel that they are charity cases who should be grateful for the opportunity to be in an environment such as Cathedral for any length of time. During one Akanksha session I attended, a group of slightly older young women were being taught how to interact with prospective employers for domestic service. As young women tried their best to mimic the body posture and tone of voice of the volunteers, I commented to one Cathedral alumnus how hard-working I thought the young women, all of whom came from extremely difficult economic circumstances, were. In a voice loud enough
for everyone in the room to hear, she remarked, ‘they aren’t nice girls, you know; they’re cunning girls, they’ve learnt to live by their wits’.

This construction of economic difference as impacting character is notable in that it speaks to notions of Otherness grounded in poverty. If the difference between ‘nice’ and ‘cunning’ is constructed as a product of class, then it serves as a sort of justification surrounding the stratification of class groups into rigid hierarchies that cannot be bridged. Indeed, numerous observers have noted that because English-language schools have the associated qualities of higher socio-economic status, their existence creates a hegemony which excludes regional or Hindi language speakers, who form the vast majority of the population. Although there may be more students in mother-tongue schools, individuals who rise to positions of prominence in Indian business are invariably English-language educated. Dua (1996) notes that this system ‘legitimizes not only sociolinguistic inequality and the dominance of English fostered by the school education, but also creates further pressures on the use of English at the school level’ (p. 570). This illustrates what Dua (1994) calls ‘the hegemony of English’, which effectively excludes the poor from access to the best post-secondary education, which is given in English. The fact that the language of one’s education essentially determines one’s future success looms large in the Indian consciousness. LaDousa (1999) observes that ‘English = high cost, foreign and employment; Hindi = nominal cost, local and unemployment’ (p. 116).

Class thus plays a powerful determining role in a student’s access to English-language education. While even parents living in Bombay slums such as Dharavi prefer to send their children to English-language schools (Rajayshree, 1986), this is often not possible for economic reasons. English is hardly class-neutral (Annamalai, 1992) and is a point of profound consideration for Indians deciding on their children’s education. This bias is also evident in studies undertaken by the Government of India. A survey conducted by the National Council of Educational Research and Training on the sociology of education concluded that 80% of university students come from the most affluent 20% of India (Pattanayak, 1981). Poverty excludes individuals from opportunities for education: for every 100 students who begin any kind of formal education in India, 88 of these are forced to drop out for economic reasons (Pattanayak, 1981).

In a country in which 400 million people are illiterate (Krishna, 1991), students at Cathedral represent a powerful minority that is better educated, wealthier and in better health that the vast majority of the subcontinent. This is certainly illustrated by the social networks which are developed at Cathedral and then used to fill (as well as create) power structures throughout Bombay. Indeed, nearly all of the formerly British colonial institutions and English-speaking corporations are dominated by Cathedral alumni. The Bombay Gymkhana, founded in 1875 as one of the bastions of British power in Bombay, is dominated by Cathedral alumni, and has closed its membership for the past decade to all but the children of present members. Membership at the British-built Breach Candy Club, which still features a swimming pool in the shape of pre-Independence India, is similarly dominated by those who have attended Cathedral.
It follows, then, that responses from Cathedral alumni to my question, ‘what kind of people go to Cathedral?’ illustrate this fact quite well.

Well, to be honest, um, mainly people from south Bombay. Not too many from north Bombay . . . we wouldn’t have, you know, like some schools have such a big mix that you’d even have, like, you know, the sweeper’s son who goes there. I don’t think we had that there, because of the fees. (Aditi, 25, financial consultant)

Ummm, varied backgrounds, but I would definitely say that the majority were, um, people from rather wealthy backgrounds, people whose parents were either ex-Cathedralites or industrialists or, basically it was known as THE elitist school, you know, as the snobbish elitist school, probably one of the most in India. (Rishad, 34, event manager)

As the alumni’s responses clearly indicate, Cathedral is not a democratic institution. Rather, it is a space for individuals from south Bombay, the former bastion of British colonial administration which remains the most expensive real estate in the city, to replicate existing stratified class patterns.

This stratification is further enforced by the phenomenon of ‘tuitions’, which refers to the extra time and money that are necessary in order for students to obtain a pass mark in exams. As Pattanayak (1981) observes, ‘formal education expects all children irrespective of their educational and social background to reach an educational goal in a single time scale’ (p. 114), resulting in a system which is so rigid that students are compelled to seek out tutors who can aid them in their pursuit of the pass mark. This is by no means inexpensive, and can be quite a lucrative venture for a tutor with the right students, although Meera Isaacs repeatedly told me that tuitions were unnecessary for students unless they were truly struggling with a subject.

