



Macaulay's Clerks And PMKVY's Proxies: English-Centric Soft Skills And Colonial Continuities

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Abstract

This paper investigates the similarities that exist between colonial education systems and current skill development initiatives in India. It particularly focuses on skill-based education programs that focus largely on English, that is training for soft skills, as provided under the Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY) and Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) programs. The study used postcolonial theory, and discourse analysis, in addition to empirical evidence gathered from both media investigations and audit reports to demonstrate the continuing relevance of colonial pedagogical principles in today's India. By following a line of thought originating with the 1835 Minute on Indian Education by Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay through its evolution to a modern-day neoliberal model of government, it can be shown that the linguistic economic capital afforded to graduates of these skill-development programs helps facilitate the ongoing control and exclusion of India through a colonial framework. The analysis reveals that skill-development initiatives often transform rural youth into measurable outputs rather than autonomous subjects, thereby sustaining linguistic imperialism and epistemic dependence. The paper ultimately contends that meaningful decolonization requires reimagining education beyond employability-driven, English-dominated frameworks.

Keywords: Skill Development, Soft Skills, Postcolonial Theory, Linguistic Imperialism, Decolonization

Introduction

The ongoing similarities of colonial education with postcolonial vocational training in India provide insight into how a hereditary system of oppression reinforced by language and by means of bureaucratic oversight continue long after Colonial Rule ended by way of “formal” decolonisation. As indicated in Thomas Babington Macaulay's (1835) now infamous “Minute on Indian Education” where he sought to create a “class” of people who were “English in taste and intellect”, to the present-day Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY) which attempts to provide “skills” to the rural youth of India to enable them to be employed, that there is often a confusion of ideas between the rhetoric of empowerment and the creation of dependency. Paulo Freire’s critique of domination is particularly useful for understanding the moral economy of contemporary skill-development discourse. The oppressors do not perceive their monopoly on having more as a privilege which dehumanizes others and themselves (Freire 59). This paper investigates how government sponsored skills development programs including DDU-GKY, PMKVY manifest the historical legacy of creating compliant, English-speaking individuals rather than thinking for themselves. Using scholarly resources and media investigative pieces such as Phillips Robertson’s and Ngugi Thong’o it is shown that the current “Soft Skills” regime is an updated version of Macaulay’s concept of education that supports employment without equity and communication without critical thought. By uncovering the ways in which colonial thinking, capitalist practicality, and language imperialism intersect to shape the Indian Developmental State today, this study highlights the ways in which colonial educational paradigms are sustained within the current context of the Indian skill development system.

Methodology

The qualitative and interpretative research design used in this survey is based on Text and Discourse Analysis methods (textually) and also use Language and Power Theory (Discourse) to explore how Colonial and Contemporary Texts in Education continue to provide a basis to identify an ideological connection or ‘line’ between Colonial Government Policy and Contemporary Skill Development in a Globalised Economy. Colonial educational texts such as Thomas Babington Macaulay’s Minute on Indian Education (1835) are used to inform current Government Skill Development Policies such as Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY). Using theory from Postcolonialism, this Survey looks at how Language, Governance, and Soft Skills Discourses perpetuate Colonial Hierarchies under Neoliberal Structures. The media, Audit reports, and Government policies are then examined through the lens of the rhetoric of Empowerment and its foundational Colonial reasoning, by using Discourse Analysis to reveal how the Language of Policy can promote forms of Structural Inequality while disguising the coercive nature of the Labour Relationship.

