



English in Pre-Independence Bengal: The Historical Role, Linguistic Influence and Socio-Political Impact up to 1947

Md. Nurul Islam*

¹ ELSD, King Saud University, Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

*Corresponding Author: Md. Nurul Islam (nurulelt313@gmail.com)

Research Article

<https://doi.org/10.31559/BAES2025.10.2.2>

Received: 5 May 2025

Revised: 21 Jul 2025

Accepted: 2 Aug 2025

How to cite this article: Islam, N. (2025). English in Pre-Independence Bengal: The Historical Role, Linguistic Influence and Socio-Political Impact up to 1947. *Bulletin of Advanced English Studies*, 10 (2), 64-70. <https://doi.org/10.31559/BAES2025.10.2.2>



This file is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Abstract:

Background: During the British colonial era, the use of English significantly altered educational, linguistic and sociopolitical dynamics of Bengal. English was first used as a language of government and administration, but it quickly evolved into a tool for colonial control, elite formation and intellectual discourse.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to critically analyze historical significance, linguistic impact and sociopolitical ramifications of English in Bengal prior to independence (till 1947). It focuses on how language functioned both as a vehicle for resistance and reform as well as an instrument of domination.

Methodology: A qualitative historical-documentary approach was employed. Academic publications, journal articles and archival papers were analyzed alongside secondary sources, in addition to primary materials such as educational policies, missionary reports and colonial records.

Findings: The study reveals that English played a dual role in colonial Bengal. It contributed to the emergence of a Western-educated elite who supported the colonial administration, while also participating in reformist and nationalist movements. English influenced linguistic identity, transformed the structure of Bengali education and contributed to sociopolitical change during the Bengal Renaissance.

Research implications: This study highlights the paradoxical role of English in Bengal's colonial history by emphasizing its function as both a mechanism of control and a means of emancipation. It contributes original insights into the intertwined relationship between language, power and identity in the colonial context, particularly in Bengal.

Keywords: *English in Bengal; Colonialism; Linguistic Influence; Socio-Political Impact and Bengal Renaissance.*

1 Introduction

It was not a neutral linguistic evolution when English was introduced to Bengal during the British colonial era. It was an intentional imperial weapon used to restructure social stratification, education and local government. Initially, the British East India Company introduced English for administration purposes. It steadily rose to prominence as a means of bureaucratic functioning, elite discourse and education over time. English was ingrained in Bengal's judicial and educational systems by the middle of the 19th century. It also had a profound impact on the political structures of the era. This change in language significantly altered native systems. Additionally, it changed social ties in Bengali society as a whole.

In earlier research on colonial language policy, the wider effects of English in British India were studied (e.g., Viswanathan, 1989; Rahman, 2005; Sultana, 2014). Bengal was a crucial hub for colonial governance and intellectual reform, although the instance of Bengal has received comparatively little attention. Although some academics have recognized the Bengal Renaissance and the rise of an elite with English education (Chatterjee, 2020; Metcalf & Metcalf, 2006), few have really examined this topic. To be more precise, they have not thoroughly investigated how English served as a vehicle for anti-colonial struggle and a tool of colonial control at the same time.

This research aims to critically analyze the historical function of English in Bengal prior to independence (up to 1947) (till 1947). Additionally, it investigates its socio-political and linguistic effects. Furthermore, the study investigates how English has influenced indigenous knowledge systems. Moreover, it examines how English made it easier to access contemporary political and scientific discourse. Later, these discussions would support reformist and nationalist movements.

The need to comprehend the colonial roots of current South Asian linguistic and educational policy is what spurred this investigation. In the context of Bangladesh today, this is very pertinent. Language is still essential to justice in education, identity and governance. Consequently, a review of colonial past of English provides important context. These observations are significant for the ongoing discussions about cultural autonomy and postcolonial language planning.

This research uses a qualitative historical-documentary methodology. It makes use of missionary records, colonial records, and educational initiatives and reformist literature. It

also makes use of secondary sources including academic books, journal articles and archival documents. These sources are critically analyzed to trace the evolution of English in Bengal and its wider socio-political and linguistic implications.

