

Objectives Of The Education Policy Of The British in India In The 19th Century

Sanket Hemant Bhat

Ph.D. Scholar,

Tilak Maharashtra Vidyapeeth, Pune

Abstract

Education policy began to be shaped by the British in India with the acquisition and consolidation of political power by the East India Company and subsequently the British crown. It replaced the existing system of education in India and introduced a new system modeled on the lines of British institutions. Education was a tool used by colonisers to legitimise their domination, establish cultural supremacy and serve their own economic needs. Education resulted in the creation of the new English educated elite class and a political class influenced by Western ideas which would remain loyal to the British and support the perpetuation of the British rule in India. The political education of princes also resulted in blunting the opposition by the erstwhile kingdoms and co-opted them into the new power structure of the British rule.

Keywords

Education Policy, British India, colonial rule, cultural supremacy

Background

The early efforts in the field of education by the East India Company were mostly aimed at improving their own administrative capacity. For instance, the Calcutta Madrasa, 1781 by Warren Hastings and Sanskrit College in Banaras in 1791 by Jonathan Duncan were set up for the study of Muslim and Hindu law and philosophy respectively, designed to provide a regular supply of Indians for administration of law and for correspondence in local languages. However, with the acquisition and consolidation of political power by the East India Company and subsequently the British crown, education too became subordinate to political power. Education now started to be looked at as a tool used by colonisers to legitimise their domination, establish cultural supremacy and serve their own economic needs.

The Charter Act of 1813 compelled the East India Company to accept responsibility for the education of the Indian people, giving up its earlier policy of non-intervention. It enabled the Company to set aside one lakh rupees for the revival and improvement of literature and encouragement of learned natives of India.

The Minute on Education in 1835 by Thomas Macaulay asserted the superiority of the English language and required that instruction in all courses of study at the college level should be given only in the English language. It thus settled the medium of instruction debate in favour of the Anglicists.¹

The Woods Despatch of 1854 became the cornerstone of British education policy in India. It stated that teaching of Western education was to be the goal of the government's educational policy. It created the structural setup for the British system of education in India - a system of graded schools, including high schools, middle schools, and elementary schools, universities and teacher training institutions modelled on those in Britain and provincial departments of public instruction. Vernacular language was to be the medium of instruction in primary schools, followed by Anglo-vernacular at secondary and English at the college level.²

The Hunter Commission formed in 1882 to examine the implementation of the Woods Despatch focused on primary and secondary education and emphasised the responsibility of the state

¹ Macaulay's Minute on Education, 1835. Central Secretariat Library, Government of India

² The Despatch of 1854 on General Education in India, General Council on Education in India

in spreading mass education through local bodies like district and municipal boards. Though its recommendations were not fully implemented, it marked a significant step in shaping the framework of India's educational system in the nineteenth century.

While the education policies played an instrumental role in facilitating colonial dominance, they also unintentionally fostering Indian socio-political consciousness.

Review of Literature

Several studies have examined the policies of the British in the sphere of education in India, their objectives and its impact on the Indian education system.

Dharampal (2000) has given a detailed account of the extensive indigenous system of education that was thriving in India before the British came in his book, *The Beautiful Tree*. Reports by Thomas Munro (1826), William Adam (1836) and G.W. Leitner (1882) presented surveys and observations regarding the prevalent system of education in the regions of Bengal, Bihar and Punjab which would inform the policies of the East India Company.

Deb, P (2014) provides an overview of the transformation of British policies on education in three stages - transformation of the British from merchants to rulers and consolidation and expansion of British power in India. Islam (2025) states that while British educational reforms altered specific social classes and intellectual discussions, their impact was constrained, and their framework predominantly catered to colonial administrative goals.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this study is to examine the policies of the British in India in the sphere of education and to analyse the objectives of these education policies.

Methodology

This research paper adopts a historical research approach, utilising primary sources such as historical texts, documents, and manuscripts and secondary sources including books, journal articles, and research papers. The study adopts a qualitative methodology through historical analysis, using research records, texts and scholarly publications to explore the objectives of educational policies throughout British rule.

Introduction

The education policies by the British in India were driven by a need to legitimise their domination, establish cultural supremacy and serve their own economic needs. The British education system in India was not intended to promote social change or progress, but rather to maintain the status quo and to keep the Indian people under British control. The objectives of the education policy of the British are explored in this study.

