

The English in South Asian Contexts: Exploring Historical Development to Present Role in Education

Bishnu Kumar Khadka^{1*}

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the historical evolution and the current role of South Asian English (SAE) in the region's education systems, with a particular focus on its function as a medium of instruction (EMI). By integrating both historical and contemporary insights, the article offers a detailed examination of how SAE has shaped educational practices. The methodology follows a systematic review process, involving the collection, analysis, and synthesis of scholarly works, government policies, and reports on English in South Asia. The findings highlight SAE's dual role in acknowledging the region's linguistic diversity while positioning English as a key tool for both local and global interactions. Tracing SAE's origins to British colonial rule, the article explains how English was initially imposed for administrative purposes and later embraced by local elites. Over time, English became instrumental in governance, law, and education, often viewed as a neutral language to manage linguistic diversity. The rise of English-medium institutions further solidified its importance, resulting in a bilingual population fluent in both English and native languages. Today, SAE has evolved into a dynamic form of English, characterized by distinct local accents, idiomatic expressions, and cultural influences, giving rise to a unique linguistic identity in the region. The article also addresses current debates about the dominance of English in education, weighing the benefits of global connectivity against the need to preserve indigenous languages. It further explores pedagogical challenges and innovations in teaching SAE, particularly within multilingual classrooms. The article concludes by advocating for a balanced approach that incorporates SAE into a multilingual education system, promoting inclusivity and equitable learning opportunities throughout South Asia.

INTRODUCTION

English's status as a global lingua franca is not solely a result of its historical spread, but also its growing acceptance among diverse linguistic communities. Fishman (1992) points out that the global spread of English is increasingly driven by the interests of "non-English mother-tongue" speakers (p. 15). This indicates a shift in English's role from a colonial language to one of international communication, fulfilling various social, economic, and educational functions. However, Fishman warns that the unchecked expansion of English needs careful regulation to prevent linguistic inequity and the marginalization of other languages. His concerns about the cultural and linguistic dominance of English continue to influence debates on linguistic imperialism.

Crystal (2004) expands on this global role of English, noting the profound changes in the dynamics of global English over the past fifty years. He observes that the influence of English has led to the adoption of English loanwords in many languages, reshaping local linguistic environments (p. 42). Furthermore, he highlights the decline of British English as the global standard, noting that it now constitutes only around 4% of global English speakers, making it a minority dialect within the diverse landscape of World Englishes. In contrast, American English, supported by the United States' political and economic power, represents around 15% of English speakers globally. Crystal (2004) also suggests that India,

due to its colonial past and continued use of English in education and governance, likely surpasses both Britain and the USA in the number of English speakers (pp. 23-24).

Building on this, Crystal (2004) emphasizes that India ranks third in the world in terms of English speakers, following the USA and UK. He underscores the demographic importance of the Indian subcontinent, which includes India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bhutan, as it accounts for nearly one-fifth of the world's population. Crystal attributes the spread of English in this region to the historical forces of British colonialism and the rise of the United States as an economic superpower in the 20th century, both of which cemented English's dominance (p. 53). These observations highlight the enduring influence of colonialism and global economic power in shaping the role of English, particularly in South Asia. English in this region has evolved into a distinct variety known as South Asian English (SAE), functioning not only as a communication tool but also as a symbol of social mobility.

This critical analysis reveals the shifting power dynamics within English-speaking communities, emphasizing how English has become deeply embedded in non-native contexts. The continued expansion of English, particularly in regions like South Asia, reflects both its colonial legacy and its evolving role in modern global economic and social structures. Thus, while English

¹ Department of English Education, Mid-West University, Surkhet, Nepal

* Corresponding author's e-mail: luckybishnu@gmail.com

enables international communication, it also raises important questions about linguistic equity and the preservation of linguistic diversity.

South Asian English (SAE) refers to the distinct varieties of English spoken in countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. Its evolution from a colonial tool to a key medium in education reflects the region's complex sociopolitical history and cultural dynamics. During British colonial rule, English was introduced primarily as a language of governance and the elite. However, in the post-colonial era, English has grown into an essential medium for communication, education, and socioeconomic mobility across these nations. Kachru (1983) highlights this transformation, noting the “renewed enthusiasm” for English in post-colonial South Asia, especially in India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Rather than disappearing with the end of the British Raj, English was “South Asianized,” adapting to local contexts and becoming deeply rooted in the culture (p. 18). This shift exemplifies the dynamics of language and power, as a once-imposed language morphed into a local tool for communication and identity formation in post-colonial South Asia.

