

Languages to unite, not divide

BY ROOPA RAKSHIT
FOR THE CHRONICLE-JOURNAL

‘BUT, your English is so good!’ is a response I often hear when I inform people that I am from India. I am mostly amused with the temporary confusion. I try and understand the mystification, as I am not sure if it is meant as a compliment or is an expression of pre-conceived perception or judgment. The lengthy explanation for a skill that is learned and practised is simply because most Indians are exposed to the English language since childhood.

The English language is a byproduct of the 200 years of colonialism of the British Empire in India — this is the case for many countries in Asia.

English language was the bridging language between Indians and the British at the time. In fact, shortly after India gained independence in 1947, the Indian Constitution was written in English.

The government then decided to officially make one of the most commonly used languages in India “Hindi” to be an official language along with English. And, when the Official Language Act was passed by the Parliament, it enabled the use of English language indefinitely.

Subsequently, the Government of India designated Hindi, as well as English as the official languages.

That is not all. There are different Indian English accents categorized by region — northern, southern, and the central accents, that are influenced by the native language.

After living and travelling exten-



ONE CITY
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Thunder Bay's Anti-Racism and Respect Advisory Committee produces this monthly column to promote greater understanding of race relations in Northwestern Ontario.

sively in India, it's been a treat to listen to the different accents and to guess the birth place. English continues to be a dominant language for most parts, even connecting different parts of India together by one common language.

Now, as I build a new home in Canada and embrace its culture and traditions, I stand out.

I am neither brunette nor blonde. I am a representation of the challenge many Canadians face as Canada adopts its newfound identity as an accepting country of all people.

I am categorized as “Asian”, along with other south Asian immigrants from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, or Sri Lanka. However, each of us has unique ethnic traditions, cultural heritages, cuisines, linguistic features, including distinct English accents.

In today's high-paced times, many people are crossing continents that

undoubtedly is fostering our global cultural consciousness. Increasingly there is less surprise and amusement when meeting international colleagues, students, friends, and neighbours and hearing the different shades of their English language.

Canada is a country of immigrants. Together, newcomers offer exciting cultural exposures, opportunities and responsibilities to inform one another and respond to appreciative comments in a respectful way. And, those occasional stereotypical ignorant remarks and questions can bring learning moments for others.

An observation I have made as a student at Lakehead University is that a lack of fluency with the English language is often misunderstood for a lack of intelligence or education.

Asian cultures offer rich history, fascinating lifestyles, tonal languages, and rainbow hues of the English language along with our butter chickens, naan bread, and Pad Thai at Asian restaurants. In time, with open minds and sensibilities, I hope that various English accents will tend to become normalized and less amusing.

Roopa Rakshit is the host of Asian Vibes on Shaw TV Channel 10. The show captures the essence of Asian cultures, peoples, and profiles in Thunder Bay. She is an energy planning specialist at Ontario First Nations Technical Services and pursuing her Ph.D on community energy planning, Lakehead University.