

English: the language of business

SATYENDRA IS the son of a factory foreman in Kanpur whose father worked hard to give him the education he did not get. Satyendra graduated as an engineer and took off for Bangalore to get a job with six months' living money from his father. He lived with friends who had made the same pilgrimage before but he didn't get a job for six months; not because he didn't know what he was talking about but because his English just didn't let him communicate who he was, what he knew, how hungry he was to learn, and how hard he would work.

He came to me through a close family contact (okay, grandmother's fatwa) and we hired him as a trainee. This workplace exposure allowed him to work on his communication and confidence and after nine months with us, he now works at Infosys. Unfortunately, the story of most students from non-English medium schools does not end this way.

English is the language of business in India. Language is an emotional subject, so I will stick to the facts. Just as the adoption of standards like windows, railway gauges, and internet protocols lead to greater interoperability and usage, English has integrated our diversity. As a country with 22 languages in our constitution, English is a "subsidiary official language" that is used for most official and inter-state correspondence.

Historian Ramachandra Guha considers not forcing the adoption of Hindi as the official language as one of the geniuses of the Independent India's founding fathers. He attributes some of the troubles of Sri Lanka with its Tamil North and Pakistan with Bangladesh to their insistence on thrusting a language onto a reluctant people. So English is a gift.

But English has also become a curse. Languages capture the ethos, dreams and experiences of a culture, but tragically, of the 7,000 languages spoken in the world today, one of them dies every two weeks.

As David Harrison, a professor of linguistics at Swarthmore, says, "When we lose a language, we lose centuries of human thinking about time, seasons, sea creatures, mathematics, landscapes, edible flowers, myths, music, the unknown, and the everyday."

Drivers of the death of languages are many but experts view the global adoption of English as one of them. If it is any consolation, India is not one of the five "global hotspots" for language extinction recently identified by National Geographic.

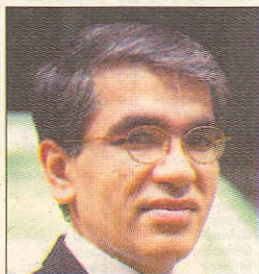
I'm not an anthropologist but work for a people supply chain company at the epicenter of India's labour market agony and ecstasy.

We have thousands of people we can't find jobs for and have thousands of jobs for which we can't find people. Unfortunately, students coming from non-English medium schools have a high correlation in lacking the communication skills that new jobs and workplace in India demands.

English is a vocational skill. It is the language of interviews, expense reports, performance appraisals and the software used to document them. It also is the foundation of many service job soft skills in a country where manufacturing is only 11 per cent of

jobs. Most candidates without fluent English feel handicapped for no fault of theirs.

At the risk of sounding like a cultural brute, India and her people must take pride in our many languages but accept that non-English schools have poor employment outcomes. My fatwa issuing grandmother ran five Hindi medium schools in Kanpur for 5,000 students for forty years and never tired of trying to fix my Hindi weakness (which she did). But given the realities of employability, with a heavy heart, she has now moved all her schools to English medium. I wish all 82-year-old education patriarchs were as pragmatic as her.



Language Skills

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English fluency is like Windows; an operating system that we may not like but without which we are handicapped in the new world of work