The historical development of SAE dates back to the expansion of the British East India Company in the 17th century. Over time, English became deeply embedded in the region, serving as a language of power, prestige, and opportunity. Kachru (1983) describes English during colonial rule as a “politically superimposed language” that later transitioned into a unifying force in multilingual nations like India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. After independence, English maintained its importance in governance, law, and education, gradually becoming a part of these nations' linguistic fabric. In modern times, SAE reflects the region's rich linguistic diversity, incorporating local accents, idioms, and cultural nuances. These unique variants of English differ considerably from British or American English. Despite its growing influence, SAE's role in education remains a topic of debate. While it is valued for its utility in global communication and academic success, there are concerns about its impact on indigenous languages and cultural identities. As Crystal (2004) notes, English-medium education has become widespread in multilingual South Asia, resulting in a bilingual populace that is proficient in both English and native languages.

Based on a literature review, this article explores the historical development of SAE and its current role in education across South Asia. It examines the evolution of SAE from its colonial roots to its present status as a prestigious language within modern education systems. Additionally, the paper addresses the challenges and opportunities SAE presents in multilingual classrooms, as well as the implications of its dominance for local languages and identities. By reviewing both historical and contemporary contexts, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of SAE's educational role and its potential for promoting equity and inclusivity

within South Asian education systems. The study also aims to bridge the gap by exploring the pedagogical challenges and innovations in teaching SAE, particularly in multilingual settings, and contributing to the ongoing discourse on language policy and equity in education. This research underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of SAE's role in fostering inclusivity and equity in a region where linguistic diversity is closely tied to cultural identity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

English has become a dominant language in South Asia, significantly influencing the region's educational, social, and cultural landscapes. Introduced during British colonial rule, English initially served as a tool for administrative governance, political control, and cultural domination (Ferguson, 2009). Over time, the language evolved from a symbol of colonial power into a crucial medium for communication, education, and social advancement. This literature review traces the historical development of English in South Asia and examines its contemporary role in educational systems and policies. The spread of English in South Asia represents a complex phenomenon shaped by historical, linguistic, and socio-economic dynamics. It interacts with diverse regional languages, identities, and social structures, contributing both to opportunities for social mobility and to challenges of equity and cultural preservation. English is widely perceived as a vehicle for accessing global knowledge and economic opportunities, but its growing dominance raises concerns about linguistic inclusion and the erosion of indigenous languages (Sultana *et al.*, 2021). Analyzing the trajectory of English—from its colonial introduction to its current role as a medium of instruction—provides insights into broader issues related to language policy, educational access, and linguistic diversity in the region.

South Asia is home to a multilingual environment, with over 700 languages spoken across the region (Lewis *et al.*, 2013, as cited in Sultana, 2024). India alone accounts for 454 active languages, while Nepal, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh together contribute over 250 more. English, functioning as a lingua franca, permeates multiple domains, including education, administration, commerce, media, and law (Low, 2022). In postcolonial India, English was embraced as a neutral language, unaligned with any particular ethnic or regional group, which positioned it as an effective medium for nationwide communication (Bhatia, 2022). This neutrality has been key to its acceptance and continued use within professional and educational sectors. English's entry into South Asia can be traced back to the early phases of British exploration, missionary activities, and imperial expansion in the seventeenth century. Initially used as a colonial instrument of power, English was imposed with little regard for the region's diverse linguistic landscape (Ferguson, 2009). However, South Asia's linguistic diversity predated the colonial era, with regional languages deeply embedded in the cultural and social practices

of the people (Bhattacharya, 2010). The introduction of English disrupted traditional linguistic practices, creating hierarchies that favored English over indigenous languages and reshaped educational structures to align with colonial interests.

The impact of English varies across the nations of South Asia, reflecting their distinct political histories and language policies. In Pakistan, English plays a crucial role in governance and professional sectors, coexisting with Urdu, the national language. While Urdu was designated as Pakistan's national language by the 1973 Constitution, English remains the official language used in governance and competitive examinations (Shamim, 2023; Sultana, 2024). Similarly, in Bangladesh, although English is classified as a foreign language, it holds considerable value in education and employment, serving as a means of securing better opportunities and upward mobility (Sultana *et al.*, 2021). Karim (2024) highlights that English is widely used in Bangladeshi media, particularly in newspapers, demonstrating its importance in shaping public discourse.

Sri Lanka adopted English during the colonial period, with the Colebrooke Commission declaring it an official language as early as 1833 (Sivaji & Iyer, 2023). Today, Sri Lankan English has evolved into a localized variety, incorporating elements from regional languages and reflecting the island's linguistic pluralism (Sultana, 2024). Bhutan, too, uses English extensively in business, administration, education, and media, where it functions as a second language (Dendup, 2020; Tshering, 2020). In Afghanistan, although Pashto and Dari dominate everyday communication, English has emerged as a growing language for international exchange and higher education (Alamyar, 2017). In contexts like Afghanistan, the use of students' first language (L1) alongside English enhances comprehension and instructional effectiveness. As Sadiqi (2024) notes, teachers in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms use Persian to teach vocabulary, clarify grammar, and provide detailed instructions, enabling students to better grasp complex concepts. This bilingual approach reflects a broader strategy to balance local linguistic practices with the demands of English-language learning, ensuring students are not alienated from their cultural and linguistic roots.

