ENGLISH IN MODERN INDIA: EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES, ECONOMIC MOBILITY, AND LINGUISTIC INEQUALITY

Shermatova Sevara Azamjon qizi
Email: sevarashermatova0110@gmail.com
Student, Uzbekistan State University of World Languages
Aziza Yormatova
Teacher, Uzbekistan State University of World Languages
https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.24371171

Abstract

English occupies a distinctive position in contemporary India. It is associated with higher education, professional communication, scientific knowledge, and participation in global networks, yet access to effective English-language learning remains uneven. This article examines the relationship between English, social mobility, and linguistic inequality in India through a qualitative review of selected academic studies and national education policy. It considers the historical development of English, its role in schooling and employment, and the ways in which class, caste, gender, and geography shape access to the language. The reviewed literature suggests that English proficiency can provide measurable economic advantages, but these benefits are not automatic or equally distributed. Research on English-medium schooling in Bangalore demonstrates that such education may support mobility while reproducing new inequalities. Ethnographic research in Delhi further shows that English can be valued differently depending on gendered expectations and social context. The article argues that English should be treated as an additional educational resource rather than as a measure of intelligence or social worth. An inclusive language policy should improve access to high-quality English teaching while protecting the educational and cultural value of India's regional and home languages.

Keywords: English in India; social capital; multilingualism; language education; social mobility; linguistic inequality; employment

1. Introduction

India's linguistic environment is exceptionally diverse. People use a wide range of languages in family life, education, public administration, media, and regional communication. Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, Urdu, and many other languages have important roles in different parts of the country. English occupies a particular position within this multilingual setting: it is used in higher education, parts of public administration, business, technology, and communication across national borders. Its importance is therefore not simply a matter of the number of people who speak it. It is also connected with the institutions and opportunities in which English is valued.

The present position of English is rooted in the colonial period, when it became closely associated with administration and formal education under British rule. Independence in 1947 did not bring an end to its institutional role. Instead, English continued to be used in important domains and gradually became associated with professional advancement, modern education, and access to international knowledge. Bhattacharya (2022) explains that English teaching in India remains shaped by colonial history, social stratification, and debates about multilingual education. This history helps explain why English can be viewed both as a useful resource and as a symbol of privilege.

Consequently, English can help individuals cross social and economic boundaries, but unequal access to it can also reinforce existing differences. The more difficult question is who has a realistic opportunity to acquire it at a high level and who benefits from that opportunity. Students attending well-resourced schools may receive sustained instruction and regular practice, while students in under-resourced settings may have fewer opportunities. Consequently, English can help individuals cross social and economic boundaries, but unequal access to it can also reinforce existing differences.

This article examines English as a form of social and educational resource in modern India. It addresses three questions: (1) how does English influence educational and employment opportunities? (2) how do social and institutional inequalities shape access to English? and (3) how can English coexist with India's multilingual identity? The article argues that the social value of English depends not only on individual effort but also on the unequal distribution of educational resources and opportunities.

2. Methodology and Scope

The selected publications were analysed through a thematic comparison. First, Azam et al. (2013) were used to examine the relationship between English proficiency and economic returns. Second, Jayadeva (2019) provided evidence about English-medium schooling and social mobility in Bangalore. Third, Highet (2022) and Minz and Doreswamy (2023) were considered to explore the social and gender-related meanings of English and the barriers faced by disadvantaged groups. Bhattacharya (2022) and the National Education Policy 2020 were used to discuss language education and the institutional context.

The analysis compares the arguments and findings of these sources while taking their different research methods and contexts into account. It does not combine their findings into one statistical conclusion because they investigate different populations and questions. This article is a narrative literature review rather than an original empirical study. It is limited to the selected publications and does not claim to represent every linguistic community or region in India.

The review is not a systematic review or an original field study. It does not include new interviews, surveys, or statistical analysis conducted by the author. Its conclusions are therefore limited by the scope and contexts of the selected publications. In particular, findings from one city or one group should not automatically be generalised to all regions and communities in India.

3. Historical and Institutional Background

English expanded in India during British colonial rule, when it became an important language of administration and formal education. Its institutional status was connected with the political and economic priorities of colonial government. As a result, English acquired associations with authority, formal knowledge, and access to influential institutions. These associations did not disappear when India became independent.

