

British Educational Policy in India 1858-1921

Academic research into the history of education in nineteenth and early twentieth century India has been both intermittent and of mixed quality. In 1970, R.P.Singh argued that it was high time that the writing of the history of Indian education rose above the level of textbooks.¹ A decade later Professor Aparna Basu observed that academic writing about the history of education in India had been overly preoccupied with descriptive accounts.² It might equally be claimed that much of the writing has been unduly coloured by anti-British sentiment, especially since Independence. Nevertheless, Professor Basu believes that the subject offers an important and relatively new area of study 'whose potentialities are only just beginning to be exploited'.³ The purpose of this paper is both to endorse her claim and to stress in particular, the need for a more scholarly reappraisal of British education policy in India in the period after the Mutiny and before the devolution of responsibility for education to provincial governments in 1921. It was during those years that the British Government was directly responsible for determining Indian education policy.

In 1974, Dr M.E.Chamberlain made the timely observation that the development of the British Empire was a single process and that the conventional separation of India from the rest of the story had led to many misunderstandings and lost insights.⁴ That thesis is well illustrated by the legacy of education policy in India in the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries. For example, to date, insufficient emphasis has been placed on the impact that the uncontrolled spread of English medium academic schooling and the emergence of a semi-literate 'babu' class, had on the shaping of colonial education policy in Africa and elsewhere after 1918.⁵

In 1951, Syed Nurullah and J.P.Naik wrote what is still the standard history of education in British India.⁶ They criticised the British for not having developed a truly national system of education; for failing to evolve a synthesis of eastern and western cultures; for inadequate aims i.e. they sought to educate an army of civil servants but not with the aim of eventual self-government; for adopting wrong methods of administration; for neglecting indigenous education, and for the absence of any overall plan or consistent drive to reach a predetermined goal. More recently, Uday Desai has also taken the British to task for allegedly neglecting vernacular education and for shaping education policy to serve their own political and economic ends.⁷ Even at a cursory glance these charges seem to assume intentions that were demonstrably absent from British rule and also suggest far greater foresight and ability to control the course of events that the facts support. Professor Basu has suggested various explanations for the alleged failure of British education policy in India. These include the nature of the bureaucratic machinery, limited finance, Indian resistance, unwillingness on the part of the British to incur

unpopularity by adopting repressive measures, and dependence on Indians for the implementation of policy directives.⁸ As yet, I am in no position to comment on her observations - this paper is not based on the many hours of archival research which necessarily lie ahead. At the present time, therefore, I can only suggest ways in which a more scholarly assessment of British education policy in India might be achieved.

Basic statistical information about the development of education in British India is freely available, however, it is often difficult to interpret and concentrates mainly on quantitative rather than qualitative matters.⁹ In the nineteenth century British officials clearly believed that growth of schooling was the yardstick of progress. Likewise, there is no dearth of documentary material outlining the broad brushstrokes of government policy. What is lacking, however, is scholarly evaluation of what was possible given the contemporary climate of opinion and available resources. In short, what were the realistic policy options available to the British at

the time?

Professor Basu has highlighted the fact that the impact of British education policy varied throughout India.¹⁰ For example, the use of English depended greatly on proximity to the coastal hinterland. We should not lose sight of the fact that the three main centres of British power - Bombay, Calcutta and Madras - were all ports. Likewise, the Hindus were initially far more enthusiastic in their reception of western education than the Moslems who feared Christian proselytism. Caste and gender also determined who benefited most from western schooling. What is needed at the present time is a deeper understanding of how education policy fitted into the general objectives of British rule in India in the latter half of the nineteenth century and more case studies of how western and vernacular education developed in local and regional areas. How, for example, does one evaluate the following summary statement of British education policy in India by the prominent Indian historian Michael Edwardes:

Finance was always the rock on which any plan for extending education foundered. Idealism, a genuine desire to impart the benefits of some sort of purposeful education, always figured in the plans of the government. Unfortunately, the realities of alien rule permitted only the most partial expression of such ideas. There were any number of grand designs, inspired by both moral and political motives, but they were all vitiated by lack of money and by the fact that, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the British were no longer sure of what they wanted to do in India. The immense self-confidence of the early educational reformers had evaporated, not so much because of the Indian experience as because of the wider threat being posed to Britain by new and more virile imperialist nations.... More was not achieved because of the dead hand of finance and the active fear that compulsion might lead to civil disorder.... In rural areas, the Indian child plays an important ancillary role in the work of the family. Compulsory attendance at school deprived the family of part of

its labour and the simple education the child received bore no relevance to the economic realities of rural life. Fundamentally, the direct effects of British educational policy on the rural masses were negligible.¹¹

A statement of this sort clearly highlights important areas for further research and scholarly debate. Was finance really the great stumbling block to progress, and if so, why? Or would it be closer to the truth to say that the majority of affluent Indians lacked any sense of commitment to schooling for the wider public good and that this was why they failed to support vernacular primary schooling for the masses? To what extent did the British nineteenth century idea of popular schooling conflict with the Indian caste system? What impact did the Mutiny have on British attitudes to India and subsequent education policy? Did it result in a lack of commitment to social reform in India? Is it true, as Edwardes asserts, that by the late nineteenth century the British were no longer sure of why they were in India or how best to govern it? And if so, what effect did this have on education policy? Questions of this type penetrate to the core of our understanding of British rule in India and objective answers based on sound evidence are not readily to hand. Clearly, education policy was not shaped in isolation from political, administrative, economic and social policies but they, in turn, were determined by the broad objectives of British rule. Perhaps the main difficulty is to reach any general agreement on what those broad objectives were. The need to maintain the trade route to India and to keep the Russian threat at bay in the northwest was clear enough but did the British really have any clear social objectives in India? They certainly didn't appear to know with any certainty what to do with some fifty million Africans in the 1920s.