Literature Review

Current research addressing the relationship between education and language in colonial and post-colonial India reveals that Macaulay's philosophy of English language education was so influential that it continues to affect how contemporary skill development programs are created, operated and administered by both government and private sector organizations. Parimala V Rao’s book *Beyond Macaulay: Education in India 1780-1860* (published 2020) is a comprehensive review of the policies that the British developed regarding colonial education in India and demonstrates how these policies were designed to establish a linguistic hierarchy where English was the dominant vehicle of power and progress. Rao posits that this linguistic hierarchy created a permanent class of intermediaries: educated Indians who had been prepared for clerical and administrative roles, not to develop independent, critical thinking skills. Thomas Babington Macaulay’s this initiative set the ideological framework for this educational system with his *Speeches by Lord Macaulay: With His Minute on Indian Education* (published 1835). His call was to prepare individuals who were “Indian in blood and colour but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.” From a global standpoint, Robert Phillipson’s book *Linguistic Imperialism* (published 1992) expands upon Macaulay’s framework to provide insight on how English continues to retain its dominant

status internationally through cultural, pedagogical and institutional mechanisms. Phillipson's term "linguicism" describes how unequal access to language and education creates and perpetuates socio-economic inequality in India today, as displayed in India's neoliberal skill development initiatives. Julietta Singh's *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements* (2018) expands on this critique of education under colonialism, viewing decolonization as a shift towards an ethical framework and a process of unlearning the colonial hierarchy of power that has been internalized by the oppressed. Singh's work, along with existing scholarship that critiques both the education system and language as an extension of colonial rule, demonstrates that the colonial mode of education is still employed by governments today (in the form of DDU-GKY) where the idea of empowered, educated elite is reinforced through training programs geared to provide a skilled workforce and competent managers to fill jobs in the informal economy. Through *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o presents a key theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between language as a means of cultural domination. Ngũgĩ asserts that English language instruction acts as a "cultural bomb" that destroys the Indigenous mind, thereby reinforcing existing colonial power structures in Post-Colonial societies. Likewise, *The Foucault Reader* provides insight into the relationship between Discipline (or Disciplinary Power) and the creation of compliant, governable bodies (subjects). This provides a useful analytical lens through which to consider how Skill Development Programmes have been utilised to create compliant, productive bodies/behaviours/products through the neoliberal governance system (neoliberalism). While there is a great deal of scholarship available regarding both colonial education as well as linguistic imperialism, little has been done to examine how those same ideologies or ways of thinking now exist within India's contemporary system of skill development. In particular, English-based soft skills training represents a means of governing rather than empowering individuals.

The Proxies

These training centres function as neoliberal intermediaries, which this paper terms "proxies", through which the state displaces responsibility while maintaining control. The persistence of exploitative patterns within government training programs reveals how colonial hierarchies have been modernized through bureaucratic schemes rather than dismantled. Alleging serious irregularities in the execution of Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY) at Periyar University, students filed a complaint with Salem city police on Sunday ("Periyar Varsity on Radar"). The DDU-GKY Program funds over 30 vocational training programs in Manipur for soft skills. Interviews with trainers and trainees suggest that the standard operating procedure (SOP) issued by the Government of India is an appropriate document; however, it has been implemented in an exploitive manner. Breakfast was provided with the tea leaves from the previous day and was not accompanied by any other food items. The lentil curry provided was so watery that it resembled the murky river water found after heavy rain. Trainees received no medications or first-aid supplies and received no uniforms or study materials even though the Government of India promised to supply these materials. This presents a clear divide between what the government states and what is actually provided. This divide is similar to the way that colonial powers viewed education as a means to "civilise" the people they controlled and the manner that they influenced their lives through the material world. Concerning placement after training, those who participated were sent to local hotels and shops and given salaries at or below 6000 INR. Such administrative fraud echoes colonial governance, where numerical success masked systemic exploitation. The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) has found that 32% of the placement claims in Kerala under the Union government's youth employment programme, Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY), were false and fabricated ("32 Per Cent of Placement Claims"). Trainers were not paid at all and were told that the government had not released the funds, even though they were required to work from 9:00 AM to 6:00 PM every day. In Odisha, BJP alleged that the government had awarded 95 agencies to provide employment out of which 26 agencies fled away after receiving the first installment money from the State government. Moreover, four undeserved agencies were given Rs 76 crore for employment programme ("BJP Alleges Rs 568 Crore Scam"). The patterns suggest that bureaucratic compliance has

