



COLONIAL EDUCATION, CIVILIZING MISSION AND NATIVE REACTION

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ABSTRACT

Modern education in India is a legacy of British colonialism. Despite the fact that the ancient India was a centre for higher education and had a rich tradition of universities from Taxila to Nalanda catering knowledge in different disciplines and attracting pupils from different parts of the world, after the Brahminical revivalism in post Shunga period and the advent of Manusmriti, India became a barren land for education leaving behind traces of informal education. The British government started formal education with a purpose to strengthen their administration. But, the reactions of the native elites to British endeavours in introducing education were ambivalent. Although, they were the beneficiaries of European education and supported the same for upper castes, they protested against colonial efforts to educate the masses which in their view were against Hindu religion. The paper attempts to highlight the exchange of conflicts on the educational battlefield between colonizer's effort in introducing modern education, postcolonial reaction to these efforts by the native elites and subaltern postcolonial struggle by the native downtrodden with both foreign and native colonizers.



KEY WORD: Caste, Civilizing mission, Colonialism, Formal education, Hegemony, Indigenous education, Nationalism, Varna, etc.

INTRODUCTION

The Pre-colonial indigenous education system was formal in nature. It gave what was required to daily workings of the society – a bit of reading, writing, arithmetic, etc. The Brahmins were privileged to learn scriptures and religious texts. There was never a fixed curriculum. The teacher would teach what he could teach better and what he thought befitting to be learnt by his pupils. The fourth Varna castes were not allowed access to education since it was the privilege of the first three. The law of Manu denied *Shudras* the right to Vedas, i.e. the right to education in modern day term. It was ordained by Manu that the recitation, study or teaching of the Vedas must be stopped (or should not be done) 'in the presence of a (man who lives unrighteously as a) Sudra' (Muller, 146).

In an essay about the pre-colonial indigenous education system in Bengal Poromesh Acharya explains how that education was upper caste centric and dominated by Brahmins. For higher learning *tols* and for elementary education *pathshalas* functioned for twice borns i.e. Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaisyas. The *tols* and *pathshalas* had no state control and were funded by society. There were around 100,000 vernacular indigenous schools in Bengal and Bihar (Shahidullah, p. 120). Since Brahmins had the right to teach and interpret the religious texts only they could teach religion to non-Hindus. That resulted in 'the hegemony of the Brahmins over Hindu society' (Acharya, p. 103). The teachers had no formal training and the teacher-student relations were one of absolute authority and perfect loyalty. For Muslims *madarsas*

were run through community funding. The teachers in *pathshalas* were traditionally called as *gurumohashoy* or *guru*. Kazi Shahidullah talks about how the indigenous education went under change after the British interference. Adhering to the Education Dispatch of 1854 the government decided to use *pathshalas* as centres for propagating modern education. A system of 'circle' school was introduced through which three to four schools were clubbed together and a government *pundit* was appointed who would train the gurus to implement the government courses (Shahidullah, p. 123). The introduction of the modern education consequently resulted into low enrolment rate in *pathshalas*. It also affected the status and privilege of the *gurus* that they had enjoyed in pre-colonial informal schooling.

The East India Company had established College of Fort William in 1800 in Calcutta to train its newly recruited officers in Indian languages. But after Company's military victories and imperial expansion there was change in the attitude of the British administrators and soon they demanded to adopt 'English as a language of administrative and official use in India, as well as the language of government funded education (Trivedi, p. 24).' It was not only the British who wanted to train the Indians with modern education for their imperial agenda, but there was also a craving for English and modern European education from elite natives because in it they saw a ray of hope and chance to enter and rise in the British administrative services. In a letter written to the British officials in 1823 Raja Rammohun Roy pleaded that the Indians should be trained in western scientific values and just English be taught as a medium of instruction (Sarkar, 1985, p. 8). Sarkar observes that first recipients of higher education were traditional upper castes termed as elite-groups. He notes: "It is certainly true that the traditional "literary" castes tended to take more easily to the new education. Thus 84.7 percent of Hindu college students in Bengal came from the three *bhadralok* castes of Brahman, Kayastha, or Vaidya in 1883-4. Brahman students predominated in Madras, Bombay, or Poona, Kayasthas were prominent in UP (Sarkar, 2000, p. 253)." Despite the fact that the British aimed at producing a class of assistants in administration and started colleges of the British style, the modern formal education instilled in the newly educated Indians some liberal ideas and consequently it gave rise to nationalism (Rothermund, p. 54).

