

**Colonial Modernity and Language Hierarchies:
The Rise of English and The Decline of Vernacular Voices:
With Special Reference to Kannada
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ABSTRACT:

This paper explores how British colonial modernity reconfigured linguistic hierarchies in South India, particularly in Bengaluru, by elevating English as the language of power, modernity, and social mobility while relegating Kannada to the margins of intellectual and administrative life. Through postcolonial frameworks drawn from Fanon, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Gramsci, Bourdieu, and Spivak, the study examines how colonial education policies and missionary interventions institutionalized English as a symbol of enlightenment and cultural superiority. Bengaluru, as a hybrid city divided between princely Mysore and the British cantonment, became a site where linguistic hegemony translated directly into class distinction.

The essay further analyses the responses of Kannada intellectuals and reformers, including B. M. Srikantaiah, D. V. Gundappa, Kuvempu, Ti. Nam. Sri., K. Shivaram Karanth, and Aluru Venkata Rao, who resisted linguistic subordination through literature, translation, and education. Their efforts transformed Kannada into a medium of modern expression and cultural self-assertion, culminating in movements for linguistic unification and regional identity.

While postcolonial Bengaluru continues to project itself as a global metropolis, the colonial hierarchy of English over Kannada persists in education, employment, and prestige. The paper argues that genuine decolonization requires not the rejection of English but the revalorization of Kannada as an equal language of intellect, science, and creativity. By tracing the historical continuity of linguistic inequality, the study redefines modernity as a plural and multilingual experience rooted in the cultural consciousness of Karnataka.

KEYWORDS:

Colonial Modernity, Language Hierarchies, Postcolonial Linguistics, Linguistic Hegemony, Vernacular Resistance.

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The history of colonial India is also the history of linguistic power. When the British Empire extended its dominion into the Indian subcontinent, it did not merely impose political control but it restructured the very texture of social communication and cultural imagination. In colonial Bengaluru, this reorganization was most clearly visible in the formation of language hierarchies. English, introduced through education and administration, became the language of modernity, authority, and aspiration, while Kannada, once the vessel of regional wisdom and creativity, was subtly relegated to the domestic and emotional sphere. This essay examines how colonial modernity in Bengaluru created a linguistic duality that still persists: English as the symbol of progress and globality, and Kannada as the emblem of rooted identity and resistance.

The idea of "colonial modernity" has long puzzled historians and cultural theorists. As Dipesh Chakrabarty and Partha Chatterjee argue, colonial modernity was not a simple importation of Western progress; it was a negotiated space where domination and transformation intertwined. The British Empire introduced modern education, bureaucratic rationality, and print capitalism, hallmarks of Enlightenment modernity. But always within a structure of hierarchy and control. Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony helps explain how this process functioned: colonial power did not rely solely on coercion but also on consent, achieved through the internalization of colonial values by the colonized elite. Language became the most potent site of this hegemony. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o notes in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), the imposition of the colonizer's language produced "a disassociation of the sensibility, " separating individuals from their indigenous cultural imagination. Similarly, Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) observed that mastery of the colonizer's language equated to psychological assimilation, an entry into the symbolic world of superiority.

In India, Thomas Babington Macaulay's "Minute on Indian Education" (1835) formalized this linguistic ideology. English education, he argued, would create a class of interpreters "Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. " With this declaration, language became the linchpin of colonial governance. The 1854 Wood's Despatch institutionalized English-medium education across the subcontinent, ensuring that access to power, employment, and intellectual legitimacy depended on English proficiency. This educational restructuring had deep social consequences: it forged a new Anglophone elite while relegating the vast majority of vernacular speakers to the margins of the modern state.

