

Ascendancy of English Education in India: Demurral of Swamy Vivekananda and Gandhi

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Introduction

The present system of education in India was the result of the introduction of education introduced by the British, during the colonial era. This system of education in India carved a niche for the people of India to gain recognition in a global platform. It is claimed that Raja Ram Mohan Roy in his letter to Lord Amherst, pleaded the British government to introduce English education introducing the natives of India to western science and demanded that the Sanskrit schools be closed. On the one hand we see that the natives of India gained an exposure to the Western culture through English education on the other hand one cannot deny that access to native culture seemed to be vanishing. This claim can be further justified by looking at the narratives on education by Swami Vivekananda and Gandhi. This paper makes an attempt to examine the objections raised by Swami Vivekananda and Gandhi to the ascendancy of English education in India because they saw that introduction of English education uprooted the Indian culture. This paper also intends to trace the growth and development of English education and its impact on the Indian culture.

It is reported that English entered India during the early 16th Century through the missionaries with a

“..., zeal to improve the manners and customs of the natives and open the doors of knowledge and faith (Western knowledge and Christian Faith) to them so that they could come out of the darkness of ignorance and superstition.”(Khanna and Agnihotri, pg 21. 1997)

It is reported that Charles Grant in his (1792) treatise bemoaned the moral social and intellectual decline of India. Though, the missionaries claimed that Western knowledge and Christian faith would rid the

natives of ignorance and superstition there were British colonials who placed a high value on ancient systems of Indian education.

Historically speaking the foundation for modern Indian education was laid by the British during the 19th century. It is usually traced to the context in which Macaulay thought about education for Indians. His famous or also known as infamous speech in which he talks about the existing knowledge and wisdom of Indians throws light on how the British valued the Indian system of Knowledge and education. Macaulay says:

“I have travelled across the length and breadth of India and I have not seen one person who is a beggar, who is a thief. Such wealth I have seen in the country, such high moral values, people of such caliber, that I do not think we would ever conquer this country, unless we break the very backbone of this nation, which is her spiritual and cultural heritage, and therefore, I propose that we replace her old and ancient education system, her culture, for if the Indians think that all that is foreign and English is good and greater than their own, they will lose their self esteem, their native culture and they will become what we want them, a truly dominated nation.” (The Wire, 1835, <https://thewire.in/history/macaulays-speech-never-delivered>)

One can easily understand the high value Macaulay placed on the ancient wisdom and knowledge provided by the ancient Indian education system. That he wanted to break the very backbone of the spiritual and cultural heritage of India so as to make way for colonisation of India is a historical and an established fact now.

However, despite the fact that some British officials like Macaulay and many others placed a high value on indigenous knowledge systems there are also reports which say the contrary. It is also reported that many British officers believed that Indians needed an education that would liberate them from ignorance. Such an opinion was also entertained by some Indian reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy who believed

in the superiority of English Education and pleaded with the British government to introduce English Education in India and urged Sanskrit schools to be shut down. He felt that in India many social evils were being perpetrated which could be eradicated only with the introduction of English education in India. Incidentally Charles grant, Wilber Force and Zachary Macaulay believed that the most useful knowledge for Indians was contained in the Bible and universal dissemination of Christianity would be a solution. This way English medium schools made their first appearance in India as early as 1819 not merely as a result of the missionary activity but also because of many other factors. (Khanna and Agnihotri, 21. 1997). It should also be highlighted that, the British system of education got introduced and popularised with the efforts put in by both Indian intellectuals like Raja Ram and British nationals like T. B. Macaulay.

It is reported that English became the official language of Government business in the early 19th C and the British advocated “a cheap trickle-down model for colonial education.” Later after the company rule had ended in 1858, the government had established universities at Bombay, Calcutta and Madras where nearly two thousand students were getting educated in government colleges and another 30,000 students were studying in government secondary schools. It is also reported that those people who managed to get vocational training were given jobs in the “low tiers of the government and in urban, Western-style legal and medical services.”

Furthermore, schools established by “Western Christian missions Indian social and religious reform organizations provided the only opportunities for elementary education in the nineteenth century...” Also, there were Christian women’s colleges in Lucknow, Lahore, and Madras where the faculty were foreign nationals who taught a Western curriculum in English. The children of Christian convert were given financial support for their education.

In the 1860’s the parents were made to bear the expenditure of the education of their wards. Whereas, people in the urban areas were to some extent able to spend on education people in rural areas and women were unable to get educated. They were also not able to send their children to educational institutions

where they got instruction in vernacular languages with general curricula. Thus, the education system in India was dominated by the colonial rulers.

