

Colonialism and English Education in India: From Charter Act to Wood's Dispatch

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Abstract

The commencement of English education in India was a decisive aspect of colonial policy. Britain aimed at forming a class of Indians who would serve as agents between the British authorities and Indians. The British colonialists in India had tried their best to establish hegemony over the people by using various methods. Here education played a crucial role. The period 1813 to 1854 witnessed some groundbreaking educational policies and decisions initiated by the English East India Company and later by the British Crown. These policies were mainly concentrated on encouraging Western education, particularly English language and literature as a measure to control the conquered people. The period saw the founding of some acclaimed institutions like Calcutta Madrasa, Sanskrit College and Hindu College. These institutions played a very crucial role in shaping the educational landscape of colonial India. Though these policies received great hype from the colonial authorities, it also invited severe criticism from various corners. The critiques primarily focused on the Eurocentric approach and neglect of traditional Indian education systems. Mostly, the period of 1813-54 marked a noticeable shift in the educational system of India, laying the foundations for future developments in the field. This paper examines the intricate relationship between colonialism and English education in India. It also highlights the ways in which British colonial rule shaped India's educational landscape.

KEYWORDS: Colonialism, Indigenous Education, English Education, Charter Act- 1813, Macaulay's Minute, Wood's Dispatch, Oriental Occidental Conflict

Introduction

The weapon used by the Europeans for the realization of the purpose of colonialism was education. Education had been accepted worldwide as the gateway to the development of society. European nations used force to suppress the traditional educational system. Instead of indigenous education the colonial regime inaugurated a foreign educational system. Europeans rigorously applied their own curricula without considering the indigenous people. As a by-product of colonization, the metropolis implemented its own form of schooling within their colonies so as to suit their purpose. The colonial authority realized that they gain strength not necessarily through physical control but by mental control. This mental control is implemented through the colonial education system. Colonial domination becomes an act of violence over the dynamic synthesis already existing in the dominated societies, and which results in the uprooting of existing cultures, and replacing them with it dominant colonial culture. This act of violence is more powerful than the militaristic forms as "the most effective means of subjugating a people is to capture their minds". Mahatma Gandhi's address at the Royal Institute of International

Affairs, London on 20 Oct. 1931, stated that “literacy had declined in India in the past 50-100 years and held the British responsible for it” (Dharam Pal, 2000 p.3). Gandhi’s remarks delve into how colonial agents conspired to sabotage a good network of traditional Indian education system that prevailed during the pre-British period. Education becomes the means for this subjugation and hence, every colonialist has taken care to educate the dominated people, in the image of the colonialists themselves (Ganesh (ed), 2004, p.152.). The education policy of Britain in India was an attempt to strip the colonized people away from their indigenous learning structures and draw them the structures of colonizers. The system of education was highlighted the glory of white man’s mythical racial superiority and oriental inferiority.

The establishment of British control over India brought drastic changes in different spheres of life. Education was one such area where grass root changes came with the transfer of power to the British. British authorities through the introduction of western education made a new set of values and justified colonial rule. The real beneficiaries of western education in India were a selected few who had specific roles assigned by the colonial rulers for the continuation of colonial rule. The intention of the introduction of western education in India was to control the country rather than its development. The early policy of the English East India Company was that of non-interference in Indian social matters. But due to the influence of several ideologies in England, such as Evangelicalism and Utilitarianism, the company was forced to interfere in Indian social matters. The utilitarian thinkers demanded appropriate social engineering and authoritarian reformism. The evangelists, especially Charles Grant, argued on the necessity of the government intervention to liberate Indians from their religions that were according to them full of superstitions, idolatry and tyranny of the priests.