Objectives of Education policy of the British in India

Assertion of Cultural Superiority

Most of the Western scholars were driven by a sense of superiority of European culture over Indian culture driven by their belief in the 'Civilizing Mission', which was an integral part of the framework of imperialism. The civilizing mission was about morally and materially 'uplifting' and 'developing' the supposedly 'backward' or 'rude' people of India and that it was the 'responsibility' of the British to make them more civilized and more modern.³ The British became overlords with Indians as subject peoples, placed at 'inferior' positions in new 'scales of civilization', and the British (and Europeans generally) at the top. Every aspect of Indian culture was condemned and Indian had to now look up to

³ Watt, C. *Civilizing Missions in Colonial and Postcolonial South Asia From Improvement to Development* (2011), pp.1-34, Anthem Press

the British to continually try to catch up to their British rulers and 'European civilization', which they considered to be the supreme benchmark.

The superiority of English over Indian languages was also asserted by the 'Anglicists' who believed that Western education given through the English language alone was the 'remedy'. Thomas Macaulay in his 1835 Minute on Indian Education argued, "I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. The intrinsic superiority of the Western literature is indeed fully admitted..."⁴

This assertion of cultural superiority was ossified structurally through multiple mechanisms including racial hierarchy in administration driven by a belief of intellectual superiority and establishment of segregated 'White Towns' or 'civil lines' in cities.

Indians, as a result, developed a deep-seated mindset of cultural inferiority, which continues till date visible through an unconscious association of white skin with social and intellectual superiority.⁵ and practices such as the continuing reference to Governor-Generals/ Viceroy as "Lord"s or using epithets such as "Father of local self-government" for Governor-General Ripon when very clearly local self-governments have existed in India since its early history.⁶

Facilitating interests of Christian missionaries

Mission schools were established by many missionary societies in the nineteenth century in the British Empire as a means to convert non-Europeans to Christianity. They were driven by the strong belief that Christian morality was the highest form of civilisation.⁷ Prominent among these were Schwartz's schools in Shivganga, Baptist Missionaries in Serampore, the London Mission Society and the American Methodists. Missionaries acted as a prominent pressure group that compelled the East India Company to give up its policy of non-intervention in education and approve a sum of one lakh rupees per year for education and assume state responsibility for the promotion of education in India through the Charter Act of 1813.

Replacing the existing system of education

William Adam, in his observations, found that there existed about 1,00,000 village schools in Bengal and Bihar around the 1830s. Thomas Munro, had observed that 'every village had a school'. Observations made by Dr. G.W. Leitner in 1882 showed that the spread of education in the Punjab around 1850 was of a similar extent.⁸ However, in the early 19th century, the general belief among the British rulers was that this indigenous system of education had hardly anything of value. Hence despite recommendations of thinkers like Adam, Munro and Thomason, the indigenous schools were either destroyed by deliberate competition, or allowed to starve of sheer neglect. The loss of patronage & support eventually replaced them with schools and universities modeled on British institutions.⁹

Creation of the New Elite and the Downward Filtration Theory

A corollary of the White Man's burden was that since education for 'upliftment' of the 'backward' Indians was expensive, the British needed an intermediary class who would gradually educate the rest of the society. Macaulay stated, "We must do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern. A class of persons Indian in blood and

⁴ Macaulay's Minute on Education, 1835. Central Secretariat Library, Government of India

⁵ Gupta, Munshi & Bagga (2021). The Skin Color Preference of Lighter and Darker Skin Colored Males and Females, The International Journal of Indian Psychology, ISSN 2348-5396 (Online)

⁶ Tiwari (2025). Village administration in Ancient India: Structure, Functions, and Evolution, International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Research

⁷ Jenz (2022), Missionaries & modernity: education in the British Empire, 1830–1910, Manchester University Press

⁸ Dharampal, 2000. Introduction in *The Beautiful Tree*, Volume III. Pp. 07-86. Mapusa: Other India Press.

⁹ Nurullah, Naik, 1951. A History of Education in India during the British period. Pp. 50. Macmillan & Co.

colour, but English in taste, in opinions, words and intellect.”¹⁰ This education was to be done in the English language which was to function not just as a means of communication but also as a medium of assertion of cultural superiority.

The resultant anglicisation of Indian education resulted in a socio-economic divide between the newly English educated Indians and the vast majority of Indians, who had limited access to education. It created an elite English educated class, with a firm belief in the superiority of British (and in general European) values and culture, and who would identify and align themselves with the British.

