Anoushka Maraj

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Kings School, Chester

Question:

How have language policies implemented during colonial rule influenced contemporary linguistic hierarchies, cultural identities, or literatures? Discuss specific examples.

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Forgotten Footsteps: Inter-colonial Displacement, Colonial Language Policies and Diasporic Identity.

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Introduction

Standing at the banks of the Hooghly River in Kolkata, at the very site where my ancestors departed in 1905, I confronted a profound truth, the land they called home had long forgotten them. The Indenture Memorial in Kidderpore Dock, a silent witness to the migration of thousands, stood largely unnoticed by the city's people. Despite the deep emotional and cultural bond that Indo-Caribbean descendants keep with India, the subcontinent itself has moved on, leaving this history unspoken. This disconnect is not accidental; it is a legacy of colonial language policies that shaped, and in many ways fractured, diasporic identity.

Growing up in the UK, I have always felt a gap between my mother's linguistic world and my own. She was born in India and speaks English and multiple Indian languages fluently. My father is Indo-Trinidadian, born in Trinidad where his family lost their Indian languages generations ago. That history shaped the way language works in my family; my mother can speak to her friends and relatives in their native tongue, but my father and I can only speak English.

This divide is not just linguistic; it is a deeper question of identity. At school, I exist in a world where I am seen as different; my cultural background marks me as "other" in subtle ways. At home, I am also different; I do not fully share my mother's linguistic or cultural experience of India, and I do not have the same historical memory of Trinidad as my father. This leaves me questioning: where do I truly belong?

This essay will take us on a journey from Kolkata, to Trinidad, to the UK where I was born, and back to Kolkata going full circle. In this journey through time and continents, I will reflect on colonial language policies and the shaping of my complex identity.

Reflections of the Kolkata Memorial

The Kolkata Memorial, unveiled in 2011 at Kidderpore Dock, serves as a tribute to the countless Indians who left those shores between 1834 and 1920 to unknown lands across the British Empire (GOPIO, 2011). Despite its historical significance, the monument remains relatively unknown in Kolkata, often requiring special permission for visitors, a reflection of India's disengagement with this chapter of its past (The Telegraph India, 2023). Ashook Ramsaran, a descendant of indentured labourers and a key advocate for the memorial, emphasized its importance, stating that "our ancestors who left those shores truly deserve their place in the annals of Indian history and the journeys of people of Indian origin in the Indian Diaspora" (Indian Diaspora Council, 2011). However, for myself and many visitors, the experience of standing at the site was bittersweet. David Sheoraj, a Trinidadian of Indian descent, expressed this sentiment: "We are the forgotten children of Mother India. Mauritius, Trinidad, Suriname, Guyana, and Fiji celebrate Indian Arrival Day and have memorials for the Indian workers. But in India, no one remembers them" (GRFDT, 2020).

Kolkata or Calcutta?

Interestingly, my father was born in Trinidad in a village called Calcutta. This village's name is a legacy of migrants aim to connect to their motherland. My mother is from Calcutta in India. In India, the city of Calcutta officially changed its name to Kolkata on January 1, 2001. The change was part of a broader movement in India to replace colonial-era place names with ones that reflect local languages and cultural identities. Kolkata is derived from the Bengali pronunciation of the name. The British anglicized the name to Calcutta, which remained in use throughout the colonial period and post-independence era until the change. This renaming was driven by nationalist and postcolonial sentiments, aligning with similar changes in other Indian cities like Bombay to Mumbai and Madras to Chennai (Ghosh, 2019).

Calcutta retains its spelling in Trinidad. Is this another example of the diaspora holding on to a past that the motherland no longer recognizes? In some ways Trinidad may be considered a time capsule of 19th century India particularly in terms of cultural, religious, and linguistic traditions that have faded or evolved differently from those in modern India (Munasinghe, 2001).

British Colonial Rule, Indentured Migration, and the Indian Diaspora in Trinidad

The British ruled India from 1858 to 1947, enforcing policies that reshaped its economic and social structures. Trinidad was under British rule from 1797 to 1962 (Bissessar, 2016). The British Empire abolished slavery in its colonies in 1834 which led to a severe labour shortage on sugar plantations in the Caribbean. To address this, the British

introduced the system of indentured labour, where people from India were contracted to work for a set number of years in exchange for a promise of return passage, land, or money. Indians were recruited to work on plantations in the Caribbean, Africa, and the Pacific. Between 1845 and 1917, over 147,000 Indians were brought to Trinidad, primarily from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, where Bhojpuri, Awadhi, and other Hindi dialects were spoken (Mahabir, 2013).