The criticisms levelled at British education policy by Nurullah and Naik presuppose a far clearer concept of empire than that traditionally espoused by the British. By the late nineteenth century Britain may have been the greatest colonial power in the world ruling over a quarter of the world's population, but to all intents and purposes the empire was still administered on the basis of an essentially pragmatic philosophy which had

been worked out largely in ruling India in the preceding century. The French, by contrast, had a clear ideological concept of empire, even if on-the-spot circumstances often forced them to adopt similar pragmatic measures.

For two and a half centuries Britain's primary interest in India lay in trade. It would have seemed ludicrous to the seventeenth century merchants of the East India Company to suggest that one day the Company would rule India yet the vagaries of history were such that by the end of the Seven Years War with France i.e. 1763, the British were the dominant power in the sub-continent. Thereafter, they had to grapple with the problem of how to rule its teeming millions of people. A similar scenario confronted the British in east and west Africa after the first world war.¹²

As British power grew in India in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries various key questions had to be considered. For example, to what extent should indigenous races be assimilated? To what extent should indigenous forms of government and culture be preserved? Should the British risk the creation of an educated elite? Was Britain morally responsible for the 'progress' of its dependent territories? How far was coercion either possible or desirable? How far should the British rely on cooperation with existing power structures and how might this best be achieved? Answers to all these questions had to take account of a powerful British Treasury which was adamant throughout two centuries of overseas expansion that India and the colonies in general must be financially self-supporting. Critics of empire have traditionally stressed the mercenary motives at the heart of imperial expansion and no one seriously disputes that manufacturers were influential in the corridors of Whitehall but so too were missionaries and other vested interest groups. Perhaps, as Chamberlain suggests, the most remarkable aspect of British rule in India was not that India was commercially exploited but that the process was checked by the emergence of such a powerful sense of responsibility as epitomised in the Platonic traditions of the Indian Civil Service. As she has somewhat wryly commented, what would have happened to India if Britain had not ruled it for almost 200 years?¹³

In evaluating British rule in India it is also important not to lose sight of the fact that throughout the nineteenth century Britain was itself undergoing the social and economic trauma of an industrial revolution. Victorians both at home and abroad were confronted with unprecedented social and economic problems whether generated by land enclosures, free trade, cholera epidemics, industrial slums or the mysteries of Hindu culture and the caste system which seemed to most Europeans akin to a social strait-jacket. In the late Victorian period the British may have expressed unprecedented confidence in their ability to control natural as well as social forces, and their superiority over their non-British subjects, but that optimism has to be juxtaposed against the intransigent nature of many socio-economic problems both in India and elsewhere. The British have been blamed for the slow progress of social reform in India during the time of the raj but as the post-Independence period has shown, many of the problems, including the acute poverty and suffering of millions of Indians, appear to defy any short or even long-term solutions.

There were various views about how Britain should rule India. The East India Company sought to trade at a profit not to reshape Indian culture. Some Englishmen, like the noted late eighteenth century linguist Sir William Jones, had great respect for Indian culture and sought to preserve it. Others like Edmund Burke emphasised the importance of respecting indigenous culture and tradition and the moral responsibility which must necessarily accompany the exercise of authority over subject peoples. He argued that all authority was a trust and that British rule in India should be benevolent and not exploitative. This view was never far from the surface of official thinking in India throughout the nineteenth century. It likewise reappeared in an African context in the 1920s in Lord Lugard's

celebrated work *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*.¹⁴

Burke thought of human society not as an artificial structure which could be rebuilt at will but as a living organism which had evolved from the wisdom and experience of the past. It followed, therefore, that change should be approached cautiously. Unfortunately, this view came into direct conflict with the Evangelicals and Utilitarians, the advocates of westernisation in the early years of the nineteenth century. Missionaries were deliberately excluded from India by the East India Company in 1793 and not allowed back until the British government succumbed to pressure from Charles Grant and the 'Clapham School' in the India Act of 1813. They called for far-reaching reforms of a society which they claimed was based on widespread corruption, slavery, superstition and plain human misery. In the course of the nineteenth century the missions figured prominently in the spread of English education but the Christian religion was never destined to win the hearts and minds of the masses.