Producing a class of clerks for the British

The system of Western education aimed at producing a class of Indians well-versed in English and fulfilling the British administrative needs. The objective was to ensure a cheap supply of clerks for holding subordinate posts in administration and British business concerns. This was also one of the reasons why the objectives of educating the masses and providing technical and scientific education, though stated, were never fully implemented.

Creation of a Political class influenced by Western ideas

The introduction of the modern system of education provided opportunities for assimilation of modern Western ideas and gave a new direction to political thought. The new class of English educated Indians played an active role in the new ‘Politics of Associations’ by forming various political organisations, marking a move away from armed rebellions such as the Revolt of 1857. However, the early leaders demanded political and administrative reforms while expressing loyalty to the British crown. Gradually these leaders in the political discourse came to be known as “Moderates”. Those who opposed British rule, despite being a basic demand for a freedom struggle, were termed by the Moderates as “Extremists”.

Neutering of opposition by the erstwhile kingdoms

The kings who ruled kingdoms before British rule had already accepted British suzerainty and became princes under British paramountcy after the Queen’s Declaration of 1858. The British established the Mayo College in Ajmer in 1875, for the political education of princes. The purpose was to co-opt the Indian royalty and aristocracy into the power structure of the British in India and create buffer states who backed the British to whom their allegiance lay. The result of this ‘political education’ policy could be evidenced from the fact that the princely states largely remained aloof from the nationalist movement till the 1930s.

Conclusion

The case of British policy on education in India clearly illustrates how the educational system of a colonised country was fundamentally replaced and new systems established to suit the needs and interests of the coloniser. The British forced a cultural transformation on Indians to develop a loyalty and superiority towards British culture. Education became a tool for the establishment of cultural superiority, fulfilling its administrative needs by creating a subordinate class of workers and creating an intermediary class of Indians that would support the British rule and ensure its perpetuation. The education policies were also instrumental in shifting the political opposition from violent revolts to the docile Politics of Association. The educational policies have had lasting impacts, shaping India’s socio-political landscape.

¹⁰ Macaulay’s Minute on Education, 1835. Central Secretariat Library, Government of India

References

- Ahmed, N., & Kumari, M. (2018). Education, educational policies and 'the raj'(1792-1854A. D). *Education*, 3(1)
- Bakshi, R. N. (2016). The language policy of the East India Company and its impact on education during British India rule. In *Language Policy and Education in India* (pp. 41-54). Routledge India.
- Basu, S., & Sarkar, S. K. (2022). Revisiting the History of Indian Education Policies. *International Journal for Innovative Research in Multidisciplinary Fields*, 8(9), 257-265.
- Deb, P (2014), British Education Policy in India: The Legacy Still Continues, *Indian Journal of Applied Research*, Vol 4, Issue 10
- Dharampal (2000). Introduction in *The Beautiful Tree*, Volume III. Pp. 07-86. Mapusa: Other India Press.
- Gupta, Munshi & Bagga (2021). The Skin Color Preference of Lighter and Darker Skin Colored Males and Females, *The International Journal of Indian Psychology*, ISSN 2348-5396 (Online)
- Islam, S (2025), Education Policy under the British East India Company and Its Transformative Impact on the Indian Subcontinent: An Analytical Review, *Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences* ISSN 3078-8358 2(1):01-20
- Jensz (2022), *Missionaries & modernity: education in the British Empire, 1830–1910*, Manchester University Press
- Macaulay's Minute on Education (1835). Central Secretariat Library, Government of India
- Moore, R. J. (1965). The composition of wood's education despatch'. *The English Historical Review*, 80(314), 70-85.
- Nurullah, Naik (1951). *A History of Education in India during the British period*. Pp. 50. Macmillan & Co.
- Suresh Chandra Ghosh (1995) Bentinck, Macaulay and the introduction of English education in India, *History of Education*, 24:1, pp. 17-24
- The Despatch of 1854 on General Education in India (1854), General Council on Education in India
- Tiwari, A. (2025). Village administration in Ancient India: Structure, Functions, and Evolution, pp. 41-44, *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Research*, Volume 11, Issue 6, 2025,
- Watt, C. (2011). *Civilizing Missions in Colonial and Postcolonial South Asia From Improvement to Development*, pp.1-34, Anthem Press