Those whose parents cannot afford to pay for such ancillary services are relegated to regional or Hindi-language schools, in which their chances for future success in adult life are not believed to be as good as those of graduates from English-language schools.

This correlation is enacted not only through education, but by language as it is spoken in everyday life. As a city, Bombay is home to a stunning variety of language patterns, including its own distinctive patois of indigenous Marathi words, Hindi and English, known as ‘Bombaiya’, a playful dialect characterized by its informality. Heavily linked to class, while everyone may occasionally code-switch between Bombaiya and their mother tongue, it is the English language ‘convent school accent’ which is the norm in spaces of power throughout the city. Learned at English-language schools, this way of speaking is an amalgamation of British and American pronunciations with a characteristically South Asian lilt.

The English language and power are highly correlated, tied together by symbolic capital. In keeping with Bourdieu’s notion that symbolic capital remains so precisely because not everyone has access to it, it is useful to turn to a discussion of geographical factors which influence access to English-language education.
The rural/urban divide

Urban and rural India are vastly different places, populated by two distinct groups of individuals who, at least superficially, have little in common with one another. Contemporary India still adheres to British colonial patterns of centralization, so that anyone hoping for a good education or a high-paying job must necessarily be in an urban area. It is only in urban areas that English is widely spoken, and the combination of diverse ethnic groups from all over the subcontinent living in relatively close proximity to one another makes for a way of life that is profoundly different from the reality of most rural villages, in which groups are discrete, bounded entities who have little interaction with one another across ethnic lines.

Urban areas are also stratified, albeit in different ways. Numerous scholars, including King (1976), have noted the way in which colonial urban planning served as a physical manifestation of imperial power. While certainly evident in Bombay in terms of the centralization of power in the southern (and formerly British colonial) part of the city, it is also markedly present in the centralization of authority in certain institutions in south Bombay, most notably Cathedral School itself and the Bombay Gymkhana, whose members draw largely from Cathedral alumni. This centralization is particularly interesting in that it consciously seeks to replicate colonial patterns, both in terms of maintenance of physical structures and closed membership.

Senior officials at the Bombay Gymkhana, for example, complained on numerous occasions to me of the expense involved in maintaining the original wooden structure of the building. In a tropical environment with a three-month monsoon season, wood is a poor choice of building material, as it rapidly rots in the humid climate.

‘However,’ one official sighed at a meeting of Cathedral alumni at the Bombay Gymkhana, ‘it is important that we maintain the integrity of a building constructed in the English tradition.’

That local elites are so invested in recreating colonial representations of power speaks to the multifaceted nature of power which, following Foucault (1980), creates a ‘regime of truth’ in which new meanings are attached to structures and institutions once considered ‘foreign’.

Similarly, a complex set of geopolitical and historical factors combine to make certain languages more prestigious than others. Although India certainly encountered English as a result of British imperial domination, the linguistic reality of 17 official languages and thousands of dialects means that English often serves as an ethnically neutral language with which to communicate without demonstrating religious or geographical affinities. In many ways, English is a necessity for life in urban India; Fishman (1982) notes that English ‘is now being significantly fostered by the non-English mother-tongue worlds’ (p. 15), so that individuals own the language even though it does not have its historical genesis in their geographical region.

Although urban students are more likely to have access to English-language schools because of their greater concentration in cities, rural students sometimes attend English-language schools as well. Differences between the two are almost
always apparent in terms of the degree of familiarity the student has with English, as N. B. Meena, a university English teacher, noted. Her students fell into two categories: those from urban English-language schools who ‘were fluent in the language but not necessarily sensitive’ and the rural students who ‘revealed their insecurity in handling a language which was obviously “foreign” to their socio-linguistic reality’ (Gupta & Kapoor, 1991, p. 84).

In my classroom observations, Hindi and English were clearly demarcated as rural and urban languages respectively. During one session on a short story, English teacher Mrs Mehta asked her class of eight-year-olds to provide her with a definition of the word ‘guest’. When Shaheen, a student whose family was active in the Bombay business community but still preferred to use Hindi in the home, responded with ‘mehrman’, the Hindi word for ‘guest’, Mrs Mehta rolled her eyes and groaned. ‘Yes, Shaheen,’ she said patronizingly, ‘in the villages guests are mehrman’.

Another student raised her hand, and when Mrs Mehta asked her for a definition of ‘guest’, she replied ‘someone who comes to your house’. Mrs Mehta responded by praising the girl for her ‘correct’ response. What Shaheen, who had also provided the correct answer, and in her mother tongue at that, had effectively learnt in this brief classroom exchange is that Hindi is a village language, while English is an urban one.

Not surprisingly, this sort of phenomenon has provoked responses both from those who benefit from it and those who do not. Often, these responses have taken on a political tone.