The introduction of English to South Asia was not a neutral or benign process; it was part of a broader colonial strategy aimed at reshaping the region's educational and social structures. English was used to create a class of intermediaries loyal to colonial authorities, marginalizing indigenous languages and disrupting long-established linguistic practices (Bhattacharya, 2010). Although many languages coexisted before British intervention, the elevation of English resulted in significant cultural and linguistic shifts that continue to affect identity and communication in the region today. Post-independence, the role of English has shifted from being a colonial imposition to a tool of opportunity and empowerment, especially in education. Yet, this shift has not come

without challenges. While English facilitates access to global knowledge and enhances employment prospects, it also raises issues of linguistic equity and cultural preservation. The dominance of English in education, especially through English Medium Instruction (EMI), can lead to the marginalization of local languages, further entrenching socio-economic inequalities.

The historical trajectory of English in South Asia reflects a complex interplay between power, language, and identity. Although the language has evolved from a colonial tool into a valuable resource for communication and education, its impact on linguistic diversity and social equity remains a subject of ongoing debate. This literature review highlights the dual nature of English as both a means of opportunity and a source of exclusion, emphasizing the need for balanced language policies that promote multilingualism while ensuring access to quality education and global opportunities. Understanding the nuanced role of English in the region's educational systems provides critical insights into the development of equitable language policies and practices for the future.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive research design based on a systematic literature review. The methodology follows a systematic review process that involves the collection, analysis, and synthesis of scholarly works, government documents, and reports related to the use of English in South Asia. The focus is on secondary data sources, including historical accounts, linguistic research, educational reports, and policy analyses. The review method is used to synthesize the development and current role of SAE across the South Asian nations, including India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. The primary aim is to explore the evolution of South Asian English (SAE) and its role in education. The data were collected through extensive searches of academic databases, including JSTOR, Google Scholar, and institutional repositories, focusing on publications between the late 19th century and the present. The search was restricted to peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and policy documents from 1950 onwards to capture both the colonial and postcolonial periods. The publications based on the development and role of English in education in South Asian countries, studies on language policies, and articles discussing the socio-political context of English language use in the region. The data analysis followed a thematic approach, wherein the selected studies were analyzed based on recurring themes related to the development and role of English in education across different South Asian countries. The findings were synthesized to provide a coherent narrative of the historical development of South Asian English and its evolving role in the education systems of countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. This study was limited by its reliance on secondary sources, which may present a gap in the latest empirical data. Furthermore, language policies and their

implementation vary significantly across South Asia, meaning that generalizations may not fully capture the nuances of each country's educational context. As a review-based study, this research ensures that all sources are properly cited, and credit is given to original authors. No new data collection from human subjects was involved, and the study complies with ethical standards for academic research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The historical development of English in South Asia is rooted in the region's colonial past, with British administrators introducing the language in the early 19th century as a tool for governance and control. Macaulay's Minute on Education (1835) played a pivotal role in promoting English as a medium for educating a class of intermediaries between the colonial rulers and the local population. Over time, English became a symbol of prestige and social mobility, especially in urban areas, and retained its significance post-independence. Today, English occupies a multifaceted role across South Asia, serving as a medium of communication in governance, business, media, and education. However, the language simultaneously creates opportunities and reinforces inequalities, particularly in multilingual contexts like India, Pakistan, and Nepal, where English coexists with indigenous languages. This complexity has also given rise to unique regional varieties collectively known as South Asian Englishes (SAE), each shaped by cultural and linguistic influences. As these varieties reflect the region's diversity, they further localize English as a regional as well as a global language.

In education, English plays a crucial but contested role. English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) is prevalent in higher education, especially in countries like Pakistan and Sri Lanka, while others, like Nepal and Bangladesh, employ dual-language policies. Despite efforts to make education inclusive, EMI remains a marker of socio-economic privilege, with access to quality English education often limited to urban and elite groups. The complex relationship between English, education, and equity underscores both the empowering potential of the language and the challenges in ensuring equal access and inclusivity across the region. The various aspects of English in South Asian contexts can be further explored in the following sections:

Historical Development of English in South Asia

The integration of English into South Asia began in December 1600, marking the early stages of its introduction through trade, missionary activities, and colonial governance. Early missionary efforts between 1600 and 1765 were limited but gradually expanded in major Indian cities, including Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras (Kachru, 1983). Sri Lanka also experienced the influence of English during this period, where missionary-driven English education started in Colombo in 1799. By 1831, 235 mission schools had been established, growing

substantially by 1886 (Kachru, 1983). These efforts were not just educational but part of a broader colonial agenda to impose Western values and consolidate power. The spread of English education was framed as a "civilizing mission," reinforcing colonial hierarchies and marginalizing local cultures.

