

[Will India Outlaw English?](#)

Category : [October 1990](#)

Published by Anonymous on Oct. 02, 1990

Will India Outlaw English?

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Quick, how much of the world's population speaks English? Check your answer below:

* 65%

* 41%

* 23%

* 8%

If you answered 65%, congratulations! You are one of many thoughtful people who are astonished to learn that a mere 8% of the human family speaks English.

There is good news and bad news for those who live and move and have their being in English. The good news is that even though a mere one in twelve of our brothers and sisters speak our tongue, English remains the second most widely used language on the globe. Chinese Mandarin is first with 844 million speakers, and English is a distant runner-up with 437 million (of which 200 million or so are in the US). English is the official international language of airline pilots, telephone

systems and some enclaves of science. It reigns as the current interstate and international language of South Asia, including Sri Lanka. And it is getting a boost in Europe where events are compelling those nations to adopt a stronger English orientation.

The bad news is that English is seen by some as galling vestige of Colonialism and menacing messenger of malefic Western mentality. They want it outlawed in government offices, stricken from school texts, banished from their borders. In the past decade Malaysia purged English in this way, then more recently decreed its return. Now there is a growing movement to do the same in India, where English is the language of law, government, modern literature and some of the best educational institutions.

Kapil Kapoor thinks all that may end. The linguistics professor says the anti-English movement's growing momentum is due to the fact that "Knowledge of English provides privileges to a few, but deprives privileges to many." His colleagues estimate that 35 million Indians speak English well, just 4% of the nation's 880 million.

Mulayam Singh Yadav, Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, the most populous state, banned the official use of English in April. Courts, he decreed, would henceforth conduct their business in Hindi (the official Indian language since the 1963 and 1976 acts). Violators would face grievous penalties. He also forbade the use of English in 1,500 private schools, thus trampling on the toes of wealthy Indians. Other Hindi-speaking states ordered all official correspondence and public communications to be made in Hindi.

India is putting its money behind Hindi. Cash rewards of Rs. 400-600 are given to those passing Hindi exams, and free vacations are offered anyone attending proficiency classes - not to mention massive translation teams required to turn letters received in English into Hindi.

Last month in New Delhi Yadav said, "I will happily accept any Indian language as our national language, but English must go." India suffers from no lack of indigenous tongues to choose from. There are 15 official languages, including English. Unofficially, an astonishing 1,652 languages and dialects are spoken on

the subcontinent, 33 of them are used by more than a million people each. The entire library of human languages in use exceeds 3,000.

Fully one-fourth of the newspaper circulated in India and 40% of all published books are in English, though only 4% of the people speak it. With such a disproportionate share of the information and literacy machinery geared toward English, it is easy to sympathize with those who have little sympathy for English. But, they face an onerous task.

"It's not that easy to get rid of English," observed M.P. Chhaya, who is a consultant for the Education Department. "It's only possible if one common language besides English is accepted. That won't happen soon."

He's right. There is little hope for a consensus on replacing English. Hindi is the obvious choice, since it is spoken by the most people. But any effort to make it the national language is met with implacable resistance from those who speak Bengali (181 million), Marathi (63 million), Telegu (53 million), Tamil (40 million), Kannada (35 million), Gujarati (34 million) and nine other languages. These groups don't want Hindi thrust down their throats. Their cultures are tied to the language of their region. English, they contend, is at least neutral, allowing their native languages to flourish. Hindi threatens to replace them altogether.

Those who want these languages to be preserved note that there is little real commitment in the movement. Politicians who publicly call for an Indian national language still send their own children to private English-medium schools. Home Minister Mufti Mohammed Sayed, a supporter of the movement, admitted when questioned that his own office has 633 English typewriters and only 57 for Hindi.

Though there is much to lament about the Colonial period, it did leave Hindus with a common vernacular which does much to knit us together globally. Without English, we run the risk of division and regionalism. Thus, we support English as a shared voice for Hindus, but we also staunchly defend every effort to preserve other idioms which are cultural, linguistic and philosophical gene pools, too precious to lose. We need not outlaw one to enjoy the other.

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