Seems the Brits never left

By MANU JOSEPH

IN A RECENT Hindi film, the actress Katrina Kaif holds a thin white bed sheet against her bare body and sings in English: "I know you want it, but you're never gonna get it." That's what has become one of the country's popular Hindi songs opens with an English sentence is unremarkable for Indians. So is the truth that Hindi films are now written in English - the instructions in the screenplay are in English, and even the Hindi dialogue is transcribed in the Latin alphabet. Mumbai's film stars, like most educated Indians, find it easier to read Hindi if it is written this way.

Almost all advertising billboards in India are in English. There is not a single well-paying job in the country that does not require a good understanding of the language. Higher education in the nation's popular Hindi songs opens with an English sentence is unremarkable for Indians. When Hindustan Pencils makes cheap pencils, which its sells to rural children for a rupee apiece (about 3 Singapore cents), the company prints the brand name, "Jobber," in English. "A villager has more respect for a brand that is written in Prasad has built a temple to the Goddess Eng.

"That would be a promise they make that they will teach their children English," he said. He also plans to adopt an Islamic tradition and fix a loudspeaker in the temple from which a recorded voice would chant the English alphabet, from A to Z, every day at 5am. All these are just symbolic gestures, he said, and the best he can do in the absence of genuine political support for making English the national language.

The chief beneficiaries if English attained this status would be the children who attend the free schools run by the central and the state governments. An overwhelming majority of such schools do not teach in English.

Indian politicians, whose own children attend private English-language schools in India and abroad, want their constituents to marinate in their mother tongues.

Sanjay Tiwari, the son of an illiterate security guard, was a victim of this attitude. Until the age of 16, he studied in Hindi and Marathi-language schools. Then, he taught himself English, and "escaped". He is now a marketing executive who makes a reasonable living in Mumbai, "only because I can speak in English".

Low-income Christians, who have easy access to English-language schools run by church and convents because they are granted tuition waivers and discounts, have benefited immensely over the years. It is not surprising that Christians are disproportionately represented in Bangalore's call centres.

Raj Thackeray, a pugnacious politician in Mumbai, is enraged by the diminished status of Marathi and the predominance of English in the city. His supporters have been known to beat up people who they believed disrespected the Marathi language. He wants everybody in Mumbai to learn Marathi.

Mr Thackeray derives his political clout from other Maratha men like himself who hope to push Marathi as the most important aspect of life in their state.

When asked why his own son goes to one of the best English-language schools in Mumbai and not to a Marathi-language school, he replied that the question was not important and was politically motivated.

His followers would have no doubt follow his example if they could. For all their laments about the siege of the Marathi language, they would probably put their children in English-language schools, too, the moment they could afford to do so.