

# British Education Policy in South Asia: A Critical Appraisal

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**Abstract.** This article discusses about conflicting ideas that emerged between the English and the Indians on the issue of Modern education. In the course of governance, the British realized the necessity for the introduction of modern education in India as the oriental education, in no way, was beneficial for the people of this country, they alleged. Contrary to it, the Indian were critic to modern education as it had devalued the cultural traditions of India. The sources of conflict can be traced back to the first half of the twentieth century when a large amount of literatures came into circulation that had been criticizing the western learning. However, in this article, the British education policy has been fiercely debated and re-examined in the light of ‘banned and controversial literature’.

**Keywords:** Proscribed Literature, Cultural Conflict, British Education Policy, *Tols*, *Pathsalas*, *Maktab*, *Madrassa* Orientalists Occidentals.

## 1. Introduction

The debate on the British education policy in South Asia began with contradictory interpretations from different ideological perspective and it remained a highly contended and controversial subject. The introduction of western education had immense implications on Indian society such as the destruction of age old social values and the creation of new classes that became admirer of the western culture. This negative change has been referred to by the British as “civilizing” role of Britain in India. [1] Contrary to it, Dilip K. Chakrabarti, in his *Colonial Indology* examines western philosophy and argues that one of the underlying assumptions of the western indology was the feeling of superiority expressed in various ways. At the same time, the image of India has been projected in terms of ‘unchangeableness’ that can’t be changed without external influence. So whatever the argument put forwarded by the western scholars in the context of Indian society was a by- product of western dominance and a feeling of racial superiority over the natives.

In the beginning, the East India Company did not develop any educational policy in India and it remained a private affairs and the focus was given on oriental learning, for example Warren Hastings Calcutta *Madrassa* , Jonathan Duncan’s Sanskrit college in Banaras and Sir William Jones’s *Asiatic Society of Bengal*. [2] However, by the end of eighteenth century, various missionary groups urged the company to allow them to introduce Christianity and English education in India and the lead was taken by Charles Grant, an officer of the Company. His pamphlet ‘*Observation*’ published in 1792 was a critical review of the state and society of the Asiatic subjects, particularly with respect to morals and on the means of imparting knowledge. He began with the description of various evils of Indian society. To him, the only remedy of all these evils was the supersession of existing religions by Christianity with the dissemination of European knowledge of science and literature through English Education. The efforts made by Grant were further strengthened by the Baptist Missionaries in India especially by William Carey, Joshua Marshman and William Ward. [3]

For several years’ the debate continued in between the Occidental and Oriental on the kind of knowledge to be imparted to the people of India. The Oriental school led by H. T Princep and others put emphasis on oriental learning and they argued that the Indian did not require European knowledge of literature and culture but the English in India required understanding of Indian culture and civilization.[4] But this stand of Oriental was opposed by Rammohan Roy on the ground that mass Sanskrit education would widen the gap between Indian and European and it would create an obstacle to Indians active participation in the

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commercial and political life of the country. [5] The Occidentals, on the other hand, led by C.E Trevelyan took prominent part in this controversy and advocated in favour of English education. The propagator of this ideology had in mind that their language, literature, culture and civilization were superior to all others and they believed that knowledge could only be transmitted through English. [6] And this concept of superiority of race can also be found in Edward Said's *Orientalism*. However, the General Committee had been steadily following the 'filtration Policy', initially laid down for its guidance. There were many reasons for the Company to adopt this 'filtration Policy'; one was to educate few Indian for appointing them clerks to run their administration while the other argument was the inadequate resources offered for the promotion of education in India.[7] Lord William Bentinck on his arrival to India stated that the 'English language was key to all improvements' and for this move he got the support of James Mill in England and of Rammohan Roy in Calcutta. To end this drama, Thomas Babington Macaulay advocated the value of English learning and questioned the utility of Oriental learning. [8]

