



## DISPARITIES OF 'CASTE' AND 'CLASS' IN COLONIAL EDUCATIONAL POLICIES OF 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY BENGAL

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### RESEARCH ARTICLE



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#### Abstract

Education is often seen as presenting opportunities for the marginalized sections of the populace, using which, they can hope to improve their lives. The contributions of Savitribai Phule, Jyotirao Phule and Satyashodhak Samaj towards the spread of education amongst women and lower caste groups in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Maharashtra, implied that Company rule had presented certain opportunities, utilising which, the status-quo of gender, caste and class within Indian society, can be challenged. However, since the publication of the 'Minute on Indian Education' by Thomas Babington Macaulay and its subsequent adaptation after 1835, the colonial government continued to pursue discriminative policies towards those, it deemed to be belonging to lower 'caste' and 'class' amongst its Indian subjects. In this paper, I would like to focus on certain aspects of such discriminatory policies, as recorded in the colonial documents of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Bengal.

**Keywords:** *Colonial India, English East India Company, Colonial Bengal, Education, Caste, Class, British Rule, Government Policy, Discrimination*

#### Introduction

Education received importance in official policies of the English East India Company since the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Though the Mohammedan College at Calcutta was established in 1781, Sanskrit College at Benares in 1792 (Trevelyan, 1-2), the English East India Company's Charter in 1813 came with a grant of one lakh rupees per year, for 'the Revival and Improvement of Literature and the Encouragement of the learned Natives of India, and for the Introduction and Promotion of a Knowledge of the Sciences among the Inhabitants of the British territories in India'. (The Charter Act 1813, 39-40) However, not much progress was made till the year 1823, when a resolution was passed in July by the Governor General in council for the establishment of the General Committee of Public Instruction. This body was entrusted 'to appropriate to the object of public education the sum of one lac of rupees per annum', subject to the approval of the Court of Directors in London. (Sharp, 53-54)

#### Education for whom?

As the educational structure under the General Committee of Public Instruction began to be organized in the first half of 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the intentions of the colonial administration were made clear, regarding the sections of the Indian populace, for whom, formalised and institutionalised education was tailored for. In its report of 1831, the Committee stated its intention of 'consulting the feelings and conciliating the confidence of... the influential and learned classes, those who are by birthright or profession teachers and expounders of literature, law, and religion, Maulavis and Pundits'. (Mahmood, 34) Birthright, by definition, in the subcontinental context, referred to the caste identities of the Indian subjects and was often used interchangeably with the word 'class' in the colonialist writings and records. The colonialist camp, was however divided on the issue of which sections of their Indian subjects, were to receive education. As such, there emerged two approaches pertaining to the spread of education. The faction led by Henry Thoby Princep favoured education for the already enlightened and influential classes amongst the Indians, while the other one led by Charles Edward Trevelyan advocated for education for all classes. Trevelyan, in his book, cites parts of the 1831 report of the Committee, which highlights the absence of the patrons of the learned classes of India. This, according to the report, necessitated for both direct and indirect literary endowments from the government, to help in their subsistence and also provide "an avenue" to "public employment". (Trevelyan, 5) According to Joshua Ehrlich, the divisions between the colonial officials had been entangled with linguistic concerns, with older English officials like Horace Hayman Wilson and Prinsep supporting Oriental scholarship and advocating education for the elite classes amongst Indians. In contrast, Trevelyan advocated the use of "united means of English and of the popular languages" to transcend beyond "the learned few" engaged in "the study of Sanscrit and Arabic" (C. E. Trevelyan et al., 18). Thomas Babington Macaulay who arrived in India in 1834 as the law member

of Governor General's Council, stood in support of Trevelyan, who would become his brother-in-law by December of the same year. Ehrlich notes that this logic of those favouring popular education ultimately influenced the thoughts and actions of Governor General Lord William Bentinck, in endorsing the points raised in Thomas Babington Macaulay's, *Minute on English Education* in 1835. (Ehrlich, 280) Thus, the prevailing deadlock between the Anglicists and Orientalists ended in favour of the former and Lord Macaulay was appointed as the President of the Committee on Public Instruction, with the former President offering his resignation. (Trevelyan, 15) Following these developments, Trevelyan records,

'In all the new institutions the important principle has been established of admitting boys of every caste without distinction. A different practice prevailed in the older institutions; the Sanskrit colleges were appropriated to Brahmins; the Arabic colleges, with a few exceptions, to Mohammedans; and even at the Anglo-Indian institution, which goes by the name of the Hindu college, none but Hindus of good caste were admitted. This practice was found to encourage the prejudice which it was meant to conciliate. The opposite practice has been attended with no inconvenience of any kind; Christian, Mohammedan, and Hindu boys, of every shade of colour and variety of descent, may be seen standing side by side in the same class, engaged in the common pursuit of English literature, contending for the same honours, and forced to acknowledge the existence of superior merit in their comrades of the lowest, as well as in those of the highest caste. This is a great point gained. The artificial institution of caste cannot long survive the period when the youth of India, instead of being trained to observe it, shall be led by the daily habit of their lives to disregard it. All we have to do is to bring them together, to impress the same character on them, and to leave the yielding and affectionate mind of youth to its natural impulse. Habits of friendly communication will thus be established between all classes, they will insensibly become one people, and the process of enlightening our subjects will proceed simultaneously with that of uniting them among themselves.' (Trevelyan, 19)