The Ship Journey

Indentured labourers were mostly recruited from northern and central India. Calcutta was the main port used in the transport. On May 30th, 1845, the ship "Fatel Rozak" docked in the Port of Spain harbour in Trinidad with 225 adult passengers on board. They were the first immigrants from India who had come to the British colony. They had spent 103 days at sea during the long and dangerous journey that spanned 14,000 miles (Weller, 1968). They were transported in crowded and often unsanitary conditions. During their voyage, they communicated in a common Hindustani dialect, which blended Hindi, Urdu, and Bhojpuri (Mohammed, 1995). I shall refer to the dominant spoken Indian language in Trinidad as Hindi for the remainder of this essay.

Although they were promised a free return passage back home, at least 75 percent of them stayed and settled in the New World colony. The thought of that arduous journey back may have partially contributed to this.

Language policies during the Colonial Period

During the period of indentureship, small communities of Indians were created from varied cultural and language backgrounds from India. Regional linguistic variations quickly blended into a common Hindi dialect to allow ease of communication. This shared linguistic space provided some cultural continuity (Tiwari, 2006).

Colonial authorities, unlike in other regions where indigenous languages were suppressed, allowed Hindi to exist but did not institutionalize it. Legal documents were sometimes translated into Hindi, and translators were employed to mediate between labourers and British officials (Vertovec, 1992).

Additionally, the lack of Hindi-medium schools in colonial Trinidad meant that Indo-Trinidadian children did not have access to literacy in their ancestral language (Mohapatra, 2009). This lack of formal Hindi education and the imposition of English as the primary language of administration, education and economic mobility led to the gradual erosion of Hindi proficiency among Indo-Trinidadians (Mahase, 2008). My father attended a prestigious grammar school in Trinidad, Naparima College, that was founded in 1894 by Dr. Kenneth Grant, a Canadian Presbyterian missionary working among the Indian population. The school was one of the first to educate Indo-Trinidadians and these educational institutions played an important role in the

development of an Indo-Trinidadian professional class. These Christian missionary schools played a role in promoting English and discouraging the use of Hindi as it was considered be associated with Indian religions (Mohammed, 1995). Over time, the economic necessity of English accelerated language loss among Indo-Trinidadians, leading to a shift towards English as primary language.

Unique Challenges in Retaining Hindi Post-Indentureship

A significant factor that contributed to the decline of Hindi in Trinidad, more than in some other regions, was the geographical distance and challenges of returning to India. Unlike Indian communities in East Africa, Fiji, or Malaysia, where travel back to India was more feasible, Indo-Trinidadians were separated from their ancestral homeland by vast oceans, making return nearly impossible for most (Singh, 2017). This physical isolation meant that there were fewer opportunities to reinforce linguistic ties with India, leading to a more accelerated language loss compared to other diasporic Indian populations (Lal, 2000).

The British discouraged repatriation, offering land incentives to those who stayed, solidifying permanent settlement in Trinidad and fostering deeper linguistic assimilation into English (Look Lai, 1993).

Hinduism and Cultural Survival in Trinidad

Despite the Hindi language loss, my Indo-Trinidadian family have preserved many Hindu cultural and religious traditions. I have a strong religious identity, and Hinduism remains a central part of my life, even though I do not speak Hindi. Many Indo-Trinidadians maintained their faith through oral traditions, music, and community rituals rather than through written texts in Hindi or Sanskrit. The Ramayan and Bhagavad Gita were passed down through recitations and interpretations in English, allowing Hindu beliefs to survive even when the language changed (Vertovec, 1992). I see this in my own life; while I may not understand Hindi prayers, I still participate in pujas, celebrate Diwali, and feel deeply connected to my faith.

This balance between religious continuity and linguistic loss is something I often reflect on. My mother, having grown up in India, learned Hindu scriptures in their original languages, while my father and I rely on translations and oral traditions. This reflects the resilience of Indo-Caribbean Hindus, who adapted their traditions to survive despite the erasure of their languages under colonial rule (Tiwari, 2006). Diwali, for example, is a national holiday in Trinidad and is one of the largest celebrations outside of India. I feel proud of my family's contribution as my grandfather and great-grandfather were Hindu priests who were instrumental in preserving cultural and religious traditions in Trinidad.

