Author : Pranav Kapoor Bhandari

Identity, Access, and English—India's Universal Keycard

English in India isn't just a classroom subject; it's a Universal Keycard. Flash the right accent, tempo, and register and the light turns green. Fumble, and the lock stays shut. Growing up in India, I kept noticing how "good English" gets equated to good thinking—how fluency in the language becomes a shortcut for judging intelligence, pedigree, or even moral worth. At the same time, the very same skill can rocket a family into schools, jobs, and rooms that were previously invisible. In India, English is a convenient technology that quietly decides who gets in.

You can hear that logic in the way people across all socioeconomic classes talk about the language. The moment someone speaks comfortably, meetings tilt toward them. When someone hesitates, they are nudged into the role of listener, or worse, translator—the person asked to relay meaning rather than originate it. I've watched classmates switch to English to be taken seriously, then switch back to Hindi or Bengali to be warm or funny. The code-switch isn't only linguistic; it's social positioning.

The paradox is stark. On the one hand, fluency unlocks. English is the language of business and networking. Private schools almost inevitably have English as their language of instruction, while public schools teach in Hindi or the regional language. On the other hand, it stratifies. Hiring panels hear "polish" where they should be listening for ideas, treating grammar and accent as a proxy for competence. Meanwhile, the person with shaky school exposure to English carries a **translation tax**: constantly rephrasing thoughts into the "right" form, spending cognitive energy that others don't have to spend. It's not that content disappears; it's that the channel filters it.

This phenomenon didn't materialize out of nowhere. English sits inside a layered history of power and aspiration in India. When wealth and poverty stand shoulder to shoulder, the language associated with higher education and corporate work becomes a shortcut for mobility—and a convenient screen for exclusion. Families hustle for access precisely because the keycard works: one sibling's fluency can change housing, neighborhood, and network for everyone. That possibility is real; so is the inequality attached to not having that card in your pocket.

There's also a cultural frame around "properness." We valorize **"śuddh" Hindi** — "shoodh HIN-dee" (**(ʃʊd̪ʱ ˈɦɪndi)**), which refers to the way previous generations spoke the language, as the emblem of heritage in our country. And then we also pivot to English when stakes feel "serious." The message young people absorb is that while identity is in the mother tongue, credibility lives in English. We learn to live split lives: think and joke in one code, present and pitch in another. Over time, that split can flatten what counts as "smart"—not because of ideas, but because of where and how those ideas are spoken.

Crucially, this isn't just an Indian story about English. The same pattern repeats anywhere a **prestige language** doubles as a gatekeeper: French in parts of West and North Africa, Spanish in some Latin American contexts, Mandarin in certain Chinese cities, Arabic in select MENA institutions, and so on. Whenever one code is welded to opportunity, pronunciation and register start masquerading as merit. It's widespread. And it asks all of

society—teachers, managers, examiners, peers—to stay conscious of which judgments are about **content** and which are about **surface**.

None of this means English is "bad," or that aspiration is suspect. It means we should separate **tool** from **test**. English is an incredibly useful tool, but it becomes unjust when we use it as the test for belonging. The best classrooms and teams I've seen make room for translanguaging—letting people think, plan, and even draft in the languages where their ideas are most alive, then share outcomes in the register the audience needs. That simple sequencing preserves rigor while widening who gets to contribute.

What could Indian society do, practically?

- **De-bias hiring and admissions.** Score interviews and SOPs on content first; treat grammar/accent as coaching targets, not inadequacy.
- **Offer language as support, not a filter.** Fund workplace and university English programs that are free, respectful, and scheduled during paid time.
- **Normalize interpreters and bilingual delivery.** Public services, courts, hospitals, and campuses should default to multilingual signage and interpretation; don't make the speaker shoulder the cost.
- **Teach with translanguaging.** Encourage note-taking, group discussion, and early drafting in local languages; polish into audience-facing English afterwards.
- **Assess ideas in many codes.** Allow answers in Indian languages for exams, presentations, and grant proposals when feasible, with translation pipelines built in.
- **Train listeners as well, not just speakers.** Managers and faculty need accent-listening practice and rubrics that prioritize argument, evidence, and clarity over accent and idiom.

English in India can be a ladder and a wall at the same time. The way forward is not to discard the ladder but to punch more doors in the wall—so that fluency is a resource people can gain, not a border that defines their worth. And because gatekeeping via "the prestige code" is a global habit, the challenge travels: wherever we are, let's keep asking whether we're rewarding insight or merely recognizing the sound we expected to hear.