## 2. Guide for Author

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## 3. Cultural Conflict

The debate initiated by Oriental and Occidental, in one way or the other, were roaming around the superiority of the west which the nationalist writers contradicted and they focused on the core cultural issue of India. One Kaviratna Shree Chaturvedi Sailendraji Gayan Bhushan in his *Swaraj Gitanjali*, argues that the cultural values of the people in India shattered in the name of education and he gave emphasis on oriental learning. According to him, the disappearance of oriental languages was the main reason of the prevalent ignorance in India. The British education policy, he says, had created a chaos and confusion in the thoughts, ideas and opinions of people. Discussing about superiority of Indian culture, Sailendraji argues that the snake-charmers had been playing with the snakes in the past had now become the extractor of their poison and selling it for making venom and this change is seen in cultural perspectives.[9] But Jnananjan Neogi in his "*Desh Ka Pukar*" (call of the nation) has another disagreement on account of lowest literacy rates in India. Arguing on British education policy, he says, under 150 years of British rule, there had been over all degradation in the country; Indians lost their wealth, honour, lives, and education. He compares literacy rates of India with other countries and says that India had only 8% literacy in 1921 because of well calculated move of the British. Contrary to it, Japan had 98% and America had 85.5%. Discussing about Education in South Asia, Neogi writes, fifty years before our poets used to sing, "*China, Burma and uncivilized Japan*. But this song, in the context of Japan, has now been proved wrong, she has got enlightened and developed a sense of nationality. Here Neogi intends to focus on the cultural values of Japan was responsible for her development. [10] Comparing the position of educational institutions of India with Japan, Neogi says, Japan had 15 *Pathshalas* for every 13 villages. In the Markin country there were 17 *Pathshalas* for every 15 village but in India there was horrible condition of educational institutions as most of the *Pathshalas* hold their sitting on the day Inspectors visits the schools for inspection. According to a survey of the East India Company in 1761, Neogi says, in Bengal alone there were 80 thousand *tols* and 21 thousand *maktabs*. But there was stiff decline of *tols* and *maktabs* in India with the introduction of the British education policy and now one half of these institutions did not survive. The reason for this decay was clearly stated in the proceedings of the East India Company of 1793, when one of the Directors had stated in connection with the establishment of *Patshalas* in Bengal. "*We are reaping today the fruit of spreading education in America. By awakening a spirit of independence along with education we have lost America. Shall we commit the same blunder again by establishing Patashalas in Bengal?*" [11] The British education policy in India was a well calculated move to deprive Indians from its rich cultural values as evident from Macaulay's statement. [12] The insincerity of the English can also be judged from the fact that William Carey was not allowed to open *Pathshalas* within Company's jurisdictions rather he was threatened with internment, in the event of his

endeavoring to establish any school or college. Thus, English never wanted to educate people as the spread of education was just like sowing the seed of independence in the heart of Indians and for this reason they wanted to degrade Indians culturally. Neogi has provided another illustration to strengthen his argument that even after 150 years of the British rule only 5 percent of the Indians were found literate who could read and write and the amount spend on the promotion of knowledge was very negligible as compared to other countries. According to Neogi Denmark spend Rs. 19, in England Rs. 9, in America Rs.16, France Rs 9, Japan Rs. 9 but in India it was 2 anna i.e. Rs. 0.125, on education per head. Neogi while comparing the literacy rate of Philippines (70%) and among the Negroes of Makin (62%), he argues that the Congress had come forward to make the country independent in the field of education. [13]