Reflections on Visiting Trinidad

During my visits to Trinidad, I notice a paradox: Hindi music plays on multiple radio stations and television channels despite most people not understanding the language. This reflects an emotional and cultural connection to ancestral roots, even if linguistic fluency has faded. The presence of Bollywood and devotional music in Trinidadian public spaces signifies an attempt to retain cultural heritage through sound and emotion rather than direct linguistic comprehension (Mahabir, 2013).

For Indo-Trinidadians, Hindi remains a marker of ethnic and religious identity, despite its decline as a spoken language. The continued recitation of Hindu scriptures in their original Hindi or Sanskrit, even when understood only through translation, reflects a deep-rooted commitment to preserving Hindu traditions despite linguistic loss. This resonates with my own experience; while I do not speak Hindi, my strong Hindu identity and cultural practices connect me to my Indo-Trinidadian roots. I personally have no struggles communicating with Trinidadians as we share a common language.

The Tension of Visiting India

While Trinidad feels like a bridge between my Indo-Caribbean identity and India, my visits to India bring an entirely different experience. In India, I feel an intense tension; on the surface, I look Indian, but I don't speak the language. Indians would approach me, assuming I speak Hindi, and when I can't respond, there is often confusion or even disappointment. In some ways, I feel like an outsider in a place that should feel familiar. It is a stark reminder of how language, more than just appearance, plays a huge role in belonging.

V.S. Naipaul described a similar experience in An Area of Darkness (1964), where he travels to India as a descendant of Indian indentured labourers but struggles with the realization that he does not truly belong. His inability to speak Hindi reinforces his distance from India, making him feel like a foreigner despite his ancestry. This experience resonates deeply with me. Standing in the streets of Kolkata, surrounded by a language I can't understand, I feet disconnected from a place that should be part of my heritage. This disconnection is not just linguistic; it's emotional, historical, and deeply personal.

Struggling for a Personal Identity in the UK

I exist in the space between these histories. While I am deeply grateful for the privilege of life in Britian, I still struggle with my identity. At school, I am not seen as fully British; at home, I do not completely fit into either my Indian or Indo-Trinidadian heritage.

My mother can navigate India fluently, my father can navigate Trinidad with cultural ease, but where does that leave me? I have inherited fragments of each world; religion

without the original language, culture without full fluency, an ancestral homeland I cannot fully access due to the language constraints. This is the struggle of many second-generation immigrants, balancing between integration into British society and preserving a cultural identity that is always shifting.

Indians in the UK, have a relatively strong community presence, with clear ties to South Asian culture (Modood, 2007). But I struggle to fully engage with the Indian community in Britain, where language often plays a key role in religious and cultural identity.

The Indo-Trinidadian community in the UK is very small but there is some literature to relate to their identity concerns. They are sometimes mistaken for Afro-Caribbeans in Britain and lack the same degree of social visibility (Vertovec, 2000). V.S. Naipaul's A House for Mr. Biswas (1961) explores this tension through the story of an Indo-Trinidadian man trying to assert his independence and identity in a world shaped by colonial history. Like Mr. Biswas, I sometimes feel like I am searching for a sense of belonging in a world that has fractured my cultural inheritance.

I could find no academic references to my individual heritage in the UK. On personal reflection, I am sometimes "too Indian" for the Caribbean community and more so "too Caribbean or British" for the Indian community, resulting in a fractured identity with no clear cultural home.

I agree with linguist Peggy Mohan (2021) who argues that language is not just about communication; it is tied to history, identity, and resilience. My identity, even without fluency in an Indian language, is still deeply connected to the cultural survival of my ancestors. I may never fit neatly into one category, but identity is not about choosing one side over another; it is about making meaning from all the pieces I have inherited. I chose to celebrate my unique and colourful history and identity.

Conclusion

The colonial era played a contradictory role in the survival and decline of Hindi in Trinidad. While Hindi persisted through religious and cultural practices, it was never institutionalized, ensuring its gradual erosion in favour of English. The geographic isolation of Indo-Trinidadians further weakened linguistic retention, as return migration to India was rarely an option. This linguistic shift has had lasting effects on identity formation among Indo-Trinidadians and their descendants. My own experience, shaped by my Hindu identity yet linguistic disconnect, mirrors the broader struggle of Indo-Caribbean heritage in the diaspora. I propose further academic recognition and study of my unique hybrid identity.

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