Focusing particularly on the pre-independence period, the study situates English within three major historical contexts:

- The pre-independence period (up to 1947),
- The post-colonial period of Pakistan (1947–1971), and
- The post-liberation period of Bangladesh (1971 onwards).

Among these, the pre-independence phase is explored in depth, as it laid the groundwork for subsequent language policies and identity formations in the region. By offering a historically grounded and critically informed perspective, this research contributes to the expanding field of postcolonial language studies and highlights the lasting impact of colonial language ideologies on modern South Asian societies.

2 The Status of English in the Pre-independence Period (up to 1947)

English as a learning and teaching language became more common in the British era in India. During the advent of the British presence in India, the educational landscape was segmented into three distinct systems: the Aryan system in north of India, the Dravidian system in south of India, and the Muslim system in the west of India. Each of these systems incorporated the teaching of classical and religious texts (Rasheed, 2012). The origins of English were traced from the event where Queen Elizabeth permitted the open trade to the merchants with India and the East India Company. Moreover, she actively encouraged the use of English as a means of communicating on a global scale (Farooqui, 2014).

The missionaries that had the notion of enhancing the ethnicity and indigenous culture promoted the English language. They propagated their religious ideas and culture by allowing the use of ships belonging to the East India Company. Besides, they established a number of Christian schools in India (Chatterjee, 2015). Their motivation was further bolstered by the implementation of the missionary cause. English as a subject had established its victory in the struggle for language dominance in India prior to the missionary clause (Hoque, 2008). The East India Company had strengthened the base of the English language

along with the efforts of the missionaries. Another event involving the conquest of the region of Nawab of Bengal by the British in 1757 was again a push for the expansion of the English language specifically for the elite class and administrative domain. This was not the end; a dissertation by Charles Grant further encouraged Christianity in promoting the use of the English language in teaching and learning. This also aimed at improving the moral fabric of the economy. Consequently, this contributed to a deterioration of the moral and social conditions in India (Kashyap, 2014).

In an effort to establish a firm foundation of English language in India, the East India Company, under the New Charter Act (1813), allocated a substantial sum of one lakh rupees per year to support schools, colleges, and universities. This financial aid aimed to fortify not only the internal education system but also the public education sector. Despite the introduction of this act, the unorganised missionaries who were against the use of the English language were somewhere able to restrict the further strengthening of English (Begum, 2015).

As discussed above, *Macaulay's Minutes* policy framework that aimed at promoting English education in India was still not followed in schools. Arabic, Persian and Urdu were still being taught in colonial schools at that time. In 1936, with the establishment of the College of Hooghly, the implementation of the above policy was fostered. As per the decision of the Court of Law, the English language was to be used in higher courts whereas Urdu which replaced Persian was to be used in lower courts. This resulted in the origin of two social operations based on the use of language in education and law. One of the famous proposals of *Macaulay's Minutes* was to convert the college at Dhaka and Patna named Kolkata Hindu College into Presidency College in 1840. The Bengal Presidency report (1844) aimed to promote the Indian languages and culture being convinced of the superiority of the English language. This policy had gained a lot of popularity among the elite class and attracted great success. This policy of selective English language for higher secondary established as an individual discipline being introduced at the university level in states of India (Steinmetz, 2002). Since then, the English language captured an important status from the perspective of schools, colleges and universities of the sub-continent till the end of the British rule. By this time, it was realised that primary education was equally important, and it needed to be focused too. Hence,

Lord Curzon's Resolution of 1904 which aimed at promoting the development of primary education in India was strengthened with the recommendations that were laid down by the Hunter Education Commission (1882). The Hunter Education Commission sought to prioritise primary education for the general population (Lawson & Sachdev, 2004).

All the above-mentioned policies and commissions primarily centred around three key dimensions: ensuring education quality, expanding access to education, and determining the medium of instruction (Lawson & Sachdev, 2004). The state was held responsible for education in India.

