One new feature of *English Today* in this issue, and for future issues, is *The ET Column*, where we'll be asking people in the know – academics, broadcasters, educators, linguists, teachers and others concerned with English worldwide – to write a column for the journal on issues of controversy, debate, work in the field, and matters of topical and immediate interest.

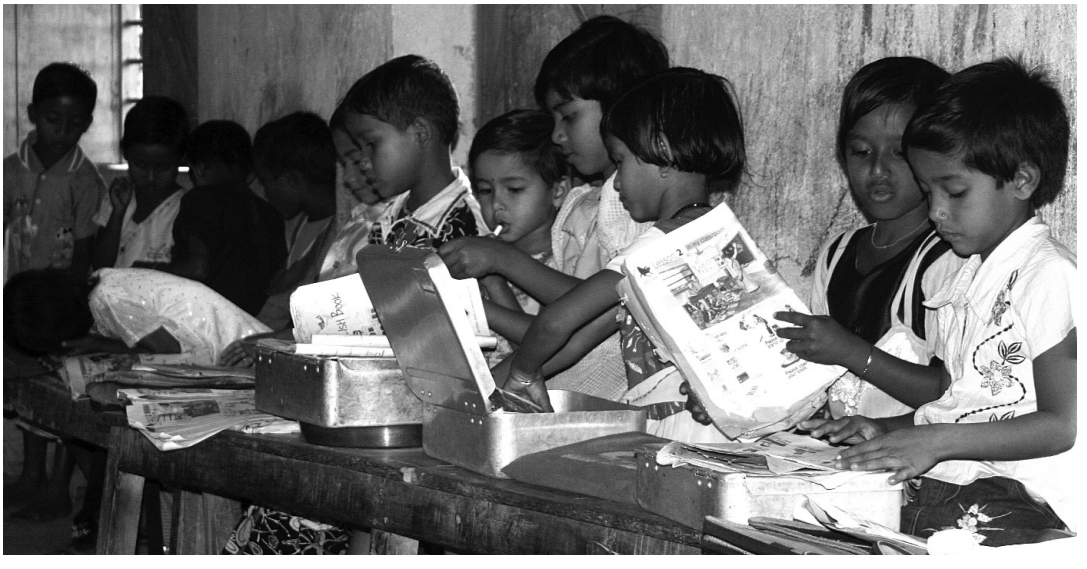
Thoughts from Kolkata on English in India

In this issue, DAVID GRADDOL is writing from India, where he's currently researching *English Next: India*.

I'm in Calcutta, or Kolkata, as I need to remember to call it now, in a small convoy of cars heading out to a village in West Bengal to see a new English text book in action. There's a bit of an English language press pack with us – including Max de Lotbinière of *The Guardian*, Melanie Butler of the *EL Gazette*, and a video crew working for the British Council. A couple of people from the West Bengal education department means that our entourage includes a traditional Ambassador car complete with government flag. These cars are still icons in India. They look as if they haven't changed since the first ones were manufactured in 1950s, but I'm told the latest models have fuel injection. It's typically Indian – accept innovation, but don't get rid of the familiar.

Calcutta itself retains much of the confusion of traffic that some other metros in India have begun to lose. We nose past rickshaws, whole families perched on scooters, the odd bullock cart, and reach the highway. It's a good road, too. Wide and straight and with relatively little traffic. I start musing on the linguistic consequences of the new roads which have been springing up all over India. Ever since Peter Trudgill carried out his classic study on accent in Norway in the 1970s, we linguists have known that building a road can change the linguistic landscape. It is true that the private airlines have already had a huge impact on the ease of travel around India (I know from experience, and I've been looking at the data), but these cater for the rich, professional, already English-speaking people who can now network across India in a way impossible even in the 1990s. Roads are different. Anyone can use roads. Buses, bicycles and oxcarts can use roads. India is finally getting the infrastructure it so desperately needs, and road building is bringing more people into the cities, and allowing city-dwellers to commute from the city edges. Different kinds of people, from different social and language backgrounds, who all need to communicate. One of India's hundreds of languages has proved excellent for that lingua franca purpose – it's called English.