Moreover, Dayanand Choudhury through his Bengali pamphlet *Pradhinanter Abhishap* had a new argument to awake and arouse Indians by quoting the statement of Hamilton when he wrote: “*If Englishmen today have to leave India in the same way as Rome had to leave Britain, they will leave behind as uneducated, unhealthy and wealth less, country*”. [14] But Balbir Gupta in his leaflet, “*Khatta Mitha Chatni*” (sweet and sour jelly) examines the cultural change in the context Indian dresses and languages. Earlier Indian had a tradition to wear *dhoti, chaddar* and had turban on their head and carrying swords in their hands, and this age old values has been snatched away by the British in the name of modernization. Instead, the British had provided us- Hat, Pant, Collar and necktie. At the same time, the British had made us to give up the Indian literature (Indian letters such as Ka, Kha, ga, gha) and at its place the English had been teaching us English letters like A, B, C, D and by doing so, they have made us slaves. [15] Similar view has been expressed by Annie Besant that “The whole education of the country is planned on foreign models, and its object is to serve foreign rather than native Indian, to make docile government servants rather than patriotic citizens” while Radhakrishnan was also a critic to British education policy. [16]

#### **4. Details of Manuscript**

The present debate on British Education Policy is based on proscribed literature that argues that English education had destabilized traditional learning and cultural values. It has been further argued that British had been continuously making efforts to achieve their goal according to the data available in the sources.

#### **5. Acknowledgement**

The present study is a part of my UGC Major Research Project entitled, “*Poster, Pamphlets and Leaflets and popular consciousness: A study of proscribed literature in Northern India 1885-1947*” Most of the literature, I have used in this article, are the same that has been consulted for the said project.

#### **6. Conclusion**

These pamphlets under study were mostly written in the vernacular languages such as Bengali and Hindi. The purpose behind writing these pamphlets and leaflets, as it appears, was to awaken the Indians about the adverse social impact of the British education policy and to seek favour for the Congress workers contesting election for the councils and local Boards. It also argues that by increasing the strength of the congress in the councils and local Boards we would break up the Chakra Vyuha (secrets) conspiracy of the bureaucracy and finally we shall achieve Swaraj.

#### **7. References**

- [1] Ralph Fox, *The Colonial Policy of British Imperialism*, OUP, Karachi, p.13.
- [2] *The Bernard Cohn Omnibus*, OUP, New Delhi, 2009, pp. 650-51.
- [3] J N Farquhar, *Modern Religious Movements in India*, Delhi, 1999, introductory pages.
- [4] S. P. Chaube, *History of Indian Education*, p.80.
- [5] Bruce Carlisle Robertson, *Raja Rammohan Ray: the Father of Modern India*, Delhi, 1995, p.43.
- [6] S.P. Chaube, op.cit, pp.80-81.
- [7] See D P Sinha, *The Educational Policy of East India Company in Bengal to 1854*, Calcutta, 1964, pp.78-79.

- [8] C H Philip (ed.), *Correspondence of Lord William C Bentinck*, pp.1403-1405.
- [9] For Hindi pamphlet “*Swaraj Gitanjali*” by Kaviratna Sree Chaturvedi Sailendraji Gayan Bhushan, published by the “Hindi Navyug” Granthmala Karyalya, Kashi, [See Political Special file No.296/1923, Bihar State Archives, Patna, (henceforth BSA)]
- [10] The pamphlet entitled, “*Desh Ka Pukar*” is a translation into Hindi of the Bengali publication “*Desh Dak*”, Which was a speech, delivered by Jnananjan Neogi. for which Neogi was prosecuted and convicted in 1927, under section 124-A and 153-A, IPC. [See Political Special file No.72/1929, BSA]
- [11] See Bengali Pamphlet entitled “*Pradhinanter Abhishap*” by Dayanand Choudhury, printed at the Ghosh Press, 38, Sibnarayan Das Lane, Calcutta. [Political Special, File No. 317/1930, BSA]
- [12] C H Philip, op cit, p.1405
- [13] *Desh ka pukar*, op.cit
- [14] *Pradhinanter Abhishap*, op.cit.
- [15] A Leaflet in Hindi headed “*Khatta Mitha Chatni*” containing a song ending with the words “*Hae! Re Bideshia*” by Balbir Gupta. [See Political Special; File No. 317/1930, BSA]
- [16] See pamphlet entitled “*Pradhinanter Abhishap*” op.cit.