The existing literature in India was enhanced with the introduction of English as an academic subject. Prior to the partition of Bengal, the National Movement of Education started against the expansion of the English language in India (Kashyap, 2014). Despite the introduction of the Kolkata University Commission Recommendation (1919) and the Bengal Presidency Report (1844), the reach of the English language was confined to the elite class and official domain and could not reach the masses (Dey, 2015). The Kolkata University Commission also recommended that the medium of instruction for almost all the subjects up to high school were to be taught and learned in the vernacular languages including Hindi and Urdu which were to be converted into English in later times.

Despite the proposal by the National Movement which was passed by the Nagpur Congress, there was less evidence of the existence of the use of vernacular languages. The aim of the proposal was to enrol the children of English Medium Schools in national schools that promoted the use of vernacular languages. By the end of the century, the aim of introducing the vernacular languages in primary education and English at the higher secondary level was fostered. On the other hand, Macaulay, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Lord Bentinck and Lord Harding were some of the popular educators of that time who requested to enhance the use of the English language in India. As a result of the Sargent Report (1944), the vernacular languages were declared as the mediums of instruction in primary, secondary and higher secondary education.

With gradual education awareness and the development of educational institutions, the English language gained significant popularity in the early 19th century. By becoming the means of communication of instruction in schools and colleges, the English language had gained

significance. Also, the English language was influenced by the freedom fighters as a medium to share knowledge and means of communication. As English was introduced much prior to independence, the pre-independence era experienced a gradual increase in the significance of the English language along with Macaulay's restricted policy resulting in the establishment of a policy of "Universal Education in the Nation" (Evans, 2002).

During the British era, the English language emerged as the main vehicle of progress in western society, especially in the UK. English was the sign

of colonial power where it began to spread in the formal domains and elite class. With this, it became the common means of communication between the rulers and the highly qualified community of the Indian sub-continent. Till the partition of India, English enjoyed this persisting status. Lawson and Sachdev (2004) observed that Bengali was spoken in both Bengal, a state of India, and Bangladesh and that these regions shared a significant linguistic history. They found that the usage of English in both regions was comparable, with a considerable presence of Indian English in Bangladesh.



Figure 1: English in Pre-Independence Bengal

3 The Historical Function of English in Bengal

2.1 The outline of English through Colonial Governance

The English East India Company was a privately held joint-stock trading company with a royal charter that began conducting English and then British trade to South and South-East Asia in the early seventeenth century. The Company became more and more involved in Indian politics and the military during the eighteenth century (Meurer, 2012). Eventually, the gradual institutionalization of English was a result of the British East India Company's triumph in the Battle of Plassey (1757) and the following consolidation of authority in Bengal. English replaced Persian and Sanskrit as the main languages of instruction in schools and colleges after Macaulay's well-known Minute on Education (1835). The founder of establishments like the University of Calcutta (1857) and Hindu College helped English become more widely used among the Bengali elite).

2.2 The Bengal Renaissance and English

The 19th and early 20th centuries saw a period of intellectuals and cultural awakening known as the Bengal Renaissance, which was greatly aided by Bengali intellectuals' adoption of English. In support of English education, Thomas Babington Macaulay said it would produce, "a class of persons Indian in blood and color, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (Macaulay, 1835/1995). In addition to advancing socio-religious reforms, reformers like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Raja Ram Mohan Roy used English to interact with Western modernity. For example, Raja ram Mohan Roy studied European Enlightenment concepts using his English language skills and promoted social changes such as the elimination of Sati and the promotion of women's right (Sarkar, 1985). English was also crucial to the development of

Bengali journalism since bilingual journals helped to reconcile indigenous and colonial ideologies.

In conclusion, the English language was essential to the growth of the Bengal Renaissance because it served as a vehicle for colonial ideology and a catalyst for cultural and intellectual awakening. The dual function of English as an instrument of colonial dominance and a vehicle for resistance and reform makes it a key concept in comprehending the intricacies of the Bengal Renaissance.

4 The linguistic impact of English on Bengali

One of the most significant outcomes of British colonial rule in India, particularly after the 19th century, is the influence of English on Bengali. This influence shapes modern Bengali in both spoken and written forms on a number of levels, including lexical, syntactic, phonological and even stylistic. There have been notable language changes as a result of English and Bengali interaction. English loanwords were incorporated into Bengali lexicon, especially in fields like, law, science and administration.