often served as a replacement for true empowerment in India's vocational education system. As was done by the colonial government, which utilized record-keeping and classification systems to categorize human lives, so too does the neoliberal government classify rural youth as "placement data" and "success metrics." The continuity in this practice shows how data continues to be used as a mechanism of governance rather than a tool for accountability. The emphasis on measurable outcomes, including the number of people who were enrolled, certified or employed, reflects the colonial emphasis on statistics as representations of advancement. As James C. Scott notes, "Designed or planned social order is necessarily schematic; it always ignores essential features of any real, functioning social order" (Scott 6). DDU-GKY exemplifies this schematic governance by privileging measurable outputs over lived realities. In both systems, visibility replaces substance: what matters is not whether empowerment occurs, but whether it can be shown to occur on paper. Moreover, the moral tone embedded in DDU-GKY's language of "training the poor" mirrors the paternalistic rhetoric of colonial "civilizing" missions. The beneficiaries are constructed as deficient subjects needing reform rather than as citizens possessing rights and agency. The clearest available example of such epistemic violence is the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other (Spivak 308). Like colonial clerks and agents who serve colonial masters while simultaneously being exploited by the same power structure, trainers often find themselves in the position of being unpaid and/or overworked. This duality creates a complex situation in which trainers become part of the colonial system, and in doing so, perpetuating Colonial Power for their own economic gain under the guise of providing assistance and support.

Colonial Continuities

These administrative failures are not accidental but historically structured. DDU-GKY is uniquely focused on rural youth between the ages of 15 and 35 years from poor families. As a part of the Skill India campaign, it plays an instrumental role in supporting the social and economic programs of the government like the Make In India, Digital India, Smart Cities and Start-Up India, Stand-Up India campaigns (Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana). Colonial powers imposed their languages on colonized societies, and even anticolonial efforts to reclaim native languages often perpetuated hierarchical structures, reflecting the enduring influence of colonial frameworks. DDU-GKY's emphasis on poor youth aged 15-35 in rural areas is not simply a mistake; it has been around for a long time. DDU-GKY is part of the Indian government's Skill India initiative and has been instrumental in providing support to the government's social and economic development efforts through programs such as Make In India, Digital India, Smart Cities, and Startup India/Standup India (The Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana). The languages imposed by colonial powers upon their colonies can be seen as an important factor in perpetuating hierarchical structures of domination and control that continue long after the fall of empires. Though colonial influenced anticolonial movements have attempted to restore native languages, these movements have largely failed to eliminate the hierarchical nature of language and language use, reflecting the continued influence of colonial structures. Singh argues, "Whether through struggles with colonial language and its enforcement in the colonies, through the colonial subject's torturous embodiments of colonial language, or through the reclamation of "native" languages, gendered force repeats across discussions of language and colonial power" (Singh 70). Thomas Babington Macaulay's 1835 Education Minute advocated for modern education through English as vernacular languages. Anglo-vernacular or English and vernacular teaching schools should be established in as many towns as possible (Rao 179). T.B. Macaulay states,

In one point I fully agree with the gentleman to whose general views I am opposed. I feel with them that it is impossible for us, with our limited means, to attempt to educate the body of the people. We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, -a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect (Macaulay 359).