Nowhere was this transformation more visible than in colonial Bengaluru. As a cantonment town straddling the princely state of Mysore and the British administrative sphere, Bengaluru became a crucible for competing linguistic and cultural influences. The London Missionary Society and Wesleyan Mission introduced English schools in the early nineteenth century, presenting English not just as a language but as a civilizing force. To learn English was to acquire modernity itself, reason, science, and moral refinement. English-medium institutions like Bishop Cotton's School (founded in 1865) and Central College (established in 1858) redefined education as an instrument of social elevation. The colonial government's preference for English-speaking clerks and administrators reinforced this dynamic. Mastery of English became a form of linguistic capital (Bourdieu 1991), converting language proficiency into social mobility. English, in short, became a gatekeeper to modern life.

This process, however, came at the cost of Kannada's institutional marginalization. Kannada, once a language of courtly literature and Bhakti philosophy, was increasingly confined to the private and cultural domain. The colonial education system reduced it to a subject of study rather than a medium of instruction. Missionary translations of the Bible into Kannada—though linguistically significant, often carried the implicit message that the language was suitable for moral instruction but not for intellectual discourse. In the colonial imagination, Kannada was picturesque and emotional, but English was rational and universal. This dichotomy infiltrated public consciousness, leading many educated Indians to internalize linguistic inferiority. Fanon's insight that "to speak a language is to take on a world, a culture" captures this psychological dimension: to speak English was to inhabit the modern world; to speak Kannada was to remain bound to the past.

Bengaluru's urban landscape mirrored this linguistic segregation. The cantonment, populated by Anglo-Indians, administrators, and soldiers, functioned in English, while the native city continued to communicate in Kannada and Tamil. This spatial division reinforced social hierarchy: the English-speaking elite occupied the upper echelons of governance and education, while Kannada remained the vernacular of artisans, peasants, and local traders. The British thus engineered not only a linguistic order but also a geography of power.

Yet, the decline of Kannada was never total. Kannada intellectuals and reformers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries recognized the dangers of linguistic dependency and mobilized to reclaim their language's dignity. Writers such as B. M. Srikantaiah, often called

the "Father of Modern Kannada Poetry," sought to modernize Kannada by introducing Western literary forms through his English Geetegalu (1921). His work symbolized an attempt to domesticate modernity rather than reject it, to make Kannada capable of expressing new ideas while preserving its cultural essence. D. V. Gundappa (DVG), philosopher and public intellectual, advanced this synthesis further. In Mankutimmana Kagga (1943), he presented a vision of ethical modernity rooted in Kannada wisdom yet informed by universal reason. Their contemporary, Ti. Nam. Sri. (T. N. Srikantiah), championed translation as a form of resistance, insisting that modern thought could flow equally through Kannada as through English.

Meanwhile, in the political sphere, the demand for linguistic self-respect became a rallying point. Aluru Venkata Rao, leader of the Kannada Ekikarana (Unification) movement, articulated a vision of Karnataka where Kannada would reclaim its rightful administrative and educational position. Later, during the post-independence period, politicians like Kengal Hanumanthaiah and K. Chengalaraya Reddy continued this legacy, making Kannada central to the linguistic reorganization of states in 1956. Writers such as Kuvempu (K. V. Puttappa) and K. Shivaram Karanth extended this cultural nationalism through literature. Kuvempu's Ramayana Darshanam (1949) reinterpreted epic tradition through a modern, humanistic lens, proclaiming "Kannada Naadu, Kannada Nudi" (Kannada land, Kannada language) as inseparable from the soul of Karnataka. His concept of "Vishwamanava" (Universal Man) epitomized a vernacular modernity that refused to be provincial. It was Kannada, yet cosmopolitan. These figures transformed linguistic resistance into a civilizational project: to reclaim Kannada was to reclaim intellectual autonomy.

Despite these efforts, colonial hierarchies did not dissolve with independence. Instead, they morphed into new forms of postcolonial inequality. The Indian Constitution recognized regional languages, but English retained its dominance as the language of higher education, administration, and aspiration. In Bengaluru, now the "Silicon Valley of India," this paradox is especially striking. The city's global economy runs on English: software companies, startups, and multinational corporations operate almost exclusively in it, while Kannada survives as the language of cultural expression and state bureaucracy. Pierre Bourdieu's notion of "symbolic power" aptly describes this dynamic: linguistic competence in English functions as social capital that differentiates elites from the masses. Schools that advertise "English-medium education" promise not merely knowledge but class mobility; Kannada-medium institutions, by

contrast, are often stigmatized as second-tier. The colonial association between English and progress remains intact, even as India celebrates its linguistic diversity.