By the 1980s, English had evolved beyond an administrative tool to become a medium of intellectual and creative expression across South Asia. Countries such as Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka began to develop distinct varieties of English, producing writers who gained global recognition (Kachru, 1983). South Asian authors used English to express postcolonial identities and articulate their experiences, exemplifying the language's dual role as both a colonial legacy and a means of cultural empowerment. This transition reflects how South Asian societies reappropriated English, transforming it into a medium for literary expression and social commentary, thus engaging with and challenging their colonial past. The emergence of internationally acclaimed writers underscores the region's ability to use English to reframe narratives from a postcolonial perspective, asserting local identities within global literary spaces.

The proliferation of English across the region also reshaped the linguistic landscape, giving rise to South Asian English (SAE). This localized variety of English, enriched by indigenous idioms, loanwords, and cultural references, reflects the region's linguistic diversity and is now recognized globally as a distinct form of English. However, despite extensive research on the historical spread of English and its adoption by local elites (Kachru, 1983; Fishman, 1992), there is limited understanding of how SAE functions within contemporary education systems, particularly in multilingual classrooms. Addressing this gap is essential, as the dominance of SAE in education presents both opportunities and challenges. While SAE serves as a vehicle for global connectivity and upward mobility, it also raises concerns about the erosion of local languages and cultural identities. Educational systems today must strike a balance between promoting SAE and preserving linguistic diversity.

The ongoing dominance of English in South Asia continues to represent both a tool for socio-economic advancement and a potential threat to local linguistic and cultural heritage. While past studies often center on the imposition of English during colonial rule, they overlook the ways in which SAE has adapted to modern educational challenges. This is especially important as today's education systems grapple with balancing SAE's dominance with the preservation of indigenous languages. Multilingual classrooms, in particular, require pedagogical strategies that acknowledge SAE's evolving role while protecting linguistic diversity. The ongoing dominance of English can be seen as both a tool for global opportunity and a potential threat to local linguistic and cultural identities.

English in South Asia

English plays a crucial role in South Asia, serving as both a medium for communication across linguistic and ethnic groups and a vehicle for cultural exchange and social mobility. In nations like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives, English functions as a bridge language, facilitating communication among speakers of different native languages. Bhattacharya (2010) underscores the significance of English as a vital lingua franca in the region, enabling cross-cultural dialogue and transferring cultural heritage among diverse speech communities. Its pervasive use in daily life not only shapes distinct community identities but also acts as a tool for social empowerment. The historical backdrop of British colonialism provided the foundation for the establishment of English, which has since evolved into a powerful medium for governance, education, and global interaction.

McArthur (2006) identifies Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka as the South Asian countries where English operates as a primary “link language” and a “window on the world.” This influence stems largely from British colonial activities in commerce, imperialism, education, and missionary work, dating back to the 17th century. Despite the region’s linguistic diversity, common elements like the Indo-Aryan and Dravidian language families, as well as historical influences from Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic, and English, create a shared linguistic heritage. This commonality, combined with the colonial legacy, underscores the role of English as a unifying medium across South Asia. Kachru (2004) offers a linguistic analysis of South Asian English, describing it as a unique “linguistic area” with features distinct from other non-native varieties of English in regions such as Japan and Europe. He categorizes South Asian English into two sub-varieties: Educated South Asian English, shaped by formal education, and broken English, influenced by context and language acquisition. These variations reflect the socio-economic differences in how English is appropriated across South Asia.

McArthur (2006) also argues for the broader use of the term “South Asian English” instead of “Indian English” or “English of the Indian subcontinent,” especially given the political changes following the 1947 partition of British India. He notes that the term “Indian English” is inappropriate for countries like Nepal, which was never part of India. The linguistic similarities in English varieties across India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal—due to shared cultural and religious factors—support the use of “South Asian English” as a regional designation. However, the status of South Asian English as a non-native variety often leads to its perception as inferior compared to inner-circle English varieties. Kachru (2006) critiques this view, emphasizing that linguistic innovations in South Asia should not be dismissed as “acquisitional deficiencies” for deviating from British norms. Instead, these innovations reflect the cultural contexts in which they emerge and contribute to effective communication

within the region.