What was the effect of English Education on Indian minds? It took quite a long time to realise the impact of English education on Indian minds. The impact of English education came to be noticeably felt and seen only after the British system of English education had taken deep roots in India. However, the impact of British education dawned on us only after great Indian thinkers like Tagore, Gandhi and Vivekananda had expressed their disapproval for the kind of education Indians were being given. These thinkers had already started foreseeing the damage going to be caused by embracing English system of education in India.

Gandhi declared that English education was causing irreparable damage. To quote him

“We have the education of this future state. I say without fear of my figures being challenged successfully, that today India is more illiterate than it was fifty or a hundred years ago, and so is Burma, because the British administrators, when they came to India, instead of taking hold of things as they were, began to root them out. They scratched the soil and began to look at the root, and left the root like that, and the beautiful tree perished.” (Qtd in Dharmapal, pg 06. 2000)

Gandhi is expressing two important ideas in his statement. One refers to the destruction of the roots of literacy established by the indigenous systems of education in India before the occupation of the British. Secondly, he is also hinting at the loss of the quintessence of education which Indians were getting before the British education system was implemented. In his statements Gandhi uses a metaphor ‘the beautiful tree’ to capture the essence of indigenous education.

To say incidentally, Gandhi’s use of the phrase ‘the beautiful tree’ later served as the title for Dharampal’s book titled ‘The Beautiful Tree’. According to Dharampal (ibid)“the beautiful tree” refers to the

indigenous systems of education that had the ability to sustain itself which was uprooted by the introduction of English education.

Dharampal claims that (2000, pg 17-18) “indigenous education was carried out through *pathashalas*, *madrassahs* and *gurukulas*. Education in these traditional institutions which were actually kept alive by revenue contributions by the community including illiterate peasants – was called *shiksha* (and included the ideas of *prajna*, *shil* and *Samadhi*.)” The author calls these institutions ‘watering holes of the culture of traditional communities.’

Similarly, one would get a clear picture of the ancient system of indigenous education if one reads a report by Mukherjee (1975). Mukherjee, (ibid, pg 17-46) says that institutionalised education had existed for 4,000 years in India. In the early Vedic age education was a family responsibility given by the father to the son. In the later Vedic age and the age of Upanishads institutionalised education took its definite shape. The institutions differed according to caste to which a particular pupil belonged. Castes were considered to be an extension of the family, and traces of family traditions were found in it. Pupils lived in the place of education for their whole period of their education and was considered to be their home for that period. Pupils stayed with the teacher as a member of the family. Tuition fee was not charged. However the students rendered service for their stay and ‘upkeep’. The school prepared the students for the future as ordained by the caste in which he was born.

Furthermore, Brahmins had *Ashrams* which were self-supporting institutions as lands were given free of revenue. The students cultivated the land and raised crops which took care of the expenditure at the *Ashrams*. On the one hand a portion of the day was spent in cultivating the lands, the rest of the time was spent in learning three main Vedas, and some times four and metaphysics along with grammar, logic and ethics. In large institutions the chief teacher was called *Acharya*, and assistant teachers were called *Upadhayas*.

The Kshatriyas also studied in *Ashrams*. They studied grammar, logic and ethics at the beginning and studied in the same *Ashrams* as the Brahmins though there were some exceptions. In the advanced state

the curriculum of the Brahmins differed. Kshatriyas learnt military tactics, archery and politics; however, they did not study many Vedas like Brahmins. Education in *Ashrams* was state supported. The author emphasises that it was not 'state controlled. *The Guru* or the teacher had the autonomy to decide what to teach and how he should teach. This resulted in diversified curriculum and standards. Mukhrjee argues that this diversity and diversification of curriculum was prevented in two ways:

- a) The *Ashrams* were grouped-since the rival Ashrams flourished alongside, it prevented them from deterioration.
- b) The *Ashrams* were grouped into *Charans* which insisted on agreed upon interpretation and hence prevented from deviations. The *Charans* were further grouped into Parishads which took care of the co-ordination amongst the *Charans*.

The *Ashrams* would grow big enough to become a *Mahashala* which is also known as ancient college. In general since the teaching was done by Guru, the system was also known as Gurukula system. It was also referred to as Brahmanic system as the teachers were all Brahmins, though Kshatriyas were also taught in this *Ashram*. Other castes had crafts-centered education. Traders were taught grammar and trade craft.

Mukherjee (ibid) highlights that there is no evidence to suggest that there was an organised system of women's education, though we hear reports about women scholars in ancient India like Maitreyi and Gargi who are believed to have received education from the male members of the family. It is reported that :

The ideas produced, preserved, and transmitted through education in India have been as multifaceted as the many social groups who have lived in the South Asian subcontinent. Gender has been an important determinant for educational opportunities over time and across regions. When and where education was closely associated with making a living, parents assumed that women needed only domestic skills, and they were unlikely to educate their daughters. Still, there were always

exceptions. For example, PanditaRamabai (1858–1922) was given a Sanskrit education by her father, received a higher education in English as an adult, and was a strong voice for social reform to serve women's needs during the colonial period. (Encyclopaedia Britannica)

From the foregoing it becomes clear that in ancient times, people did receive education which matched their style of living and culture. Secondly, the use of the words 'Brahmins', 'Kshatriyas' and 'others' had no special connotations except referring to the kind of vocational work they did and the people who received such education, did not feel that they were discriminated against.