The introduction of modern education was viewed both from the colonizer and the colonized from different perspectives. For some the study of English literary texts was aimed at a colonizing the natives under the veil of civilizing them. The military and political success had created a sense of superiority among the colonizers which was reflected in their attitude to view English language and literature. It established the superiority of English over indigenous languages and also the superiority of the western culture over Indian culture. Aijaz Ahmad aptly says: "The sense of superiority of Western knowledge was thus established not in the literary but, generally, in the cognitive and technical fields (Ahmad, p. 200)."

The British aimed at introducing European literature and natural science in India because they had the apprehension that the disciplines that ushered in modernity in Europe could help in bringing modernity and civilization in India. Benita Parry remarks that "The decision taken under Bentick's administration in 1835 to introduce western education – 'the great objects of the British government ought to be the promotion of European literature and science' remained the purpose of the government's education policy (Parry, p. 13)." The British administrators viewed religious practices and social norms practiced by Indians as uncivilized. Governor-General Lord William Bentinck passed 'The Bengal Sati Regulation Act' in 1829 banning widow immolation. The British regarded *Sati* as barbaric and heinous act. The practice of *Thagee*, offering human sacrifice to *Kalee*, etc. were acts of crime for them. They viewed that such a type of amorality could be removed from the natives only through modern liberal education. By introducing modernity they wanted to change the morals and civilize the natives. Sir Richard Temple defined the object of British rule as moulding 'the character as well as the intellect (Parry, p. 19)' of the Indians.

However, it should not be neglected that despite the civilizing mission of the British policy on education there lied at heart a sense of superiority among the British about their culture, civilization and education. They wanted to cast the natives in their own mould. Robert J. C. Young maintains that education was used as a tool for colonizing the natives. He says, "... the complicity of Western literary and academic knowledge with the history of European colonialism was that it emphasized the ways in which seemingly

impartial, objective academic disciplines had in fact colluded with, and indeed been instrumental in, the production of actual forms of colonial subjugation and administration (Young, p. 151)."

The advocates of empire were proud of the duty they had to shoulder of civilizing the natives. They regarded it a divine providence to educate the illiterates. They had a patronizing attitude which made them treat the natives like children who required need and care and who imitated the speech of the parents. Thus, they expected from the Indians that they imitate their speech, language, mode, manners, etc. J. R. Seeley in his popular text remarks with pride that the Post-Macaulayan colonial education did not only serve the purpose of educating the masses but it held a higher purpose of civilizing them, "It marks the moment when we deliberately recognized that a function had developed on us in Asia similar to that which Rome fulfilled in Europe, the greatest function which any government can ever be called upon to discharge (Seeley, p. 200)." The colonial advocates of modern education especially English were of the opinion that their education would work as a model which will be copied by the natives as Roman model worked for the British. Charles Traveyan was of the opinion: "The Indians will, I hope, soon stand in the same position towards us in which we stood towards the Romans (Mantena, p. 61)."