Eaglestone (2002) supports this perspective, noting that despite linguistic variations, English varieties in South Asia are mutually intelligible and reflect a shared historical identity. This recognition of linguistic diversity enhances English’s evolution as a global language, adaptable to different cultural contexts. However, Bhattacharya (2010) offers a critical view, pointing out that in countries like Nepal, English often serves as a marker of social status, functioning more as a “decorative language” than a purely functional medium. The symbolic use of English as a status indicator raises concerns about socio-economic inequalities and the limited access to opportunities tied to English proficiency. These issues highlight the need for further examination of English’s role in perpetuating social hierarchies.

This analysis demonstrates that English in South Asia is not merely a colonial relic but a dynamic, evolving language shaped by historical, cultural, and socio-political factors. While it acts as a powerful force for regional unity and global engagement, English also plays a role in reinforcing social stratification. Understanding its impact on equity and access is crucial, as proficiency in English in contemporary South Asia is closely linked to social status and opportunities. As Bhattacharya (2010) observes, fluency in English has become a marker of modernity and progress, with its use in everyday life contributing to the formation of community identities. Moreover, English serves as a neutral medium, enabling effective communication across diverse linguistic backgrounds, thereby fostering regional cooperation and integration.

South Asian Englishes: A Variety of English

The term South Asian Englishes refers to the diverse forms of English that have emerged across countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, reflecting the region’s linguistic and cultural complexity. While these varieties originated during British colonial rule, they have evolved beyond imitating native English models, acquiring unique local identities influenced by indigenous languages, cultural practices, and socio-political dynamics (Kachru, 2004). These regional Englishes are not mere copies of British or American English but function as independent varieties, widely used in education, media, governance, and business. Their significance extends beyond practical communication—they also serve as symbols of modernity and local identity, promoting regional connectivity while simultaneously reflecting socio-economic disparities (Götz, 2022). Despite their essential role in South Asian societies, debates persist about their legitimacy, normative status, and relevance in global communication.

The development of Indian English can be traced back to the late 16th century with the arrival of British missionaries, who initially sought to spread Christianity among the upper classes. However, the systematic use of English in India expanded after the Charter Act of 1813, which allowed missionary activities to flourish (Vennila,

2018, as cited in Kraaz & Bernaisch, 2022). English became a tool for disseminating European knowledge and values, with the British administration creating a class of Indians who could assist in governance and relay colonial ideologies to the masses through local languages (Annamalai, 2004; Mohanty, 2019; Kaushik & Khanna, 2023).

In Sri Lanka, the spread of English occurred later, primarily through trade connections, particularly in the cinnamon trade, between the British East India Company and local communities. Missionary schools established in the early 19th century laid the foundation for Sri Lankan English, blending British and American linguistic influences, which contributed to phonetic variations within the variety (Gunsekera, 2005). These schools also played a pivotal role in shaping Sri Lanka's modern educational system, with their influence still visible in contemporary sociolinguistic practices (de Silva, 1981). This process demonstrates how education became a key colonial instrument for institutionalizing English across the region.

While most South Asian countries experienced direct colonial rule, Nepal's case was distinct. Though it was never formally colonized by the British, English still holds significant importance in Nepal, particularly in business, education, tourism, and trade (Pandey, 2020). Unlike other countries in the region, English in Nepal did not spread through missionary activities or colonial administration, leading to a unique developmental trajectory. Scholars have observed the emergence of localized forms of Nepali English, with distinct phonetic, grammatical, and lexical features (Hartford, 1993; Sharma, 2009, 2012; Giri, 2014; Adhikari, 2017; Götz, 2022). A compelling theory suggests that India acts as a linguistic epicenter for South Asia, influencing the development of neighboring English varieties, including Nepali English (Hoffmann *et al.*, 2011; Hundt, 2013; Leitner, 1992; Götz, 2022). Indian English, referred to by Bernaisch and Lange (2012) as the "lead variety for the entire Indian subcontinent," exerts a considerable impact on the linguistic landscape of South Asia (p. 10). For example, Sri Lankan English has already followed the trajectory set by Indian English, and similar patterns are emerging in Maldivian, Nepali, and Pakistani English (Götz, 2022).

The codification and standardization of South Asian Englishes highlight the region's efforts to assert linguistic agency in the postcolonial era. These varieties are no longer viewed as deviations from British norms but as legitimate English forms with their own grammatical rules and communicative functions (Kraaz & Bernaisch, 2022). This shift represents a broader trend in postcolonial societies, where localized English varieties are gaining recognition for their role in reflecting cultural identities and enhancing social cohesion. However, debates about linguistic legitimacy persist, especially in educational contexts. For example, while South Asian Englishes are widely accepted in informal settings and media, they often face challenges in academia and international

communication, where native English norms dominate. This tension reflects broader concerns about global linguistic hierarchies and the perceived inferiority of non-native varieties (Kachru, 2006). Furthermore, in countries like Nepal, English proficiency is closely tied to socio-economic status, with fluency often serving as a marker of privilege and access to opportunities (Bhattacharya, 2010).