After 1947, language policy had to respond to the practical challenge of governing a country with extensive linguistic diversity. English continued to be used in official and educational domains alongside Indian languages. Over subsequent decades, its importance grew in higher education, scientific research, international business, and professional communication. Globalisation and the expansion of sectors that interact with international markets further strengthened the perceived value of English.

However, the historical development of English also created a hierarchy between languages and their speakers. Bhattacharya (2022) notes that English in India is often associated with power, prestige, and privilege, while access to it remains uneven. This means that English is not simply a neutral communication tool. Its value is partly produced by the institutions that use it and by social beliefs about education, class, and modernity. Understanding this background is necessary for evaluating both the opportunities and the inequalities associated with English today.

4. English in Education: Opportunity and Unequal Access

English is important in many parts of India's education system. It is taught as a subject and is also used as a medium of instruction in numerous schools, colleges, and universities. Proficiency can help students read academic publications, use international learning resources, participate in conferences, and apply for programmes in which English is required. In fields such as information technology, engineering, medicine, and business, English can provide access to a substantial body of professional knowledge.

Nevertheless, the presence of English in a school does not necessarily mean that students receive effective English education. The quality of teaching depends on teacher preparation, class size, learning materials, opportunities for practice, and the wider educational environment. Students in well-funded private schools may have more opportunities to use English in and outside the classroom. By contrast, schools with fewer resources may struggle to provide the same level of instruction. These differences can influence students' confidence and later educational choices.

Jayadeva's (2019) research on low-cost English-medium schools in Bangalore is particularly relevant. The study examines the belief that English-medium education automatically transforms students' futures. It finds that such schooling can support socioeconomic mobility for some middle-class families while also creating new forms of inequality. This challenges the assumption that the label "English-medium" is sufficient evidence of educational quality. A school may use English as its stated medium without necessarily providing students with strong language skills or an effective learning environment.

India's National Education Policy 2020 offers an important perspective on this issue. It states that, wherever possible, the home language, mother tongue, local language, or regional language should be used as the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, and preferably until Grade 8 and beyond. It also encourages bilingual approaches and the development of learning materials in home languages (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020). The policy does not require students to choose between learning English and learning through a familiar language. Rather, it recognises the educational value of multilingualism.

The key challenge is implementation. A multilingual policy can only be effective when schools have appropriate materials, trained teachers, and realistic support for students who move between languages. English should be taught well, but it should not become a reason to undervalue students' existing linguistic knowledge. Strong foundations in a home language and meaningful opportunities to learn English can be complementary rather than competing goals.

5. English and Employment Opportunities

English proficiency is frequently treated as an advantage in India's labour market, particularly in sectors that involve international clients, digital services, higher education, and communication across linguistic boundaries. It can help applicants participate in interviews, prepare professional documents, communicate with colleagues, and access training materials. In some occupations, English is a practical requirement; in others, it is an additional skill that may distinguish one candidate from another.

The gap between educational policy and classroom practice is particularly important in this debate. The National Education Policy 2020 supports the use of students' home languages in the early years of education, while also recognising the importance of multilingual learning. However, Jayadeva's (2019) research in Bangalore shows that choosing an English-medium school does not necessarily guarantee high-quality English instruction or improved social mobility. This suggests that the medium of instruction alone cannot determine educational outcomes. Teacher preparation, classroom resources, students' opportunities to practise English, and the quality of subject teaching must also be considered. Consequently, expanding English education requires more than increasing the number of English-medium schools; it requires improving what students actually learn in those schools.

This evidence is important for two reasons. First, it indicates that English ability may be economically valuable. Second, it shows that the value of English is connected with other forms of advantage, including education and experience. English does not operate independently of qualifications, occupational opportunities, or the quality of schooling. A person may speak English but still lack the technical knowledge or professional experience required for a particular job.

It is therefore more accurate to understand English as one component of employability rather than as a guarantee of success. Its benefits are greatest when language skills are combined with relevant education, professional competence, and access to employment networks. If high-quality English instruction is available mainly to already advantaged groups, the labour-market value of English may contribute to the continuation of inequality.

