



The Influence of Indian languages on English

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English is the most global of languages and has been enriched by languages from all over the world since the age of colonialism.

The association of the British with India started in the early part of the 17th century with the first East India company voyage in 1601, which eventually resulted in the company controlling India from 1757 till 1858. The rule was then passed to the Crown and lasted till India's independence in 1947.

This rather long period resulted in India adopting English as its official language post independence and several Indian languages leaving their impact on English.

India is an extremely diverse subcontinent with a rich array of languages that run into the hundreds. India has 22 official languages, 150 major languages and about 1652 recorded languages and dialects (1962 census).

When two cultures are exposed to each other over an extended time, their languages begin to influence each other and words from one language are assimilated into the other. The assimilation could take place with the same pronunciation as the donor language or a distortion depending on the pronunciation limits of the recipient language.

An interesting distortion – ‘Doolally Tap’

‘Doolally tap’ is a phrase that has made its way into the English language from India. The Oxford English dictionary defines ‘Doolally tap’ as ‘Temporarily deranged or feeble-minded’. Typically, when ‘Doolally tap’ is used in Britain, the ‘tap’ is used meaning a knock on the head causing insanity, and the forehead or temple is tapped to indicate that a person has the ‘Doolally tap’.

Deolali is a small town in the Marathi speaking state of India – Maharashtra. Geographically it falls under a high temperature zone. Deolali was a transit camp for British troops during the British Raj. British troops were stationed in Deolali awaiting their return home to Britain. Over the years, Deolali became notorious for its unpleasant environment, high

temperatures, boredom and malarial fever, which caused delusions in British troops. There were several cases of mental disorders and ‘Doolally tap’ was born.

The English alphabet and the way in which English is pronounced make it very difficult to trap and convey the pronunciation of Indian languages, hence Deolali (Actual pronunciation –They-Oh-Lah-Lee) became Doolally. In Marathi, the local language spoken in Deolali, the word for fever is ‘Thaap’. It derives from Sanskrit, the ancient Vedic language of India. ‘Thaap’ was spelled as ‘Tap’ in English and even pronounced as such. Over time and repeated use, the ‘Deolali thaap’ morphed into ‘Doolally tap’ – the first word undergoing a mere pronunciation change but the second morphing to its original English meaning – ‘tap’!

Some words from India that made their way into English:

While the list runs into the hundreds, below are 20 common words in English that have their etymological roots in Indian languages.

Avatar – Sanskrit for ‘Incarnation’. Traditionally used for the ‘incarnations’ of the Hindu God ‘Vishnu’ on earth, it is also used for a ‘new form’ taken by someone. The connotation in English is similar, though the word has become more popular with the advent of the web in the way of online ‘Avatars’.

Guru – Sanskrit for ‘Teacher’, it dates back to the times of the Vedanta. The connotation in English, though, is more as an ‘Expert’ on a subject.

Pundit – Hindi for ‘Learned one’. In India, ‘Pundit’ is an exalted title for a person who has achieved great heights in a field involving the intellect or fine arts. It also means ‘Priest’.

Zen – Yes, Zen has its etymological roots in Sanskrit. Zen is derived from the Chinese ‘Chan’ for meditation, which in turn is derived from the Sanskrit word ‘Dhyana’ for meditation.

Mantra – Sanskrit for ‘incantation’ or ‘chant’. Mantras in India are supposed to have special powers and are prescribed as remedies for rectifying spiritual issues. The English connotation of course is that of a panacea for a particular problem from a statement or slogan recited repeatedly.

Juggernaut – The English connotation is ‘a huge, overwhelming and unstoppable force’. It is derived from the name of God Vishnu – Jagannath. The Jagannath temple in Puri in Eastern India has an annual festival where a huge chariot seating the deity is dragged with ropes by devotees. In bygone days (and days of the British Raj) such was the religious fervour that devotees would sometimes get crushed under the chariot but it could not and would not be stopped. Hence the derivation.

Khaki – First used as a colour in 1848, khaki was conceived as a camouflage colour for desert warfare. The word ‘Khak’ in Hindi means ‘Ash’ or ‘Soil’.

Shampoo – Yes indeed, the word is derived from the 18th century Hindi word -‘Champo’ which meant massage into the head/hair.

Loot – From Gurus and Zen to yes –Loot, which is Hindi for, you got it – Loot!

Thug – From the Hindi word ‘Thug’. Thugs were organised robbers and assassins in India. Notoriously secretive and skilled, they would strangle passers-by on forest routes with their legs, hanging down from trees. They also used yellow scarves with a coin tied in the centre to quickly strangle victims.

Mugger – Hindi for ‘Crocodile’. The crocodile is a master of ambush hence the connotation in English.

Dacoit – From the Hindi word ‘Dakait’ which meaning ‘Dacoit’ of course!

Chutney – From the Tamil word ‘Chatni’. One of the most commonly used culinary accompaniments in India. A mix of condiments and spices used as a sauce or accompaniment to specific dishes or even as a common one to several dishes.

Pukka – In English it means ‘First rate’ or ‘Excellent’. It derives from the Hindi word ‘Pakka’ which means ‘Ripe’, ‘Cooked’ or ‘Done’, hence ready for consumption.

Jute – From the Bengali word ‘Jatho’ which means matted or interwoven fabric or hair.

Bungalow – From the Hindi word ‘Bangla’. Houses in India that were constructed in the ‘Bengali’ style were known as ‘Banglas’.

Bandanna – From the Hindi word ‘Bandhan’ which means ‘Tie’. ‘Bandhana’ in Hindi means ‘to tie’.

Punch – (As in fruit punch) – From the Hindi word ‘Paanch’ which means ‘Five’. The drink’s original five ingredients were spirits, water, lemon juice, sugar and spice.

Pajamas – From the Hindi word ‘Pajama’ meaning ‘Leg garment’.

Bandicoot – From the Telugu word ‘Pandi-kokku’ which means ‘Pig Rat’.

Hemant Rangan graduated from Bangalore University and worked as a developer and database specialist for 4 years in a local company before joining Tata Consultancy Services (TCS). He worked for TCS in Malaysia (GE) and Switzerland (UBS) before moving to the USA to lead teams on turn-key projects with General Electric and Xerox. He then moved to the UK, leading large scale Programmes for Aviva. After leaving TCS in 2009 he worked as an independent consultant with Aviva for major Programmes and with Lloyds Bank, leading projects in Uruguay and Japan. He became aware of and keenly interested in Cross Culture Management in 2003 while in the USA and since then has actively implemented it in his engagements and team interactions. He is now working on a new venture to use his experience to help organisations synergise diversity.

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