English education was introduced in India in the eighteenth century through the charity schools run in Calcutta, Madras and Bombay for the education of European and Anglo Indian Children. The company supported these schools in various ways, but did not take any direct responsibility for the education of the indigenous population until 1813. (Bandyopadhyay, 2004 p.140) The period between 1813 and 1854 was very pivotal concerned with the introduction of western education in India. The Charter Act of 1813, Macaulay’s Minute of 1835 and Wood’s Dispatch of 1854 determined the fate of the Indian educational system. Since modern education was introduced in India to meet the needs of Britain, its progress had been restricted and its character, from the standpoint of the Indian people, was unsatisfactory. The main purpose of the introduction of modern education was to supply the English-knowing personnel to the British apparatus. Thus mass education had been seriously neglected throughout. (Desai, 2010 p.141). In spite of the defects mentioned; the introduction of modern education in India was a progressive act of British rule. It was secular in character, liberal in essence; open to all, irrespective of caste or creed, unlike the education in the pre- colonial period. The impact of English education on Indian society was multifaceted. It contributed growth of Western-educated elite while also perpetuating cultural and linguistic hierarchies.

Indigenous Education System during the Eighteenth Century India

There is considerable evidence that India did possess an indigenous education system during the eighteenth century. There were *Madrassas* and *Maktabs* for the Muslims and *Tols* and *Patshalas* for the Hindus. These ranged from the centres for higher learning in Arabic and Sanskrit to lower levels of institutions for schooling people in Persian and Vernacular languages. The Brahmins studied in special seminaries namely, *Tols*, *Vidyalayas* and *Chatuspathis*. The medium of instruction was Sanskrit, the sacred language of the Hindus, in which only, all religious and higher secular knowledge was expressed.

For the common people, there were, in every village and town, vernacular schools which taught mainly reading, writing, and rudiments of arithmetic. These schools also imparted religious instruction to the pupils. These schools were generally taken advantage of by the sons of the traders. Women, the lower castes and agriculturalists hardly received education. Thus education among the Hindus, in Pre-British India, was extremely restricted and for all, except Brahmins, very poor in content. The Brahmin enjoyed the monopoly of all higher education (Desai, 2010 p.127). Among the Muslims in pre-British India, higher education was not a monopoly of a section. Any Muslim could study at the Madrasa. However, all higher education was imparted in Arabic, an alien language in India, since the Koran was written in that language. There were, however, schools which, in addition to the Koran, taught vernaculars, Persian, and other subjects (Desai, 2010 p.128). Following are the major features of indigenous education system that prevailed in India prior to the introduction of western education.

- *Schools were generally conducted with the contribution from Zamindars or from local rich men.
- The curriculum gave importance on classical languages like Sanskrit, Arabic or Persian and subjects of classical Hindu or Islamic tradition like Grammar, Logic, Law, Metaphysics, Medicines, etc
- Women were generally prohibited from the formal education system
- Oral tradition and memory of the teacher formed the basis of knowledge and information, supplemented with handwritten manuscripts.
- The state had little or no role in school education, though kings patronized people famous for their learning.

The British authorities discarded the indigenous system of education and replaced it by a system of education of their own. As the 'modern' education system expanded; the indigenous education system was either absorbed in it or died through neglect.

Charter Act of 1813- Its Historical Significances

English literature made its appearance in India, albeit indirectly, with a crucial act in Indian educational history: the passing of the Charter Act in 1813 (Viswanathan, 2015 p.51). This Act renewed the East India Company's Charter for a twenty-year period. It brings forth two pivotal changes in Britain's relationship with her prestigious colony. One was the taking up of a new responsibility toward indigenous education, and another was a relaxation over missionary activity in India. The actual beginning of Western education in India can be dated from the Charter Act of 1813. The Act not only allowed the missionaries to travel to India, but provided for the allocation of one hundred thousand rupees per year for two specific purposes: first, "the encouragement of the learned natives of India and revival of and improvement of literature; secondly, the promotion of knowledge of the sciences amongst the inhabitants of that country". The main reason for introducing such an Act by the British Parliament was the prolonged agitation carried on by Charles Grant and Wilberforce for about twenty years. These Evangelicals had strongly urged for the desirable changes in the Company's educational policy. The East India Company now for the first time assumed the state responsibility for education. The Act announced the release of large amounts annually for the educational purpose. It is to be noted that the Act was tacit on whether the money was to be spent on western education or indigenous education. The specific clause 43 of the Act was rather vague in its language and was open to interpretation. In official thinking in India, the Orientalist thoughts were still powerful. The newly formed *General Committee of Public Instruction* (1823) was dominated by the Orientalists, who interpreted the clause to mean advancement of Indian classical literature and the sciences of the land. The programme they chalked out was for the establishment of a Sanskrit College in Calcutta, two more Oriental Colleges at Agra and

Delhi and patronage for the *tols* and *madrassas* as institutions of indigenous learning (Bandyopadhyay, 2004 p. 141). In due course East India Company opened many schools and colleges under their control which laid the foundation of the English system of education in India.