I'm in India doing research for a British Council



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project – a sequel to *English Next*, which will look at the future of English in India – and in between visits to the big IT companies I've been reading up on the early history. I thought I knew the basic story of the British in India, but I've been learning lots of new things. I didn't know, for instance, that there was a 'Danish India', based on the trading colonies of the Danish East India Company. Danish India included the Nicobar Islands, which they called Frederiksøerne. And when the Danes pulled out of Nicobar (or rather, seem to have succumbed to malaria), Austria ran up its flag for a few years. Now I knew that the British had to contend with quite a few other European rivals, but Austrians? This was getting surreal.

In many ways, Calcutta was where the real story of English in India began (and where the story of Danish India ended when the British surrounded their base in Bengal and forced them to sell up). At the start of the 17th century, the English language itself was hardly past that stage of being 'worth nothing past Dover' (as Florio described it in 1578). The first colonials had to learn the local languages – which, alongside Bengali, included Persian, Urdu and the kind of Portuguese which was then used around the coast as a lingua franca.

Our car pulls in to the side of the road, seemingly in the middle of nowhere. A small track – too small for motor vehicles – leads us past fish ponds, winding between village buildings and small temples and shrines, to a more open area where the school is situated. It's a community affair, and several parents are busy making school lunch in the front porch. School lunches have proved an important innovation in government schools, bringing far more children into school – especially girls. It's part of a huge investment in primary schools in recent years. Inside, the rooms are dark but reasonably cool. I wonder why children across India have to go to darkened places to seek their enlightenment. I count four classes, but there seems to be only one teacher – the head teacher who greets us and offers chai. We're apparently waiting for the English teacher to arrive.

Despite the recent improvements there is still a great shortage of teachers. A quarter of teachers in government schools are said to be missing on any one day, adding to the problem. Now that our entourage has arrived, there is no teacher in any of the classrooms. Well, actually there is one. Ray MacKay is the man behind the new textbook and he has wandered into one of the classrooms and has started interacting with the children. He tells me the strange story of his involvement. Years ago, working as an ELT consultant in West Bengal, he wrote a report suggesting the current textbooks were dire and in urgent need of revision. The report ended up in a drawer in the education office. West Bengal's communist government didn't see the need for English and its teaching was all but abandoned in government schools. Then came the wake-up call. In India today, the message is, everyone needs English and fast. A local official discovered the dusty report and asked the British Council to contact Ray – by then retired to his croft in western Scotland, where he was spending his days mending neighbours' deer fences. Back in West Bengal, he helped to train a writing team, working with local teachers. The new textbooks, embodying recent approaches to teaching English to young learners, are to be used by 10 million children in the state. So the class we are about to witness marks a political and educational turning point for English in this part of India.

The English teacher finally arrives. He is one of the school's usual teachers but because he is part of the textbook team is in much demand elsewhere. In most classrooms in India the children sit (often on the floor) in rows – boys one side, girls on the other. Here, the wooden benches have been moved to the sides, creating an open space for movement. He takes the children through some of the activities, and they are clearly having fun – not least because of all the attention they are getting. But I've been in enough classrooms in India to see that, despite the obvious rehearsals, there is something genuine going on here. These are first generation learners, being introduced to English in a lively way.

If what is happening here is mirrored across India, then a few years down the line we will have to substantially revise our estimates of how many people speak English in the world – there are around 25 million children in each year group in India at the moment. But teachers like this one are too rare. His English is good, though definitely Indian. And his enthusiasm is infectious. Across India, a new generation in primary schools is now expected to learn English, but there is a critical shortage of teachers who speak the language.