The propagation of education among the masses had to be a systematic process. Therefore, it had to be monitored by the government. The prime advocate of modern education in India, Macaulay was of the opinion that the State had to take the responsibility of education. In a speech delivered in the House of Commons on the 19th of April 1847 Macaulay held that education like defence is a state responsibility and it should not be left at the mercy of private sector: "... Government ought not to leave to private people the task of providing for the national defence, will equally show that the Government ought not to leave to private people the task of providing for national education (Seeley, p. 311)." Macaulay had influence of utilitarian philosophy. He was a liberal in outlook. Despite the fact that he exaggeratedly compared the whole of Indian literature as not worthy to a single shelf of European literature, his concern to bring modernity in Indian population was genuine. He emphasized that English was far superior to Sanskrit and Arabic as a medium of instruction as they had the best available knowledge in the world in their language – "We have to educate a people who cannot at present be educated by means of their mother-tongue. We must teach them some foreign language (Young, G. M., p. 349)." He advocated English because it was not just the language of the ruling class but also higher class of natives (elite upper castes) who aided the British in administration. He was optimistic that as Greek and Roman literature brought Renaissance in Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth century, English would do same in India. Macaulay in this regard certainly was a man of vision. Jotirao Phule and a host of succeeding scholars from non-Brahmin movement were deeply influenced by European humanism and modern liberal ideas which made them stand against the cultural hegemony of the upper castes. Ambedkar and Periyar were the products of the modernity who fought for the betterment of the millions of laymen. Macaulay in the Minute mentioned about a petition (Young, G. M., p. 354) made by some students who claimed that the Hindu literature had not made them fit for living and therefore, they demanded modern European education. Thus, it would be unjust that Macaulay's critics frame him as usurper and intruder in Indian culture and civilization. It is a kind of revivalist agenda in modern day which alters the facts.

The critics of British educational policy maintain that they aimed at colonizing the minds of the natives. But it is certain that the same education also brought a significant change among native population. Makarand Paranjape talks about the beneficiaries of modernity in India steered by Colonialism: "Not all sections and communities in India came into modernity in the same way or at the same time. My account has been confined to that of what might loosely be termed the *savarna* groups. The word traditionally means those with letters (*varna*= letters), but it also refers to the upper-castes who, willy nilly, were probably the only literate ones in ties bygone (Paranjape, p. 256)."

A. R. Desai has listed three agents of the spread of modern education in Colonial time: the Christian missionaries, the British government and some educated Indians (Desai, p. 139). Some critics regarded that the missionaries had a secret mission of Christianizing the Hindus. The government certainly wanted to create bands of clerks to govern the country. Some intellectuals and reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy,

Chiplunkar, Agarkar, Gokhale and some organizations like Brahmo Samaj, the Arya Samaj, the Aligarh Movement, etc. worked to educate the masses. However, they failed to attract the native students since they preferred government schools and colleges as the diplomas and degrees they received from government institutions could only give them employment. The nationalist institutions were not affiliated to the government. A fruitful output of the government education was that the youngsters who had an acquaintance with western liberal philosophy developed a spirit of nationalism among themselves which consequently became widespread.

It is important to note that efforts made by some famous Indians in education were upper caste centric. They supported the education of twice borns and instead of promoting the education of other caste or supporting the efforts of the British government to educate them took strong opposition. Pramila V. Rao has taken a brief survey of the colonial policy to educate the masses and 'postcolonial' opposition to hinder their endeavors. It was Governor-General William Bentinck who supported the expansion of education system in India. During 1870s the British attempted to introduce compulsory education in India. The effort was supported by scholars like Jotirao Phule, Mahadev Govind Ranade, Ramkrishna Gopal Bhandarkar, etc. But it also met with strong opposition from landlords and some other politicians like Rajendra Lal Mitra, Vishwanth Narayan Mandlik, Peary Mohan Mukherjee and Syed Amir Ali. Rao says that the opponents feared that they will get competition in government jobs and also it will be a challenge to feudal order (Rao, p. 155). In face of such opposition Governor-General Ripon had to abandon attempt to introduce compulsory education in 1880.