Debate over Education Policy- *Oriental Occidental Conflict*

There were two schools of thought among the British regarding the type of education to be imparted to the Indians. The first school of thought known as the Anglicists, of which Macaulay was the most outstanding protagonist. This group stood for the English as the medium of education. It was supported in this view by the missionaries, the younger officials of the Company and progressive Indians like Raja Ram Mohan Roy (Desai, 2010 p.p 134-35). The second group known as the Orientalists, strongly advocated for oriental learning. They stood for the encouragement of Sanskrit and Arabic literature. The establishment of *Calcutta Madrassa* (1781) by Warren Hastings, the *Banares Sanskrit College* (1791) by Jonathan Duncan and the *Asiatic Society of Bengal* (1784) by William Jones were highly remarkable. The orientalist favoured the British officials to learn local language and culture so that they would be better at their job. The balance was finally tilted in favour of the Anglicists when William Bentinck, a Utilitarian reformist, took over as governor general in 1828 and Thomas Babington Macaulay was appointed the law member in his council in 1834. (Bandyopadhyay, 2004)

Macaulay's Minutes on Indian Education-1835

The rise of literary studies as a 'discipline' of study in British Universities was in fact linked to the perceived needs of colonial administrations. English literature was instituted as a formal discipline in London and Oxford only after the Indian Civil Service examination began to include a 1000 mark paper in it, on the assumption that knowledge of English literature was necessary for those who would be administering British interests. Soon after, it was also deemed important that the natives themselves be instructed in Western literatures. (Loomba, 2012, p.75) Thomas Babington Macaulay, the architect of English education in India, put the issue in his famous 'Minute on Indian Education' written in 1835: English education, he suggested would train natives who were, 'Indian in blood and colour' to become English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. These people would constitute "a class would in fact protect British interests and help them rule a vast and potentially unruly land". 'Macaulayism' is the term given to the deliberate policy of an imperial power to redirect a subject people's education in an attempt to influence their thought and self-understanding (Chellarajan, 2017).

Macaulay was appointed the President of the General Committee of Public instruction. On 2nd February 1835 he issued his famous Minute on Indian Education which became the blueprint for the introduction of English education in India. He was full of contempt for Oriental learning. He asserted that "a *single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia*". He advocated for the Indians an education in European literature and sciences, inculcated through the medium of English language. William Bentinck immediately endorsed his Proposals in an executive order of 7th March 1835, and did not deviate from this position despite strong protest from the Orientalists.

Extracts from the Minute of T.B Macaulay, dated the 2nd February 1835

"We now come to the gist of the matter. We have funds to be employed as the Government shall direct for the intellectual improvement of the people of this country. The simple question is what is the most useful way of employing it? All parties seems to be agreed on one point, that the dialects commonly spoken among the natives of this part of the India contain neither literary nor scientific information, and are moreover so poor and rude that, until they are enriched from some other quarter, it will not be easy

to translate any valuable work in to them. It seems to be admitted on all sides, that the intellectual improvement of those classes of the people who have the means of pursuing higher studies can at present be effected only by means of some language not vernacular amongst them. What then shall that language be? One half of the committee maintains that it should be the English. The other half strongly recommended the Arabic and Sanskrit. The whole question seems to be which language is the best worth knowing? I have no knowledge either Sanskrit or Arabic. But I have done what I could do to form a correct estimate of their value. I have read translation of the most celebrated Arabic and Sanskrit works. I have conversed, both here and at home, with men distinguished by their proficiency in the eastern tongues. I am quite ready to take the oriental learning at the valuation of the orient lists themselves. I have never found one among could deny that a single shelf of good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. The intrinsic superiority of the western literature is indeed fully admitted by those members of the committee who support the oriental plan of education.”