Despite these challenges, South Asian Englishes play a crucial role in fostering regional cooperation and global interaction. Eaglestone (2002) emphasizes that these varieties, though diverse, are mutually intelligible and reflect a shared historical identity, promoting communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries. As South Asian societies continue to modernize, English functions not only as a tool for upward mobility but also as a neutral medium, enabling interaction among speakers from diverse linguistic backgrounds. This adaptability enhances the role of South Asian Englishes as an essential component of the region's linguistic repertoire and a facilitator of global engagement.

In conclusion, South Asian Englishes represent a vibrant and evolving variety of English, deeply rooted in the region's historical, cultural, and linguistic contexts. While these varieties are shaped by colonial legacies, they have developed distinct local identities that reflect the complexities of modern South Asian societies. Their role extends beyond communication, encompassing education, business, governance, and media, while also symbolizing both modernity and regional identity. However, the challenges of linguistic legitimacy and socio-economic inequality underscore the need for continued scholarly engagement with these varieties. As South Asian Englishes gain recognition as legitimate forms of communication, they will likely play an increasingly prominent role in shaping the region's linguistic future.

English in Education in South Asia

English plays a critical role in education throughout South Asia, deeply rooted in the region's colonial history and linked to its current socio-economic aspirations. Countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka rely on English not only as a medium of instruction but also as a symbol of academic prestige, social mobility, and access to global opportunities. Particularly in higher education, English dominates subjects like science, technology, and business, making it essential for success in an increasingly interconnected world. However, this prominence also presents challenges, especially regarding linguistic equity and access. English can act as both a gateway and a barrier—while it opens doors to opportunity, it also disadvantages students from rural areas or non-English-speaking communities. Balancing English's role with the preservation of local languages and promoting inclusivity remains a critical issue in South Asian education systems (Bhattacharya, 2010; Giri *et al.*, 2024).

The imposition of English in South Asia was largely driven by colonial interests, often at the expense of the region's indigenous education systems. Classical languages such as Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic—alongside various local languages—were sidelined as English rose to prominence. This shift disrupted linguistic norms, reinforcing colonial hierarchies by associating English with power, privilege, and access to government employment. As Ferguson (2009) observes, the introduction of English as a colonial tool was aimed at maintaining control rather than fostering local development. Similarly, Giri *et al.* (2024) highlight that English-medium instruction (EMI) became intertwined with the concept of modern education, shaping South Asia's education policies from the colonial era to the present.

The foundation for English education in India was laid with the Charter Act of 1813, which marked a policy shift toward expanding English education. By 1835, Macaulay's infamous "Minute on Indian Education" further entrenched English in the education system, emphasizing the creation of a class of Indians who could mediate between the British rulers and the broader populace (Raina, 2009). English education quickly gained traction, especially in Bengal, where locals embraced English-language texts, even before the establishment of universities in 1856. Christian missionaries also played a significant role in spreading English, setting up schools that educated elite Bengali boys, further embedding the language into the social fabric (Bhattacharya, 2010).

Several key institutions fostered the spread of English education in South Asia. Hindu College, founded in 1816-1817 in Calcutta, emphasized English literature and European sciences over traditional subjects, while Bishop's College, established in 1820, focused on educating Eurasian children with English as the medium of instruction (Bhattacharya, 2010). Fort William College, founded in 1800, further contributed by publishing textbooks in both English and vernacular languages, promoting the spread of English knowledge and culture (Butalia, 2010). These institutions widened the socio-economic divide between the English-educated elite and those without access to such education, a division that leaders like Gandhi and Vidyasagar critiqued, arguing that Macaulay's education policies subjugated India both politically and intellectually (Bhattacharya, 2010). Despite these criticisms, English remains a vital part of South Asian education. According to the British Council (2016), English continues to hold a prestigious status in India due to its association with upward mobility and professional advancement. What began as a colonial imposition has evolved into an essential tool for participation in the global economy and access to higher education (British Council, 2016).

The expansion of English education has had varying impacts across South Asia. In Nepal, for instance, English is a compulsory subject from Grade 1 through to the undergraduate level, and students must pass English to progress academically (Ojha, 2018). EMI is now the

norm in nearly all private schools, which constitute 29% of schools in the country, and it is increasingly adopted in public schools as well (Ojha, 2018). Shrestha *et al.* (2024) report that English is especially dominant in higher education, particularly in fields such as science, technology, engineering, medicine, and forestry. Although Nepal was never colonized, the influence of English has grown due to the language's importance in business, tourism, and trade (Pandey, 2020).