The Utilitarians were akin to the economic rationalists of today. They had little or no reverence for the past and no inhibitions about changing society. Led by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, they sought by rational enquiry to establish the universal laws of nature which would promote the greatest good of the greatest number. Such laws were then to be applied equally to society whether in India or Britain. This line of thought clearly contained a strong authoritarian component. The Utilitarians were most prominent in India in the 1830s and it was no accident that one of their number, Thomas Macaulay, as Chairman of the Committee of Public Instruction, resolved the deadlock between committee members over the heated controversy surrounding the relative merits of oriental and western learning in favour of the latter. His celebrated Minute resulted in all future government funds for educational purposes being devoted to the maintenance of schools and colleges of western learning, taught through the medium of English. Contrary to much that has been written since, this decision did not mean that the Government actively wished to discourage oriental learning or the development of vernacular languages. At the time, however, it seemed to Macaulay that there was no other practical means of extending 'useful [scientific] knowledge' to millions of Indians other than through the medium of English. His decision meant that only a minority of Indians would be educated because anything approaching universal education was clearly beyond the resources of the government.

The growing importance of English in nineteenth century India was further strengthened by the freeing of the press in 1835 and two years later by the suppression of Persian as the language of the courts. Thereafter, western education, especially at the secondary and post secondary levels, increased rapidly under government direction and encouragement. Many educational historians continue to reiterate the belief that British financial assistance [grants-in-aid] was given to higher institutions of learning in

the belief that if western education were introduced to the upper classes it would eventually 'filter down' by a natural process to the lower social orders. There is, however, no documentary evidence to support official acknowledgment of the so-called 'filtration theory' and it failed in practice.¹⁵

In 1844, Lord Hardinge announced that preference would be given in all future government appointments to applicants who had received a western education. Hindsight reveals that it was a decisive move. By making western education the passport to employment in the public service, the course of educational development in India was set for the next century. Moreover, Hindu enthusiasm for western education 'as a means to an end' ensured that English medium schooling was firmly rooted in Bengal by the mid nineteenth century.

Educational historians traditionally cite Sir Chales Wood's educational despatch of 1854 as the most important influence on the shaping of British education policy in India in the second half of the nineteenth century because, in theory, it imposed upon the Government of India the duty of creating a comprehensive system of education for the diffusion of practical

knowledge i.e. the arts, science, philosophy, and literature of Europe, from the primary school to the university, using both English and the vernacular languages - Wood was convinced that the only way to reach the rural masses was through the vernacular languages. The proposed scheme of education was to be based on the principle of subsidising private enterprise by the payment of grants-in-aid as was then the practice in England. The Government was to accept responsibility for pioneering the way but thereafter 'it recognized no responsibility to do for the people what it thought the people could and ought to do for themselves'.¹⁶

In retrospect, perhaps the most significant point about the despatch was the fact that it left the future development of education in India largely to what in modern parlance are termed market forces. At the same time the precise role of the central and provincial governments in promoting education was never clarified. Wood argued strongly for the establishment of vernacular schools for the masses but there was no way of guaranteeing ahead of time that Indians would provide financial support for vernacular primary schools if education were to be left to the dictates of the market place. There is no space here to comment in detail on the development of education over the next seventy years except to say that the period was marked by a rapid proliferation of high schools, often of dubious quality, run purely for profit. The demand for English schooling as the means to white-collar employment was to prove so intense amongst upper caste Hindus that many schools were able to survive without government financial assistance and were, therefore, not subject to inspection by provincial authorities. Their quality suffered accordingly. Conversely, Indian support for rural vernacular schools was minimal. By 1900 and thereafter, there was also a widespread belief in official circles both in India and the United

Kingdom that English education was the source of the growing political discontent then evident in the sub-continent. Macaulay and others may have believed in the 1830s that it was the duty of the British Government to attempt the intellectual emancipation of India as a justification for British rule but as Sir Alfred Lyall commented in 1910, English education in India 'acts upon the frame of an antique society as a powerful dissolvent, heating weak brains, stimulating rash ambitions, raising inordinate expectations of which the disappointment is bitterly resented'.¹⁷

Sir George Anderson, a former Director of Public Instruction in the Punjab and Educational Commissioner to the Indian Government, referred to an educational policy of 'drift' in the period under review and instanced the failure to promote vernacular education as perhaps 'the most grievous error of those days of drift...'.¹⁸ It might also be argued that by the late 1880s the Indian Government was rapidly losing its influence over secondary schooling, its place being taken by the universities which were responsible for determining their own matriculation requirements. In the final analysis one can and perhaps should argue that it was the Indians, not the British, who determined educational outcomes in nineteenth/early twentieth century India. As the late Sir Christopher Cox, the former Educational Adviser to the Colonial Office observed, the fundamental, though often underrated factor in colonial education generally, was less the policy of government than the attitude of the governed.¹⁹

It was also Cox who suggested that being accountable for the education of other peoples of very different stock in other parts of the globe was a formidable responsibility which had fallen to few peoples and to none on quite so large a scale as the British.²⁰ It was in India that the British first wrestled with the problem of governing millions of alien peoples and the experience clearly influenced subsequent colonial policy. I would contend that a deeper appreciation of how British education policy evolved in nineteenth/early twentieth century India and the forces which determined its outcomes has important implications for a more scholarly understanding of the colonial experience generally. The issues and questions raised in this paper should facilitate that end.

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