

Civilizing the “Native”, Educating the Nation

The Tradition of Orientalists: Orientalists needed Indian scholars to teach them vernacular languages, local customs, and laws and help them translate and interpret ancient texts. They believed that the ancient customs of the country and oriental learning ought to be the basis of British rule in India.

Education for Commerce: It was believed that Indians would be able to understand the advantages of trade and commerce through European learning. Western influence would change the lifestyle of educated Indians so that they would readily accept British goods.

What Happened to Local Schools: Earlier, local schools or pathshalas were allowed to function without much interference. But after 1854, the British standardized the curriculum-imposed routines, established rules and ensured regular inspections of these schools.

New Routines, New Rules: The Britisher’s government-appointed officials were made in charge of four to five schools. Teaching was now according to a regular timetable. Students wrote examinations, paid a regular fee, and obeyed the new rules of discipline.

Agenda for National Education: In the 19th century, Indian thinkers were impressed with the developments in Europe. They felt that western education would help in the modernization of India. They urged the British to open more schools, colleges and universities and spend more money on education.

Gandhi’s View on Western Learning: Gandhi argued that colonial education created a sense of inferiority in the minds of Indians and destroyed the pride they had in their own culture.

Tagore’s ‘Abode of Peace’: Tagore felt that creative learning could be encouraged only within a natural environment. Therefore in 1901, he set up his school, Shanti Niketan, in a rural setting where children lived in harmony with nature and cultivated their natural creativity.

The British in India established their rule over the entire country. But their task was not completed with the establishment of control. They felt that they had a cultural mission. They had to civilise the natives by giving them proper education and by changing their customs and values.

For this it was necessary to study Indian history, philosophy and law. William Jones, an expert in law and a linguist, took this task. He began to study ancient Indian texts

on law, philosophy, religion, politics, morality, arithmetic, medicine and the other sciences.

Englishmen like Henry Thomas Colebrooke and Nathaniel Halhed were also busy discovering the ancient Indian heritage, mastering Indian languages and translating Sanskrit and Persian works into English.

Jones and Colebrooke shared a deep respect for ancient cultures. Both of India and the West Indian civilisation, they felt, had attained its glory in the ancient past but had subsequently declined. In order to understand India it was necessary to discover the sacred and legal texts that were produced in the ancient time.

Jones and Colebrooke went about discovering ancient texts, understanding their meaning, translating them and making their findings known to others.

Several company officials got influenced by these ideas. They felt that the Hindus and the Muslims ought to be taught what they were already familiar with, and what they valued and treasured, not subjects that were alien to them.

It was thought that this was the only way the British could win the hearts the 'natives', and could get respect from them.

A madrasa was set up in Calcutta in 1781 to promote the study of Arabic, Persian and Islamic law. In 1791, the Hindu College was established in Benaras to encourage the study of ancient Sanskrit texts that would be useful for the administration of the country.

Not all Company officials shared these views. They began to criticise the Orientalist vision of learning. They strongly disapproved the British effort to encourage the study of Arabic and Sanskrit language and literature.

James Mill was one of those who attacked the Orientalists. He was of the opinion that Indians should be made familiar with the scientific and technical advances that the West had made, rather than with the poetry and sacred literature of the Orient.

Thomas Babington Macaulay, another critic of Orientalists, saw India as an uncivilised country that needed to be civilised. He emphasized the need to teach Indians the English language.

Finally, the English Education Act of 1835 was introduced. The decision was to make English the medium of instruction for higher education, and to stop the promotion of Oriental institutions like the Calcutta Madrasa and Benaras Sanskrit College.

In 1854, an educational despatch, popularly known as Wood's Despatch, was sent to India. Outlining the educational policy that was to be followed in India. It emphasised once again the practical benefits of a system of European learning.

Wood's Despatch argued that European learning would enable Indians to recognise* the advantages that flow from the expansion of trade and commerce and make them see the importance of developing country's resources. European learning would also improve the moral character of Indians. It would make them truthful and honest and thus supply the company with civil servants who could be trusted.

The British took several measures to uplift the Indian's educational system. They set up education departments of the government. Universities were established in Calcutta, Madras and Bombay. Upto the mid-19th century, the company's primary concern was to improve higher jeducation.

Afterwards, it also took steps to improve the condition of local schools.

In 1830s William Adam, a Scottish missionary, was given the charge by the Company to tour the districts of Bengal and Bihar. He was asked to report on the progress of education in local schools.

Adam found that the system of education in the local schools, known as pathshalas, was flexible. There were no fixed fee, no benches or chairs, no system of separate classes, no annual examinations, etc. In some places classes were held under a banyan tree, in other places in the corner of a village's shop or temple, or at the guru's home. Teaching was oral and the guru decided what to teach.

After the Company got Adam's report, it immediately took decision to improve the system of vernacular education.

It appointed a number of government pandits, each in charge of looking after four to five schools. The task of the pandit was to visit the pathshalas and try to improve the standard of teaching.

New routines and rules were introduced. Teaching was now to be based on textbooks and learning was to be tested through a system of annual examination. Students were asked to pay regular fee, attend regular classes, sit on fixed seats and obey the new rules of discipline.

Not only the British officials but several Indians too wanted to spread English education in the country. The Indians felt that Western education would help modernise India. Hence, they urged the British to open more and more schools, colleges and universities.

At the same time, there were other Indians too, such as Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore, who were dead against western education.

Mahatma Gandhi argued that coloured education created a sense of inferiority in the minds of Indians. It would enslave Indians. He felt that Indian languages ought to be the medium of teaching. Education in English crippled Indians, distanced them from their own social surroundings and made them strangers in their own land.

With the spread of nationalist movement, other thinkers also began thinking of a system of national education which would be different from that one set up by the British.

Rabindranath Tagore started Shantiniketan in 1901. He was of the view that creative learning could be encouraged only within a natural environment. So he chose to set up his school 100 kilometres away from Calcutta, in a rural setting. He saw it as an abode of peace, i.e. Shantiniketan, where living in harmony with nature, children could cultivate their natural creativity.

Linguist: One who knows and studies several languages.

Native: Original inhabitant of the land.

Orientalists: Those with a scholarly knowledge of the language and culture of Asia.

Munshi: A person who can read, write and teach Persian.

Vernacular: It refers to a local language or dialect as distinct from the standard language.

Minute: A short note on a subject.

Despatch: A message or report.

Pathshala: Local school.

Guru: Teacher.

1781 – A madrasa was set up in Calcutta.

1791 – The Hindu College was set up in Benaras.

1835 – The English Education Act was enacted.

1854 – Wood's Despatch was issued.

1901 – Rabindranath Tagore established Shantiniketan.