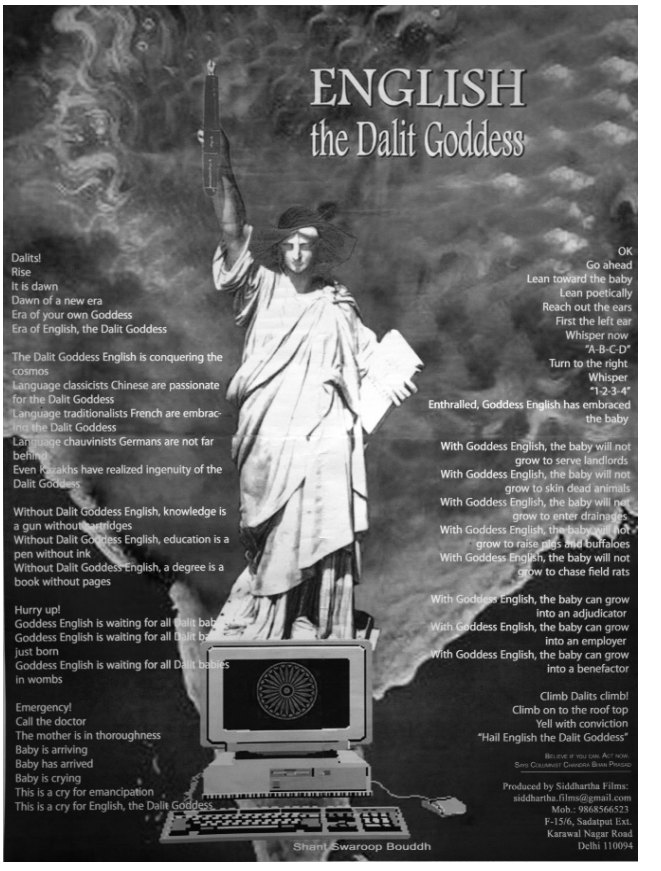
But why do these children need English? Why do their parents want it so badly that it has become an election issue? The answer to that helps us understand a remarkable change in India which is recasting its relationship with the English language. All over India, private schools have been opening up to cater for the poor: in slums and for village Dalits (untouchables). In some rural and slum areas, half the children now attend small private schools, often just in a room in someone's house. It's difficult to get accurate figures because most of these schools are not recognised by the government. In India, private school means English-medium. Parents, however poor, desperately want better for their children, and for them better means English-medium. A survey, carried out by an Indian TV channel in summer 2009, found that 87% of Indians now 'feel that knowledge of English is important to succeed in life'. The dismal fact is that as far as English goes, these unrecognised

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schools are probably a waste of the family resources. But it underlines how success and English are tied together in the popular imagination across India.

For decades, the Dalits have known and resented this. In Karnataka (Bangalore is the state capital), local politicians felt it necessary to promise to close down the private schools which were proliferating in the early 1990s. The bulk of the electorate, their 'vote banks' in the countryside, resented the advantage the well-off were getting by sending their children to these English-medium schools. Now the rural poor and disadvantaged classes want such schools for themselves. And the Karnataka government's attempt to force them to teach in Kannada rather than English was this summer rebuffed by the Supreme Court in Delhi: parents should be allowed to choose the language medium, the judges said.

I visited a Dalit activist in Delhi to find out more. Chandrabhan Prasad scandalised intellectuals in Delhi a couple of years ago by publishing a poster representing 'English – the Mother Goddess', which he launched at a party celebrating Lord Macaulay's birthday. Macaulay is known throughout India for his famous 'Minute on Education' in 1835, which many claim was responsible for introducing English-medium education for the Indian elites. Prasad tells me he regards Macaulay as the 'father of Indian modernity'. Why a Goddess English? 'Because babies are often shown a picture of a goddess at birth, and mantras are whispered in their ear.' Prasad's idea is that for Dalit children, that goddess should be a representation of English, and the mantra 'a-b-c-d'. English to the Dalits has become not just a route out of poverty but a 'mass movement against the caste order'. It is a language which connects and unites Dalits across India who speak many different languages.



So the age-old debate about English or vernacular schooling has now taken a new political twist in India. But the solution to this either/or dilemma – to a European at least – seems obvious. Multilingual education. I find that there is now a cartel of European cultural organisations called EUNIC (European Union National Institutes for Culture – the likes of the British Council, Alliance française, Goethe-Institut, Instituto Cervantes and 19 others). What is more, they have established a mission in India. I'm intrigued, and arrange an interview with the current President of EUNIC-India – which turns out to be Austria. What follows is a convivial dinner party, hosted by the director of the Austrian Cultural Forum at her farmhouse on the outskirts of Delhi, where we all muse on the virtues of multilingual education. There's the Spanish representative: he's actually Catalan, representing Spain, speaking to me in English with side comments to fellow-diners in other European languages. The Italians, the Hungarians, many Europeans are there, all sharing their experiences of India and language education. I'm humbled by their sheer linguistic virtuosity, but also struck by the irony. Not only do they have to talk to me in English, but they also have to sell their own country's cultural propositions to Indians through English.

My mind wanders back to that brief Austrian occupation of the Nicobar Islands. The islands are known to linguists for the number of small endangered languages spoken by tribes who have had little contact with the outside world – foreigners are now banned. In 1778, the Austrian representative was a Dutchman, sailing in a boat rigged out to look like a British ship (it's a long story). When he persuaded the local islanders to sign over some of their islands to Austria – what language did he use? ■

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