Bengali prose evolved under the strong influence of English syntactic structures, resulting in a modernized and standardized written form of Bengali. Bengali writing and speech today frequently use words like, “pen, train, computer, school, and mobile.” Lexical borrowing is the term for this behavior and the borrowed words have been phonologically modified to fit Bengali sound patterns (Dasgupta, 2003).

5 Socio-political Impact of English in Bengal

5.1 English as a Colonial control mechanism

An-English-speaking elite class that held professional and administrative positions was established as a result of the use of English as a language of governance and social stratification. This group held important positions in the civil services, education and bureaucracy and was frequently drawn from the upper-caste Bengali elite (Macaulay, 1835/1995, Viswanathan, 2014). Since the rural Bengali population had little access to English-medium education, the British frequently alienated them by using English education to create a devoted bureaucracy. But this colonial approach had consequences that excluded people. According to Chatterjee (1993), this gap exacerbated the sociolinguistic division between the rural masses

and the urban elite. For non-native speaking populations, English became a tool and symbol of privilege, limiting their ability to move up the social ladder.

5.2 The rise of Nationalism and English

Despite its colonial beginnings, English developed become a potent anti-colonial activism tool.

Bengalis who were educated in English (e.g., Rabindranath Tagore, Aurobindo Ghosh, and Subash Chandra Bose) used the language to express their nationalist views and interact with audiences around the world (Sarkar, 1985; Nussbaum, 2007). For speeches, petitions and discussions with British authorities, the Indian Congress and other political groups used English.

With a sizable Bengali membership, the Indian National Congress mostly employed English for petition writing, legislative discussions and negotiations with British officials. Consequently, English not only promoted political discourse within the country but also provided a conduit to international forums where Indian complaints could be heard (Guha, 1997). In this situation, English was used as a strategic linguistic tool for political mobilization rather than as a colonial imposition.

5.3 The Function of English in the partition Discussion

English played a major part in political talks and intercommunal dialogue in Bengal in the years preceding India's 1947 Partition. English served as a neutral language for communication between Bengali Hindus, Muslims and British officials and it was used to draft legal documents, political manifestos and memorandums that influenced the discussion of nationhood, religious identity and self-determination (Talbot & Singh, 2009). But the linguistic gap between the people who spoke vernacular and the elite who had received their education in English also made sociopolitical tensions worse.

6 Conclusion

The development of English in Bengal prior to independence illustrates the intricate relationship between political agency, cultural change and colonial rule. English was introduced as an instrument of authority and administration, and it slowly spread throughout the intellectual and educational domains. This led to the emergence of an elite class with English education who were influential in both nationalist and reformist

movements. English functioned simultaneously as a medium for resistance, critical conversation and literary invention while also reinforcing existing social inequalities. It had become a vehicle for anti-colonial protest as well as a symbol of imperial authority by 1947. The linguistic and sociopolitical landscape of South Asia and Bengal are still shaped by its lasting legacy and highlight the conflicting function of colonial languages in postcolonial settings. The results imply that English was used as colonial tool. In society, it also established linguistic hierarchies. English also gave educated Bengalis the ability to participate in reform initiatives. It made it possible for them to engage in international discussions and nationalist activities. English education fostered the emergence of an enlightened middle class that played a significant role in social change, including the Bengal Renaissance. However, its limited accessibility also entrenched class-based linguistic divides, excluding the rural masses. English played a dual role in the Partition negotiations and anti-colonial movements. It was both a tool of colonial control and a means of resistance. These findings highlight the paradox of English. It was a language that both oppressed and empowered, excluded and liberated. They highlight the enduring influence of colonial language policies on postcolonial linguistic identities and educational structures in Bangladesh and South Asia. This study emphasizes the need to critically assess how colonial language legacies continue to influence language policy and identity politics in contemporary South Asia.

