

INDIAN WORDS IN ENGLISH

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Thumb through an English dictionary and you will be surprised to see the number of words that are derived from Hindi and other Indian languages. Most have been so acclimatized all over the English-speaking world that nobody thinks of their origin. BUNGALOW, SHAMPOO, COT, LOOT, VERANDAH -- who thinks of these as Indian words? Yet they are all derived from Hindi or other Indian languages.

In effect, the Oxford English Dictionary lists more than nine hundred words -- main ones -- of Indian origin. The count in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary is equally impressive.

Many Indian words have found their way into English by devious routes, especially those originating in Sanskrit. CANDY and SUGAR, for example, both come from Sanskrit through Persian, Arabic and French; OPAL, and probably PEPPER, from Sanskrit through Latin and Greek; SHALIMAR also from Sanskrit via Persian and Urdu; and MANGO from Tamil through Malay and Portuguese.

The early British settlers, a tiny minority in a huge alien environment, perforce adopted many of the customs of the country, and therewith the words. They wore BANIAN clothes, smoked the HOOKAH, drank TODDY, chewed BETEL, ate PILAU, CABOBS and CURRY, and employed PUNDITS. Other early borrowings reflected the trade they were engaged in. CHINTZ, TUSSORE, CALICO (from the town of Calicut) and others were in use by the early seventeenth century.

Indeed, the British seem from the beginning to have formed the habit of wholesale borrowing from Indian languages. For, in 1617, the court of directors of the East India Company reproved their Surat factors for using too many Indian words. And later, when they began to make fortunes and come back to England as NABOBS, they were much ridiculed for their Oriental ways and language.

But it was in the heyday of Anglo-India, in the nineteenth century,

that borrowings became so profuse as to constitute almost a separate language, peculiar to the British in India. Indian words were used not only for specifically Indian things or ideas but also for all sorts of concepts for which there already were perfectly good English words. Newcomers from England were quite lost, and at least one Governor-General complained that he could not understand the reports of his own officials.

This language was recorded in all its ramifications in Yule and Burnell's celebrated dictionary Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of the Anglo-Indian Tongue, which has recently been republished and makes fascinating reading. (The title was supposed to represent a typical adaptation of Indian words to the English tongue, Hobson-Jobson deriving from the call "Hassan, Hussain" used by Moslems at the Moharram festival.)

It is interesting and noteworthy that the two greatest writers on the India of the British Raj made good use of this jargon. Kipling sprinkled his early poems with Indian words and phrases which had to be explained in footnotes when published in England. E. M. Forster used many "Hobson-Jobsons" in his masterpiece, A Passage to India, to enhance the Anglo-Indian atmosphere.

Much of this colorful vocabulary has died with the passing of British India, for example the terms for numerous categories of servants such as MOLLY (mali) and BOBACHEE (bawarchi). Some terms, on the other hand, have become standard English. THUG, PYJAMAS, PURDAH, BANGLE and CHUKKER (in polo) were all adopted in this later period.

Some of the slangier side of this jargon is very expressive, and may retain a permanent place in the language. CHIT, CUSHY, BAD-MASH and TAMASHA are all admitted by the Oxford English Dictionary and surely deserve their place. PUKKA (also in the Merriam-Webster) is an invaluable (gem of a) word. A nineteenth-century writer put it rather well when he said:

A man who is a thorough master of the word 'pukka' may hold his own in any society in India. A man who is good at all points is 'pukka'. A permanent barrack is 'pukka' as opposed to a thatched hut. The arrangements for a shooting party are 'pukka' when the pale ale does not run short, and the bore of the station is prevented from coming by an attack of dysentery.

Other borrowings of the nineteenth century came from a very different source. A wave of interest in Eastern religions in the early part of the century (and later, thanks to major Western figures such

as Goethe, Voltaire and Emerson) introduced such famous terms as NIRVANA, YOGA, KARMA and AVATAR.

In the present century, political developments brought a number of new words -- SWARAJ, SWADESHI, HARTAL, SATYAGRAH, and so on -- all of which have a place in the Oxford English Dictionary and the Merriam-Webster, although still marked foreign in terms of etymology and usage.

The process continues. RISHI and MAHARISHI are not yet in the dictionary, but after the Beatles' visit to the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi they must be quite familiar to the English-speaking world. GHERAO and BANDH have also been suggested as claimants to Anglicization. But they must be left to find their own way. The influence of one language on another is a subtle and, above all, a natural process. Attempts to regulate and fix the language (a la Dryden and Dr. Johnson) have never been very successful. English will, no doubt, continue to draw on Indian languages and vice versa.