Afghanistan presents a contrasting picture of English's role in education. English is taught throughout elementary and secondary levels, and many universities, particularly those specializing in applied sciences, require sEnglish for admission. Proficiency in English is viewed as essential for engaging with global opportunities, securing jobs with multinational companies, and traveling abroad (Giri, 2024). However, the reception of English varies across the country. In rural areas, especially those centered around madrasahs, English is sometimes regarded with suspicion and associated with foreign influence. Conversely, in urban areas, it is seen as a vehicle for ambition and opportunity (Orfan, 2020). Giri (2023) identifies four key functions of English in Afghanistan: enabling student mobility abroad, facilitating international communication, supporting translation and interpretation, and fostering participation in media.

The experiences of countries like Nepal, Afghanistan, and Sri Lanka underscore the uneven impact of English across South Asia. While some countries embrace English for its global utility, others grapple with its role in reinforcing inequalities. In Nepal, the increasing use of EMI is often linked to aspirations for upward mobility, though it also raises concerns about the marginalization of local languages (Ojha, 2018). In Afghanistan, English is viewed through both aspirational and suspicious lenses, reflecting the complexities of adopting a global language within a deeply traditional society (Orfan, 2020). The dominance of English in education highlights the tension between maintaining local identities and pursuing global engagement. As Bhattacharya (2010) notes, colonial legacies and economic forces have converged to position English as a language of power across South Asia. However, each country's experience is shaped by unique historical and geopolitical dynamics. While Sri Lanka and Nepal have embraced English for different reasons, their educational policies reflect a shared struggle to balance the demands of globalization with the preservation of cultural and linguistic heritage (Giri, 2023).

English plays a multifaceted role in South Asia's education systems, functioning as both an opportunity and a challenge. Its association with prestige, economic mobility, and access to global resources makes it indispensable in sectors like business and higher education. However, the language also perpetuates socio-economic divides, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The historical development of English education—rooted in colonialism—continues to influence the region's linguistic landscape. Moving forward, educational policies

in South Asia will need to navigate the complex interplay between promoting English for global engagement and ensuring inclusivity by supporting local languages and cultural identities (Bhattacharya, 2010; Giri, 2023).

Discussion

The role of English in South Asia has evolved significantly, shifting from a colonial tool of administration to a medium of education, social mobility, and international communication. This review traces the historical trajectory of English in the region and examines its contemporary implications in educational systems. The discussion critically reflects on both the benefits and challenges posed by English as a medium of instruction (EMI), emphasizing the complexities surrounding access, identity, and linguistic diversity.

English was introduced to South Asia during British colonial rule, primarily to serve the colonial administration's needs. Macaulay's Minute on Education (1835) was instrumental in establishing English as the preferred language for governance and education. This colonial policy aimed to create a class of English-educated intermediaries who could bridge the gap between the British rulers and the local population. The strategy reflected a broader effort to assert cultural dominance by promoting English over classical and indigenous languages such as Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic (Giri *et al.*, 2024). The long-lasting colonial legacy resulted in the rise of an English-speaking elite that retained influence even after the region gained independence. English became associated with power, privilege, and access to higher education and employment, creating a sharp divide between those proficient in the language and the general population. This elite status of English continues to reinforce socio-economic inequalities across South Asia, as proficiency in the language often determines access to upward mobility and prestigious opportunities (Bhattacharya, 2010).

Following decolonization, South Asian countries adopted varying approaches to the role of English in education. In India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, English remains a key language for higher education and professional sectors such as science, technology, and business (Crystal, 2004). However, the post-colonial language policies of these countries reflect the tension between promoting local languages and maintaining English as a tool for global engagement. For instance, Pakistan uses English as an associate official language, while India adopts a similar status for English in several states (Haider & Manan, 2022).

Nepal's language policy reflects a slightly different narrative. Although English lacks official status, it plays a crucial role in higher education, especially in science and engineering programs, and is increasingly being adopted in public schools through EMI practices (Dahal & Gyawali, 2022). Private schools in Nepal have embraced EMI extensively, reinforcing the perception that English offers a pathway to better academic and professional

outcomes (Ojha, 2018). This pattern mirrors trends observed in Bangladesh, where English-medium schools cater to urban elites, while state schools predominantly use Bangla (Shrestha *et al.*, 2024). Sri Lanka, too, has seen EMI become prominent in higher education, especially in fields like natural sciences. The language policy in Sri Lanka has evolved over time, shaped not only by British colonial influences but also by interactions with other cultures, including China and the Netherlands (Sultana, 2024). Yet, the linguistic impact of these external forces remains less pronounced compared to other South Asian nations.