Thus the 1835 Macaulay tract on Indian education exhorted for the promotion of English education in India at the expense of Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit, which were being taught in colonial schools.

Wood's Dispatch of 1854- Magna Carta of Indian Education

The first phase in the history of modern education in India ended with Wood's Dispatch, 1854, which resolved all controversies of the period round the subject of education into well defined attitudes. The dispatch was usually called the Magna Carta of Indian education because of some larger tasks it set to the government. However its implementation in subsequent years was declared inadequate by some Indian critics. (Desai, 2010, p.136). Sir Charles Wood was the President of the Board of Control in 1854. He laid down the policy which became the guiding principle of the education programme of the government of India. Charles Wood declared *“the education that we desire to see extended in India is that the diffusion of the improved arts, science philosophy and literature of Europe, in short European knowledge.”*

The Dispatch stated that the educational system in India was organized for the triple object of 1) spreading western culture, 2) securing properly trained servants for the public administration, and 3) doing their duty to the sovereign by the Indian subjects. In connection with the controversy over the medium of instruction the Dispatch provided a final verdict that i) English should be used as the medium of instruction at the collegiate stage ii) Secondary education was to be imparted both through English and through modern Indian language, and iii) modern Indian languages were to be encouraged with a view of making them the media in course of time for imparting higher education. The Indian critics of the government blamed it for not implementing properly the last two conclusions. The Dispatch further stated that the government should assume direct responsibilities for the education of the masses and women. It was Wood's Dispatch of 1854 which laid the foundation of the structure of the modern educational system in India. The growth of education gathered momentum after 1854. (Desai, 2010 p.136). The important recommendations of the Dispatch were as follows:

- The establishment of universities at Calcutta, Bombay and Madras
- The creation of a department of public instruction in each of the five provinces of company's territory
- The establishment of teacher training institutions
- The establishment of a network of graded schools- high schools, middle schools, and elementary schools.
- The introduction of a system of grants-in aid for financial help to schools, and colleges.

- The promotion of vernacular schools.

It may be clearly understood that the Woods Dispatch of 1854 was an important turning point in Indian educational history. It brought about considerable changes and set the stage for the spread of Western-style education in India. The Dispatch's focus on advancing European philosophy, science, and literature influenced India's intellectual climate and helped create a class of Western-educated people who would be vital to the country's social, cultural, and political advancement. The significance of the Dispatch on Indian education and society cannot be overestimated, despite its shortcomings and criticisms. It cleared the path for later educational reforms and still has an impact on India's educational development today.

Conclusion

The above discussed aspects show how gradually English education developed in India. The British government promoted this system while neglecting the indigenous education system. The new education provided by the British broadened the horizon of knowledge. The establishment of printing presses and easy availability of books removed the traditional barriers and made education accessible to more people. The ideas of the western thinkers influenced the younger generation of Indian society and they began to question the existing tradition, values and customs. A new spirit of rationalism emerged among the educated Indians. English education brought the native youth in contact with a body of thought which openly questioned many of the fundamental assumptions upon which the traditional values rested. They began to look at their own society through a prism ideologically constructed by such concepts as reason, utility, progress and justice. Gauri Viswanathan (*Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*) aptly remarks: "English literature, it was believed, was an ideal representation of English identity, sanitized and abstracted from the more immediate history of exploitation and oppression. Moreover it would inculcate an appropriate training in morality, ethics and correct behaviour, and thus incorporate a group of natives into the structure of colonial rule, which was the main political agenda of Anglicism". In India, the effects of colonialism and English education are intricate and varied. English education helped create contemporary, Western-educated elite and gave Indians new opportunities, but it also reinforced linguistic and cultural inequalities, which led to the marginalization of indigenous languages and knowledge systems. With continuous discussions concerning the value of indigenous languages, the use of English in education, and the necessity of a more inclusive and equitable educational system, colonialism's effects on India's educational system are still evident today. Building a more equitable and powerful educational system for everyone in India requires an awareness of the historical background and continuing effects of colonialism and English education as the country continues to negotiate its post-colonial identity.

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