The implications of English as an agent of global hegemony

Perhaps the most negative consequence of the use of English in India is what is termed ‘the brain drain’: critics point out that if English was no longer the language of instruction, educated professionals would no longer be able to emigrate in search of better, more lucrative job opportunities outside India (Annamalai, 1992). Although a somewhat facile solution, this has larger implications, including the marginalization of indigenous languages in fields such as science, and unbalanced growth in technology (Dua, 1994).

This concept of English-language education creating an imbalance in Indian society speaks to the reality that although English is indubitably a useful tool for those who can afford to acquire it, for the majority who cannot it is a hardship indeed. In this light, it is helpful to briefly consider the ways in which the language of instruction makes a difference in the lives of those educated in it. English-language education matters not only to those who have access to it, but also to those who do not. One way in which English-speaking Indians negotiate various perceptions of self as a result of their education is through code-switching.

By juxtaposing a ‘we-code’ with a ‘they-code’, code-switches ‘serve to index the associations or identities linked to each code. By knowing the details of the ‘we–they’ situation, the intention and meanings of the switches can be extrapolated by listeners and researchers perceiving the switch’ (Auer, 1998, p. 321). As such, regional or
Hindi language forms one code, and English another. Switching codes is part of the perception of self, and the perception of the self by others: switching codes helps to negotiate identity for English-language students, as does being a student at a ‘good’ school.

In his discussion of what makes a ‘good’ English-language school, Singh (1989) highlights the importance of factors beyond actual education, including ‘the general behavior and manners of the products’ (p. 40). This underscores the way in which education is as much about the transmission of class as it is about learning basic skills. Although English-language education is restricted to those in the middle and upper echelons of Indian society, thus enforcing the global hegemony of the language, English-language education does pave the way for a brighter future for many individuals, at least in terms of social class continuity. Annie Thomas, the Principal of Bombay Assemblies of God Day School, which educates slum children for a very nominal fee of 50 cents per year, contends that English-language education at any level offers a passport to success for students:

See, I am in this school for the last 30 years. I chose this school because I can be a part of the social work. Many times the inspectors and all they come; we have actually only one-month classes in this school, we cannot have more because of the limitations of the state. They could tell me that ‘maybe you could go to a big school’ or something like this, but I prefer this, doing a service, that way I feel. Actually I am very happy. Many children from a very low background, from a very low background they have come up in life. When I see this, I am much happy. That’s the result that you get.

Mrs Thomas’ conviction that English offers children of all backgrounds a chance to succeed, to ‘come up in life’ illustrates the way in which English functions as symbolic capital in India. Her contention that she enjoys granting this symbolic capital to her students further emphasizes the point that language, power and status are intimately connected at all levels of Indian society. While English certainly has a complex history in South Asia and carries with it associated colonial baggage, it also remains a critical part of life for many urban Indians.

Conclusion

Language and power are intimately connected in Bombay, manifested as they are in the complex interplay of history, culture and class. There is by no means a unified opinion on the subject: English-educated elites in Bombay justify their use of an ‘international’ language in order to maintain and reproduce their dominance, while critics of this system dismiss the use of English as a ‘colonial hangover’. The issues surrounding English-language education in India are by no means uncomplicated, as they involve questions of power, status and prestige on both an international and regional level. As a result, Bombay is a fascinating place to look in search of an illustration of the intimate linkages between language and power.

This article joins a growing body of work that places notions of language and power in post-colonial societies in anthropological focus. By examining what English-language education means to those who benefit from it the most, this article
draws several key conclusions which, in turn, contribute to the field of anthropology and education by underscoring the cultural meanings of English-language education within a specific group in a single geographic location. The first is that power is a learned phenomenon, gained from attendance at schools such as Cathedral, which instill in students a sense of privilege and entitlement which mother-tongue language or government schools cannot provide.

The second major conclusion is that English-language schools, to some degree, replicate colonial educational policies and processes which were originally designed to benefit only those who would eventually become part of the established power structure, whether via family or ethnic ties. The only difference is that now these policies and processes are owned by Indian elites, rather than the British colonial administration. Related to this is the third conclusion, which is that English-language education is part of a historical global hierarchy of nations which is replicated on multiple levels, from governments to mass media to, perhaps most unfortunately, classrooms.

These findings are particularly relevant for pedagogy and policy as they speak to hierarchies in place which need to be altered if education is to become more democratic in India. As long as a tiny minority of hereditary elites is allowed to monopolize access to education, the current status quo will be maintained, effectively marginalizing the rural, the poor, and those who do not speak English, thus replicating all of the flawed structures that the Indian independence movement sought to eradicate.

References