The dominance of English in South Asian education systems offers both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, English facilitates access to global knowledge, professional advancement, and cross-border mobility, making it indispensable in an interconnected world. For example, in Afghanistan, proficiency in English is crucial for securing jobs in multinational companies, accessing international media, and engaging with the global community (Orfan, 2020). This highlights the instrumental role of English as a gateway to social and economic mobility. However, the prioritization of English in education also creates barriers, particularly for students from rural areas or non-English-speaking backgrounds. These students often struggle to keep pace with English-medium curricula, limiting their ability to benefit from educational opportunities. In Pakistan, the dominance of English has led to monolingual practices in higher education, marginalizing local languages and contributing to social exclusion (Haider & Manan, 2022). Similar patterns of exclusion are evident in Nepal, where EMI is predominantly accessible to students in urban areas, further widening the rural-urban education gap (Ojha, 2018).

This linguistic inequality is compounded by the transfer effects from local languages on the varieties of English spoken in the region. The influence of local languages is particularly noticeable in phonology, creating distinct regional accents and dialects. For example, Indian English has emerged as a prominent regional variety, while Nepali English retains unique characteristics shaped by the country's distinct linguistic and cultural context (Schilk *et al.*, 2012). These local adaptations illustrate how South Asian English varieties reflect the region's diverse linguistic landscape.

The expansion of English education in South Asia has also shaped the region's publishing industry. Initially, English-language books were imported from Britain, but high import costs prompted the establishment of local publishing houses. Companies like Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press played pivotal roles in producing educational materials tailored to the South Asian context (Bhattacharya, 2010). These developments contributed to the spread of English-language knowledge and further entrenched the language's dominance in education. The influence of English-language publishing extends beyond India to Bangladesh and Pakistan, where

similar colonial histories have shaped the educational and publishing landscapes. In Bangladesh, English-medium instruction is more prevalent in private schools, while public education continues to prioritize Bangla (MoE, 2010). Nepal's academic institutions have also embraced English-language materials, especially in fields like medicine and technology, reflecting the demand for global knowledge (Shrestha *et al.*, 2024).

The role of English in South Asia raises important questions about linguistic diversity, identity, and educational equity. While English serves as a critical tool for international communication and socio-economic advancement, its dominance often comes at the expense of local languages and cultural identities. The increasing reliance on EMI in both public and private education systems poses challenges to the preservation of linguistic diversity, as students and teachers prioritize English over native languages (Dahal & Gyawali, 2022). At the same time, the unequal access to quality English education perpetuates social stratification. Students from privileged backgrounds, who have greater exposure to English, are better positioned to succeed in EMI settings, while those from disadvantaged communities face significant hurdles. This dynamic reinforces existing inequalities and limits opportunities for inclusive education. Policymakers in the region must navigate the delicate balance between promoting English as a global language and preserving local languages to ensure equitable access to education.

In summary, the role of English in South Asia is multifaceted, shaped by historical, socio-economic, and cultural factors. While the colonial roots of English continue to influence its status in education, its role has evolved into a vital component of the region's socio-economic landscape. The ongoing prominence of English reflects the complex interplay between global aspirations and local realities. However, as South Asia grapples with issues of linguistic equity and access, it becomes increasingly important to develop policies that foster both global engagement and the preservation of linguistic diversity. Through careful language planning, educational systems can promote inclusive learning environments that benefit all students, regardless of their linguistic or socio-economic background. A nuanced understanding of the region's linguistic and educational dynamics will be essential in shaping language policies that promote both equity and excellence in education.

CONCLUSION

The role of English in South Asia reveals a nuanced historical and socio-cultural trajectory, transitioning from a colonial imposition to a modern symbol of socio-economic mobility and global opportunity. Initially introduced to serve colonial governance, English has become deeply entrenched in the educational systems of countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and the Maldives. Its widespread influence extends beyond education into governance, commerce, and media, positioning English as a valuable resource

for international communication and professional advancement. However, the expansion of English has also introduced significant challenges, notably widening socio-economic divides, with English-medium education primarily accessible to elite classes, while marginalized communities remain underserved.

The use of English as the medium of instruction has created linguistic barriers, particularly in rural and multilingual settings, exacerbating educational inequalities. While its importance in higher education and professional sectors is undisputed, the growing preference for English risks marginalizing local languages, eroding cultural identity, and undermining linguistic diversity. To navigate these tensions, South Asian educational policies must foster a balanced approach that promotes multilingualism alongside English. Policymakers need to address the socio-political contradictions inherent in English's dominance and develop inclusive frameworks that embrace both global aspirations and the region's rich cultural and linguistic heritage, ensuring equity and sustainable development.

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