Ripon appointed a commission headed by W. W. Hunter in 1881 to ascertain the public opinion regarding compulsory education. Dadabhai Naoroji pleaded for free education to all the masses. Jotirao Phule demanded that untouchables should have free and compulsory education. Tilak was strong opponent of compulsory mass education. He thought introduction of compulsory education as irrational and having de-nationalizing effect (Rao, p. 157). While opposing to 'waste' taxpayers money on education Tilak said: 'only the tax payers have the right to decide how the money is spent and spending it on the education of Kunbi's (peasant) is a sheer waste of money (Rao, p. 157).' He also thought that educating the untouchables (*Mahars*) was an encroachment upon Hindu religion and it went against the Queen's proclamation of 1858 which promised to abstain from religious interference. Tilak also opposed common curriculum, 'the curriculum taught to upper caste children was unsuitable to peasant children and rational system of education meant teaching of only those subjects which would be necessary for their living (Rao, p. 161).' He also opposed secular education and supported religious education i.e. the education which teaches people to stick to the duties bestowed upon them by their Caste/Varna. He claimed that only religious education was nationalistic and the secular education was de-nationalizing (anti-national in the modern sense, since in their perception nation composed of only upper castes). Gandhi also opposed compulsory education. In this regard, Rao says that as far education was concerned Gandhi's views were closer to Tilak than his political Guru Gopal Krishna Gokhale. When Sayajirao Gaikwad, the King of princely state of Baroda, made efforts to introduce compulsory education among his subjects, he had to face criticism both from Tilak and Gandhi. Gandhi replied: "Do you wish to make a peasant disconnected with his cottage and his lot (Rao, p. 172)."

In contrast to Tilak, Phule championed the cause of education for non-Brahmins. Tilak proved to be an Orthodox Brahmin scholar who asked for modern education to Brahmins and other upper castes only. Ironically he went ahead to such an extent of opposing education to non-Brahmin castes. Phule asked that education should be given to all. Brahmin girls were admitted in girl schools started by him. Tilak was anti-Majoritarian supporting Brahmin hegemony over education whereas Phule was egalitarian in true sense. Phule objected to the prevailing system of education which benefited the Brahmins only by expending more on higher education dominated by the Brahmins and less on primary education which was the real concern of the lower castes. In his memorial addressed to the Education Commission headed by Hunter he replied, "the present system of education, which by providing ampler funds for higher education, tended to educate Brahmins and higher classes only (Deshpande, 103)." He worried about the state of higher education had become 'the virtual monopoly of all the higher offices under them by Brahmins (Deshpande, 104).' Brahmins

had been custodian of the religion, i.e. Brahminism. Since ages, their only concern had been to deprive other caste of all that is good in the name of religion and to suffice avarice of own community. Naturally, they wanted education be made their privilege. It made nationalist leader like Tilak to spew venom against all the attempts made to educate *kunabis*, untouchables and women. Phule was worried from his own experiences that Brahmins will not do justice to the masses. Therefore, he demanded that Brahmins should not be made teachers – “Let there be schools for the Shudras in every village; but away with all Brahmin school-masters! (Deshpande, 105).” Phule started school for untouchable castes like *Mahars* and *Mangs*. He was aware that owing to the caste prejudice they would be the worst deprived of education. It is significant to note that he advocated for education to untouchables under the premises of the Queen’s Proclamation in stark contrast with Tilak who considered that such an attempt would be an interference in Hindu religion which the Proclamation had promised to abstain from – ‘Under the promise of the Queen’s Proclamation I beg to urge that Mahars, Mangs, and other lower classes, where their number is large enough, should have separate schools for them, as they are not allowed to attend the other schools owing to caste prejudice (Deshpande, p. 106).”

SUM UP:

The British attempts to introduce compulsory education at the end of nineteenth century were opposed by native elites. The Constitution of India was adapted on 26th November 1949. According to the Article 45 under Part IV of the Constitution entitled ‘Directive Principles of the State Policy’ directions were given to the State to provide education to children until they complete the age of six years. It was in 2002 that the State made education a fundamental right of the people. Article 21a was inserted into the Constitution by 86th amendment which promised that the State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of six to fourteen years. However, the education still remains a privilege of few. There is no pan-India common curriculum. In different states different educational boards administer education. Even in a single state the curriculums vary as different institutions are affiliated to different boards and agencies.

The Right to Education Act abiding to the Article 21a came into force on 1st April 2010. So, it took sixty years after adapting the Constitution to elitist government to make education a fundamental right to masses.

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