Today's English-focused employability training follows a similar pattern as colonial mediation practice. The interpreter mindset has been established in Indian society and continues to influence how we develop soft skills. The development of soft skills in India focuses on training an individual to conform to the global standard (that is, English-speaking) rather than cultivating indigenous innovations. The fact that English is still the most accepted way to obtain professional legitimacy shows the continual infiltration of colonial hierarchies through the auspices of neoliberalism. As Ngugi wa Thiong'o argues, "The biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against that collective defiance is the cultural bomb" (Ngugi 3), a process that continues today through English-centric soft-skills programs that normalize linguistic conformity as employability. In India, this "cultural bomb" operates through employability discourse rather than direct coercion. Language, once a marker of colonial modernity, now functions as economic capital, determining access to employment and social mobility. The DDU-GKY as well as the Skill India program, therefore, extrapolate the visions of Macaulay concerning educational implementation using branding 'linguistic dependence/dependence' on language to legitimise the development of 'soft skills' (communicative competence, etc.) in societies that require them. The concept of "soft skills" obscures a more systemic ideological purpose: the promotion of the Western version of 'winning' through internalising Westernised work culture into the workforce. As Timothy Mitchell observes, "the possibility of social science is based upon taking certain historical experiences of the West as the template for a universal knowledge" (Mitchell 8), a logic that continues to inform contemporary skill-development regimes in postcolonial states. This continuity reinforces not only linguistic imperialism but also epistemic dependence, ensuring that the postcolonial subject remains globally employable yet locally disempowered. In this sense, soft-skills programs represent a double bind. On one hand, they promise empowerment through global fluency; on the other, they discipline participants into linguistic and cultural conformity. As Michel Foucault writes, "Discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies" (Rabinow 182). The DDU-GKY trainee thus emerges as a neoliberal docile body, disciplined, adaptable, and replaceable. This model explains how the methods of training and developing skills postcolonially constitute an inward acceptance of control over one's behaviour through beliefs about education and employability. The ideal outcome is for trainees to be flexible, productive and English-speaking, with these qualities reflecting corporate capitalism rather than community-based development. These trainings are concerned with perpetuating the ideologies of people who espouse global neoliberalism by supporting the structural inequalities that Macaulay created, thereby creating more asymmetry and maintaining the same cyclical systems whereby each language contains the hope and promise of advancement, but also serves as a vehicle for oppression. Linguistic imperialism refers to the dominance of one language over others, often driven by political, economic, and cultural power. It is a form of cultural and linguistic hegemony where a dominant language, such as English, is promoted or imposed at the expense of local or indigenous languages. Phillipson asserts, "The working definition of English linguistic imperialism attempts to capture the way one language dominates other with anglocentricity and professionalism as the central ELT mechanisms operating within a structure in which unequal power and resource allocation is effected and legitimated Linguicism is the central concept here" (Phillipson 54).

Conclusion

The trajectory of education in India from Macaulay's 1835 Minute on Indian Education to the twenty-first century schemes such as the Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY) and Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), illustrates the persistence of colonial logic cloaked in the language of modern development. In spite of proclaiming to empower and include all groups of individuals, state-sponsored programs continue to mimic a hierarchical approach where English skill/capability is the foremost indicator of employability and social mobility. In fact, the characteristics of discipline, conformity, and the servile nature associated with colonial education have simply been rebranded as professionalism and soft skills in contemporary society. The viability of linguistic

imperialism and bureaucratic paternalism within India's developmental framework is repetitive in that it exists today as it did at the onset of colonialism. Therefore, absent structural reform, state-sponsored employment skill development programs will simply institutionalise conditions of precarity rather than provide support for poverty alleviation. Consequently, true decolonisation will require far more than simply re-naming the original colonial-oriented education systems or having indigenous systems of curriculum in place; it will require a complete re-imagining of education as a space where critical thought, cultural autonomy and ethical labour can flourish. Only with the freedom from the colonial-neoliberal constraints placed on language, labour and learning will India be able to transition from a nation of clerks to a society of creative thinkers and doers.

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BIO NOTE

Hijam Georgie Philemon holds an MA in English Literature from IGNOU and has qualified UGC-NET, TET-1 and TET-2. He has a strong academic foundation in literary studies and brings deep insight into various theoretical frameworks and literary analysis. He has participated and presented papers in various national/international seminars/conferences/workshops and has published one research paper in a reputed journal. He has also written two book chapters in the reputed National Publication House. Currently, He is a research scholar in the department of English, DM University, Imphal (Manipur).



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