### **Disparities Linger On**

The missionary William Adam advocated for an educational survey through an initial memorandum on the subject of popular education in the year 1829, addressing it to Lord William Bentinck. After following up on the proposal in 1834, Governor-General, appointed Adam as the Special Commissioner for the Survey of the State of Education in Bengal in the year 1835, as he felt that the latter was the most qualified person for this role, due to his knowledge of the languages and experiences with the Indians. (Adam, xxiii – xxiv) However, such measures, which were meant to correct the wrongs of the "masses" being "overlooked" due to the raging "battle" between Orientalists and Anglicists (Adam, 479), produced limited successes in their implementation. As such, by 1860, the Vernacular Schools, which 'had been designed for the labouring and agricultural classes....had been appropriated by the middle orders' (Stark, 88) The *Note On The State of Education in India 1865-66*, records that; 'In no other Province of India has education of a higher kind so great a money value as in Bengal.' But in the same vein it points out that; 'The main channel chosen for directing its efforts has been education of the Higher and Middle Classes, and in this respect it has unquestionably succeeded in a degree unequalled in any other part of India.' (Selections from Educational Records of the Government of India, Vol I, 124-125) Tracing the issue to be persisting since yesteryears, the document records;

'The great masses of the people of Bengal, including the laboring and agricultural classes, were reported in 1863-64 to be in reality scarcely touched as yet by our educational operations.'" "Various plans," as the Director of Public Instruction wrote in that year, "have been devised and tried for bringing School instruction to bear upon them, (the lower orders of the people above referred to), but the result has almost uniformly been that the Schools which have been organized or improved for their benefit have been at once taken possession of and monopolized by classes who stand higher in the social scale. The fact was that up to that time no good plan for diffusing elementary instruction among the masses of the people had been devised.' (Selections from Educational Records of the Government of India, Vol I, 125)

Doubts were also cast on the policies of 'downward filtration of education' from the upper classes of Indians to permeate to the 'lowest strata of the population'. Alternatively, it was noted that policies which put effort to educate the 'agricultural and laboring population independently of all other measures for promoting education of a higher order' yielded most successful results 'in any part of India.' (Selections from Educational Records of the Government of India, Vol I, 126). The discussions of a Bill to consolidate the law relating to municipalities in 1870, proposed to 'overthrow' "the filtration theory" while explaining its failures. The theory, which was first enunciated by the Committee of Public Instruction in 1838, is blamed to be standing 'in the way of reform' while ignoring the conflicting interests of the 'peasant classes of Bengal' vis a vis "subordinate servants of Government", "the underlings of the zemindars, and indeed by every one with the slightest shadow of authority". (Selections from Educational Records of the Government of India, Vol I, 307-309) The Hunter Commission was appointed to 'set forth the Court of Directors' Despatch of the 19th July 1854 as the basis of the educational policy of India' in the year 1882. (Report of the Indian Education Commission, 1). The primary goal of the Wood's Despatch of 1854 was to 'to divert the efforts of the Government from the education of the higher classes, upon whom they had up to that date been too exclusively directed, and to turn them to the wider diffusion of education among all classes of the people, and especially to the provision of primary instruction for the masses'. (The Despatch of 1854 on "General Education in India", 42). To fulfil this end, the Hunter Commission of 1882 recommended that aided schools 'be understood to be open to all classes and castes of the community' with the provision of 'special aid being, if necessary, assignable on account of low-caste pupils' in the case of 'Indigenous Education'. (Report of the Indian Education Commission, 76) However the Commission also recommended that; 'Primary Education be regarded as the instruction of the

masses, through the Vernacular, in such subjects as will best fit them for their position in life, and be not necessarily regarded as a portion of instruction leading up to the University'. (Report of the Indian Education Commission, 81) Thus by the end of the nineteenth century, a 'dual system' of education was implemented which had the stated goal of differentiating between "primary instruction" and "the primary stage of higher instruction", with the rationale being that, 'the pupils in primary schools, and those in the primary classes of secondary schools, aim at a different class of education, and belong to different grades of society, it is both economical and logical to recognise this distinction at the outset of their educational career.' (Report of the Indian Education Commission, 94)

### Conclusion

Readings of the nineteenth century archival records thus lay bare the policy dilemmas, debates and divisions within the colonialist circles, as they dealt with both existing and emergent social and economic divisions within the Indians. One of the possible reasons for such divergences can be the contradictory logic, using which, the colonialists operated with respect to the spread of education beyond the Indian elites to the masses. Thus, while the eradication of hierarchies amongst Indians was one of the stated aims for the spread of mass education, colonial policies still operated with the principles of the differing levels of education, tailored according to the very logic and realities of 'caste' and 'class'. As such, the 'dual system' of education of the nineteenth century could never escape the paradox but re-entrenched old hierarchies while creating newer ones in occupations, which were being offered to Indians, under colonial rule. Thus, someone from upper 'caste' and 'class' could hope to avail university level education and get opportunities of serving in colonial administration, while those belonging to the so called lower 'caste' and 'class' groups, were not meant to progress beyond elementary and primary levels of schooling. The knowledge gained from the latter endeavour was meant to help in agriculture and also in the dealings with the local exploiters (landlords, tax collectors and moneylenders) in the rural space. Thus, Gopal Guru's argument of colonialism aiding in the development of 'new concepts' in 'static spaces' and inducing reconfigurations of local non-egalitarian power structures (Guru, 78-79), is still applicable in the latter context, as envisioned by colonial educational policies themselves. But the potential extent of such reconfiguration was also largely restricted by the very same colonial policies, which produced and enforced social, occupational and spatial immobility based on the parameters of what colonial officials defined as 'caste' and 'class', in 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal.

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