Furthermore, one of the most significant factors was the fact that education in ancient systems was given through the student's mother tongue and lack of knowledge of a language never came to be questioned because the education given was oral and practical and did not depend on the student's knowledge of the writing system of the language except for those whose profession depended on their ability to use the orthographic symbols of the language. On the contrary in the system of English education introduced by the British class room teaching was transacted through the medium of English language which had a well developed orthographic system. Naturally, only those who had the knowledge of the orthographic system were able to interact and participate in class room teaching. Those who were unable to master the basics of English language system came to be called illiterates. This meant students had to be taught by somebody which entailed financial burden on the parents. Consequently, only those parents who could afford to send their children to English schools were able to get an education. Naturally, a majority of the indigenous population who were making a living based on their traditional occupations could not give up their living and go to such schools. Therefore, most of them stayed at home rendered support to their parents and eventually came to be called illiterates and uneducated. It is this fact which is highlighted in the statement made by Gandhi.

Yet another account of Indian Education system by Sundarlal in his book (qtd in Ddharampal 2000 pg 1-3) would substantiate the foregoing argument. He claims that at the end of the 18th century India had a

higher percent of literates than any other European country. The Indian people were getting education in four different ways.

1. Lakhs of Brahmin families taught resident students in their houses.
2. There were Vidya-peeths or Tols where education was imparted through Sanskrit language as medium.
3. Hundreds and thousands of students both Hindus and Mussalmans were getting taught in Urdu and Persian in the Maktabas and Madrassas all over the country and
4. There were Pathshalas or village schools even in the smallest village where the children of the village were taught.

According to Keir Herdie's report that there were about eighty thousand native schools in Bengal before British occupation. This view is supported by Ludlow who has reported that the children in Hindoo villages were "able to read, write and cipher" and wherever there was British occupation, the indigenous village schools also disappeared. (Cp. B.D. Basu, Education in India under the E.I. Co., p18, qtd in Dharampal, 2000, 374, 375).

Dharampal, (2000) says that the British prior to 1770, were interested in largely mercantile, technological concerns. They also wanted to understand and evaluate Indian statecraft. They were not at all interested in Indian religions, philosophies, scholarship and the education system. Dharampal argues that the British society did not show any interest in such matters because from the mid 16th to the later part of the 18th century, the British were introverted by nature. Though, this period in England produced figures like Francis Bacon, Shakespeare, Milton, Newton and established universities like Oxford, Cambridge and Edinburgh which were responsible for considerable learning and scholarship, they were also limited to a very select elite. It is also true that some of Indian elites had the opportunity to get educated in such universities later and the opinion of some of them proved detrimental for implementing ancient systems of education in India.

Thus, the system of English education introduced by the British, focused on imparting European knowledge(Wellesly), western science, literature, theology, logic and many other along with indigenous subjects.. Sen Gupta (1991, pg 114) argues that “English literature was given primary importance in the curriculum” with the fond belief that English literature would provide Indians with ‘alternative experiences’ of English culture. Indians, it was hoped, would valorize the text (over the reality of the imperial race in India) as true specimens of the culture that the texts represented. The author comments that the British wanted to impress the natives that the British stood for the “world of liberalism and justice”.

In view of the foregoing, one cannot but conclude that the education given by the British had ulterior motives and they did not have any real concern for educating the Indian populace in the real sense of the term. Secondly, the English system of education had neither the moral values nor the skills required for personal development or the development of the society. Furthermore, the introduction of English as a medium of instruction and the financial burden the parents had to bear became the biggest challenge for those who wished to educate their children. It is this challenge that continues to divide the society into two halves - the haves and the have nots even today. Moreover, those who managed to overcome this challenge, came to be grouped as the member of the elite society and those who failed came to be grouped under illiterates, uneducated, uncivilized and unsophisticated. To top this all, the biggest blow was the masking and suppressing of the indigenous knowledge which was the store house of ancient wisdom and experiential/procedural knowledge using European knowledge both religious and scientific. It should be noted here that while the ancient knowledge empowered the individual with knowledge of life skills as well guidance for spiritual knowledge. On the contrary, the European knowledge to the Indians turned out to be an amorphous mass of decontextualized and incomprehensible information which would neither empower them to take up a vocation on their own or help them in any other way. It only gave them proficiency in the use of English language, taught them customs and manners and cultural habits of the English people which they could put to good use as servants of the British colonial masters.

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