References

- Begum, T. (2015). The 'cultural legacy' of English in Bangladesh. *Language in India*, 15(3), 239-252.
- Bhabha, H. K. (2012). *The location of culture*. Routledge.
- Chatterjee, P. (1986). *Nationalist thought and the colonial world: A derivative discourse*. Zed Books.
- Chatterjee, P. (2020). *The nation and its fragments: Colonial and postcolonial histories*.
- Chatterjee, T. (2015). *Bilingualism, language contact and change: The case of Bengali and English in India*. (Ph.D.), University of Michigan, Michigan. Retrieved on January 14, 2020, https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/113302/tridha_1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
- Dasgupta, P. (1993). *The otherness of English: India's auntie tongue syndrome*. Sage Publication.
- Dasgupta, S. (2007). *The Bengal Renaissance: Identity and creativity from Rammohun Roy to Rabindranath Tagore*. New Delhi: Permanent Black.
- Dey, D. (2015). Indian indentured laborers in Mauritius, diseases, mortality and sexual encounters: Some reflections. *The International Journal of Humanities & Social Studies*, 3(17), 99-102.
- Evans, S. (2002). Macaulay's minutes revisited: Colonial language policy in nineteenth-century India. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 23(4), 260-281. [CrossRef]
- Farooqui, S. (2014). The struggle to teach in English: A case study in Bangladesh. *Journal of Education and Human Development*, 3(2), 441-457.
- Guha, R. (1997). *Dominance without hegemony: History and power in colonial India*. Harvard University Press.
- Hoque, M. (2008). *English language teaching and learning at the Alim Level in the Madrashes in Bangladesh: Problems and possible solutions*. Unpublished M. Phil. Thesis. Jahangirnagar University, Dhaka.
- Kashyap, A. K. (2014). Developments in the linguistic description of Indian English: State of the art. *Linguistics & the Human Sciences*, 9(3). [CrossRef]
- Lawson, S., & Sachdev, I. (2004). Identity, language use, and attitudes: Some Sylheti-Bangladeshi data from London, UK. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 23(1), 49-69. [CrossRef]
- Macaulay, T. B. (1835). *Minute on Indian Education*. Government of India.
- Macaulay, T. B. (2012). Minute on Indian education (1835). *Thomas Babington Macaulay Selected Writings*, 235-51.
- Metcalf, B. D., & Metcalf, T. R. (2006). *A concise history of modern India*. Cambridge University Press.
- Meurer, S. (2012). Approaches to state-building in Eighteenth Century British Bengal. In *Structures on the Move: Technologies of Governance in Transcultural Encounter* (pp. 219-241). Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer Berlin Heidelberg.
- Mirza, G. H., Mahmud, K., & Jabbar, J. (2012). Use of other languages in English language teaching at tertiary level: A case study on Bangladesh. *English Language Teaching*, 5(9), 71-77. [CrossRef]
- Nussbaum, M. (2007). *The clash within: Democracy, religious violence, and India's future*. Harvard University Press.
- Rahman, T. (2005). *Passports to privilege: The English-medium schools in Pakistan*.
- Rasheed, M. (2012). Learning English language in Bangladesh: CLT and beyond. *Critical literacy: theories and practices*, 6(2), 31-49.
- Ray, S. (2001). *The Bengal Renaissance: Identity and Creativity from Rammohun Roy to Rabindranath Tagore*. Permanent Black.
- Sarkar, S. (1985). *A critique of colonial India*. Papyrus.

- Sarkar, S. (1989). *Modern India 1885–1947*. Springer.
- Sen, S. (2018). *Language and Colonial Modernity in Bengal: A Sociolinguistic Perspective*. Routledge.
- Steinmetz, A. (1983). *The discrepancy evaluation model*. In *Evaluation models* (pp. 79-99). Springer.
- Sultana, S. (2014). Young adults' linguistic manipulation of English in Bangla in Bangladesh. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 17(1), 74-89. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Talbot, I., & Singh, G. (2009). *The partition of India* (p. 115). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Viswanathan, G. (2014). *Masks of conquest: Literary study and British rule in India*. Columbia University Press.