Gayatri Spivak's question, "Can the subaltern speak?" resonates powerfully in this context. For the Kannada-speaking majority, the issue is not silence but audibility: they speak, yet their speech lacks institutional resonance. Policies mandating Kannada signage or instruction, while symbolically significant, rarely alter deeper structures of linguistic inequality. The dominance of English in digital and academic domains perpetuates what Ngũgĩ called "linguistic imperialism", a continuation of colonial modernity under the guise of globalization. The irony is that while English now serves as a neutral global medium, its colonial genealogy remains embedded in the social hierarchies it sustains.

However, resistance continues. Contemporary Kannada movements such as Karnataka Rakshana Vedike and initiatives promoting Kannada computing, translation, and cinema represent a renewed assertion of linguistic pride. Writers like Girish Karnad and U. R. Ananthamurthy carried forward the intellectual lineage of the Navodaya and Navya movements, using literature as a platform to question both Westernization and linguistic chauvinism. Their works demonstrate that Kannada, far from being parochial, possesses the expressive elasticity to address modern existential, political, and philosophical concerns. In this sense, the struggle for Kannada is not merely about preservation but about epistemic justice. The right to think, write, and innovate in one's own language.

Colonial modernity, then, must be understood as both a rupture and a continuity. It ruptured traditional hierarchies by introducing new forms of education and bureaucracy, yet it replaced them with new hierarchies based on linguistic access. The British did not simply teach English; they redefined what it meant to be modern. This redefinition still governs contemporary Bengaluru, where linguistic hybridity is both a resource and a divide. English is the city's lingua franca, the medium through which it connects to global networks, while Kannada remains its affective core, the language of belonging. This duality—rooted in colonial history, embodies what Homi Bhabha might call the "ambivalence of hybridity": neither pure imitation nor full autonomy, but an uneasy coexistence of two worlds.

To move beyond this legacy requires more than policy. It demands a transformation of consciousness. Decolonizing language, as Ngũgĩ insists, is not about rejecting English but about reclaiming the right to

define modernity in one's own terms. Kannada's revival in literature, cinema, and technology shows that a vernacular modernity is possible. When poets like Kuvempu envisioned a "Vishwamanava," they anticipated precisely this plural modernity. Where a regional language could articulate universal values without surrendering its identity. Similarly, Visvesvaraya's advocacy for technical education in Kannada reflected an early recognition that self-reliance must begin with linguistic self-respect. Such efforts remind us that decolonization is not a nostalgic return to tradition but a creative reorientation of modernity itself.

In today's Bengaluru, linguistic consciousness is once again at a crossroads. The city's cosmopolitanism thrives on multilingualism, yet its power structures remain linguistically stratified. The question, therefore, is not whether Kannada can coexist with English, it already does. But whether it can share equal epistemic legitimacy. True decolonization would mean recognizing that knowledge, creativity, and intellect are not monopolies of one language but capacities of human thought across linguistic worlds. English may remain a global bridge, but it must cease to be the measure of intellect. Kannada, with its thousand-year literary tradition, from Pampa and Basavanna to Kuvempu and Karnad, offers a testament that intellectual modernity need not be imported; it can be spoken, written, and imagined in the language of the soil.

The colonial encounter in Bengaluru thus left a complex inheritance: a society fluent in English yet searching for its Kannada self; a city modernized through colonial institutions yet anchored in indigenous emotion. The challenge of postcolonial modernity is to reconcile these identities without subordination. As we revisit this linguistic history, we are reminded that the politics of language is not merely about words, it is about power, identity, and imagination. To speak Kannada today, in a world still structured by colonial residues, is to perform an act of cultural continuity and intellectual defiance. The decolonization of language is, ultimately, the decolonization of the mind.

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