6. English, Social Inequality, and Gender

The relationship between English and social inequality is one of the most important questions in the Indian context. English is often associated with confidence, modernity, education, and professional status. In some settings, the ability to speak English fluently can influence how a person is evaluated, even when language proficiency is not directly related to the person's knowledge or ability. This can place speakers of other languages at a disadvantage and create pressure to acquire English as a marker of social respectability.

Access to English is shaped by more than personal motivation. Family income can influence the type of school a child attends, whether additional tuition is affordable, and whether English is used in the home or community. Geography also matters: students in urban areas may have more access to private institutions, language centres, and digital resources than students in remote or poorly served areas. Caste and class relations can further influence the distribution of educational opportunities. These factors help explain why the language can be both a route towards mobility and a marker of existing privilege.

Highet's (2022) ethnographic study adds an important gender dimension. Based on fieldwork at an organisation in Delhi that offered English training to disadvantaged young people, the study explores how women seeking social mobility through English navigate expectations surrounding femininity, tradition, and modernity. English may be understood as a resource for employment and independence, but women's use of it can also be interpreted through social expectations about appropriate behaviour. Highet's findings therefore complicate the idea that acquiring English automatically produces empowerment. The social value attached to a speaker's language practices can change according to the situation and the expectations of other people.

Minz and Doreswamy (2023) similarly question the assumption that English offers limitless opportunities to disadvantaged communities. Their discussion highlights the tension between the promise of English as a route to mobility and the structural barriers that restrict access to effective learning. Taken together, these studies suggest that English can create opportunities, but the outcomes depend on the social conditions in which people learn and use it.

The findings of Highet (2022) and Minz and Doreswamy (2023) show why English should not be viewed as an automatic solution to social inequality. Highet's study illustrates that English can offer young women access to education and employment while also placing them under social expectations concerning behaviour and identity. Minz and Doreswamy (2023), in turn, question the idea that English alone can overcome the disadvantages experienced by marginalised communities. These arguments reveal that language opportunities are closely connected to social position. A learner may develop English proficiency but still face discrimination or limited access to employment and education. For this reason, improving English education must be accompanied by efforts to address the social and institutional barriers that restrict people's opportunities.

7. English and India's Multilingual Identity

English exists alongside India's many regional, national, and community languages. These languages carry cultural memory, literature, local knowledge, family relationships, and regional identities. Their importance cannot be measured only by their usefulness in the formal labour market. For many people, a home or regional language is central to belonging and everyday communication.

The relationship between English and Indian languages is sometimes described as a competition. Concerns arise when English becomes the preferred language of prestigious education or employment and other languages are treated as less valuable. Such attitudes can weaken the status of local languages in particular institutions. However, it would be misleading to assume that the growth of English necessarily requires the decline of Indian languages. Many people use different languages for different purposes: a regional language at home, another language in wider communication, and English in certain academic or professional contexts.

English in India has also developed local characteristics. Indian English is shaped by the country's linguistic and cultural environment, including distinctive vocabulary, pronunciation, and patterns of use. It should not be understood simply as an imperfect version of British or American English. Its development illustrates how a language can become adapted to the society in which it is used.

Bhattacharya (2022) emphasises that English operates in dialogue with India's multilingual networks. The National Education Policy 2020 also promotes multilingualism and supports the teaching and development of Indian languages alongside English (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020). These positions point towards an inclusive model in which learning English does not require abandoning other languages. The aim should be to expand people's linguistic resources, not replace one language with another.

8. Discussion and Recommendations

The literature reviewed in this article presents a consistent but nuanced picture. English can provide access to education, employment, and wider communication. The wage analysis by Azam et al. (2013) offers quantitative evidence of economic returns for men in the 2005 survey, while Jayadeva (2019) shows that English-medium schooling can be connected with both mobility and inequality. Highet (2022) demonstrates that the social meaning of English is also shaped by gender and local expectations. Minz and Doreswamy (2023) further caution against presenting English as a universal solution to structural disadvantage.

A comparison of the selected studies indicates that the benefits of English depend on more than language proficiency itself. Azam et al. (2013) identify an economic advantage associated with English skills, but their findings do not mean that every English speaker will automatically achieve a higher income. Jayadeva (2019) adds an educational perspective by showing that English-medium schooling can reproduce differences between families rather than remove them. Highet (2022) further demonstrates that the social meaning of English is influenced by gender expectations, while Minz and Doreswamy (2023) question whether English can provide equal opportunities for communities facing structural disadvantage.

Although these studies focus on different groups and settings, they point to a common issue: the benefits of English depend on the conditions in which it is taught, learned, and used. English can support economic and educational mobility, but it cannot independently remove inequalities related to class, gender, location, or access to quality schooling.

This comparison suggests three priorities for language education in India. First, public schools need better-trained English teachers and appropriate learning materials so that students are not disadvantaged by their family income or location. Second, schools should be evaluated according to teaching quality and students' actual learning outcomes, rather than simply being described as English-medium institutions. Third, English education should be developed alongside home and regional languages. Such an approach would allow students to gain access to wider educational and professional opportunities without treating their existing languages as barriers to progress.

Finally, language policy should recognise that English and Indian languages can serve complementary purposes. English can connect learners with international knowledge and professional networks, while home and regional languages support comprehension, identity, and cultural continuity. A balanced approach would widen access to English without creating the impression that other languages are obstacles to progress.

9. Limitations and Further Research

This article is based on a selected narrative review and does not present new empirical data. The studies discussed differ in their methods, dates, locations, and participant groups. For example, the wage estimates reported by Azam et al. (2013) are based on data from 2005, while Jayadeva's (2019) research focuses on low-cost English-medium schooling in Bangalore and Highet's (2022) ethnographic work concerns an English-training organisation in Delhi. These findings provide valuable insights but cannot represent the experiences of every Indian state, language group, or occupational sector.

Further research could compare access to English education across rural and urban areas and across different school systems. More recent labour-market research could also examine how English interacts with digital skills, professional qualifications, gender, and regional economic conditions. In addition, research involving students, teachers, parents, and employers could clarify how language policies are experienced in practice. Such work would help identify which forms of English teaching expand opportunity without weakening multilingual education.

10. Conclusion

This article has examined the role of English in modern Indian society by focusing on education, employment, social inequality, and multilingual identity. The reviewed research suggests that English proficiency can provide economic advantages and improve access to educational and professional opportunities. Azam et al. (2013), for example, identify a positive relationship between English-language skills and wages. However, this economic benefit should be

understood in relation to the opportunities people have to acquire English, rather than as a result of individual ability alone.

The analysis also demonstrates that access to English education remains unequal. Jayadeva's (2019) research shows that English-medium schooling does not automatically guarantee better educational outcomes. Highet (2022) and Minz and Doreswamy (2023) further illustrate that gender expectations and structural disadvantages influence how English is learned and used. These findings answer the article's second research question: social and institutional conditions strongly influence who benefits from English. Therefore, English proficiency should not be treated as a complete measure of a person's intelligence, professional ability, or potential.

Regarding India's multilingual identity, English and Indian languages should not be considered competing choices. English can provide access to international communication and professional networks, while regional and home languages remain essential for cultural identity and learning. The most effective approach is therefore to improve access to quality English education while supporting multilingual instruction. English can contribute to social mobility, but its benefits become more inclusive only when educational opportunities are distributed more fairly.

References

1. Azam, M., Chin, A., & Prakash, N. (2013). The returns to English-language skills in India. *Economic Development and Cultural Change, 61*(2), 335–367. https://doi.org/10.1086/668277https://doi.org/10.1086/668277
2. Bhattacharya, U. (2022). The teaching of English in India. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.1777https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.1777
3. Highet, K. (2022). "She will control my son": Navigating womanhood, English and social mobility in India. *Journal of Sociolinguistics, 26*(5), 648–665. https://doi.org/10.1111/josl.12567https://doi.org/10.1111/josl.12567
4. Jayadeva, S. (2019). English-medium: Schooling, social mobility, and inequality in Bangalore, India. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly, 50*(2), 151–169. https://doi.org/10.1111/aeq.12287https://doi.org/10.1111/aeq.12287
5. Ministry of Education, Government of India. (2020). *National Education Policy 2020*. Government of India. https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English.pdf
6. Minz, S. S., & Doreswamy. (2023). Strengths and limits of limitless English in India: A critical reflection on the relationship of English to a backward community. *Social Identities, 29*(2), 171–184. https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2023.2208055https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2023.2208055