# **Colonial Educational Policy: Nation, Caste, Religion and Gender**

As colonial enterprise in India gained ground and the role of the British in India shifted from trader to coloniser, we see that a colonial policy of social reconstruction also began to take shape. Through ideas of racial superiority and economic doctrine, the colonial state exercised its power over the natives. But beyond ideas, it also undertook an education policy that would cement the ideological structure of colonial rule. In establishing the British educational enterprise in India, there was much debate and change in the strands of thought (Orientalists, Anglicists and the Evangelists) that would influence official policy on education in India. Key educational stages in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were defined both by the motivations behind the educational enterprise and the different forces at work that created new phases of transformational interchange. In the course of development of the educational policies, Indian society underwent great changes. A new class of Indian intellectuals emerged and they helped bring about reforms in the existing social structurehe attempt of this essay is to understand societal change and education in context of nation, caste, religion and gender.

**Background**

Traditionally, the *pathshala* was a traditional form of imparting education to children. It was a very flexible and variable institution that was closely tied to the means and needs of the village community. The home was also an important site for the passing on of values and skills. If historians wish to incorporate histories of women and lower castes, the home is a particularly important site. With the coming of colonial education policy, things changed and Orientalists, Anglicists and Evangelists were the three major schools of thought that influenced the colonial educational enterprise until the 1850s.

One of the most pivotal developments in colonial education policy was the Education Despatch of 1854 or as popularly known, Wood’s Despatch. Charles Wood, Secretary of State for India, issued his pivotal Education Dispatch of 1854 from his remote vantage point at the India Office in London. The dispatch signalled a more general government attempt to bring education to what it now deemed to be “the masses” across India. However, just three years later, 1857 presented the greatest shock and upheaval to the colonial state: the sepoy mutiny.

In many ways, the proposals of Wood's Despatch set a broad direction, without actually ensuring a wider spread of education. The first Indian Education Commission, popularly known as Hunter Commission, was set up in 1882 to examine why the aims of Wood’s dispatch of 1854, to spread education to “the masses”, had not been fulfilled. It was in the aftermath of the Hunter Commission that a large number of colleges and institutions of higher learning emerged. The idea that the state could not be solely responsible for spreading education was maintained throughout the period of colonial rule. It was always recognized that private institutions run on market principles would have to play a key role in spreading education. After the introduction of diarchy in 1919, education became a transferred subject and all the expenses were now to be met by the provincial councils.

**New schools, new structure, new roles**

The new policies in education implemented after the Wood’s Despatch of 1854 brought about a new colonial curriculum and with it, a new concept of literacy. With colonial control, a notion of the school as a building with a set of classrooms, each with the teacher at its head, was developed. As Nita Kumar points out, the school building also became a marker of the quality of education that was being imparted. The backwardness or otherwise of knowledge came to be judged as much from the quality of its infrastructure.

Kazi Shahidullah suggests that the orientation of education was turned away from knowledge useful to the community, towards the acquisition of education for its own sake. Literacy was now the only clear sign of knowledge and certification the only clear sign of literacy. Other skills necessary for work – manual skills for crafts and traditional business knowledge for trading communities-- had to form alternative institutions to pass on this knowledge.

The role of the teacher also changed from that of a “guru” to what Khrishna Kumar calls a “meek dictator”. Examinations set both a time limit within which this must be done and dictated a particular form in which learning was to take place. As a result, rather than deal creatively with their subjects, or teach according to the individual needs of students, teachers restricted their classroom activities to giving students competence in answering questions based on the texts and rote learning. For those above him in the hierarchies of the educational administration, the teacher was merely a meek underling. With respect to students, however, the power of the teacher was still absolute. He was the master of the classroom and over the fate of those who had to sit for exams. This was his dictatorial face.

Thus, the student could be seen as “pliant” or “obedient” to the will of his teacher. From the colonial archive, however, there are hints that the agenda of transformation of the receiver of education was not an unqualified success. For instance, colonial officials commonly complained that Indian students were prone to learn up their portions by rote for reproduction during the exams. Historian Sanjay Seth argues that this complaint reflected a frustration at the inability to achieve the full ideological agenda that the colonial state established for Indian students. This does not imply that the student was in any way 'free', or that the process of learning was engaging, or indeed that power did not operate through it. It simply marks the fact that the outcomes of the learning process were not exactly those that were intended by the colonial authorities.

**Missionary Education**

In the aftermath of 1857, the colonial state became increasingly keen to separate religion and education. At the same time, as has been mentioned, the colonial state was not prepared to put in the funds required to widen the coverage of education. Thus, post-1857, there was a tremendous expansion in the number of mission schools. In the United Provinces missions schools formed a large proportion of the aided schools and very quickly displaced the *pathshalas* and *maktabs.*

While the number of mission schools was increasing, missionaries often felt restricted by the needs of the curriculum established by the state and its regular inspections. According to historian Hayden Bellenoit, missionaries from the 1870s onwards were less and less convinced about their ability to re-mould students' beliefs based only on a curriculum of English literature, language and biblical studies. Students tended to be very flexible in their beliefs – agreeing to certain propositions about religion that were suggested, while never giving up their belief systems. Bellenoit suggests that as missionaries reconciled themselves to this, they also became less dismissive than colonial officials of the growing political consciousness of Indians. Many missionaries defended students from charges of sedition and disloyalty and criticized particular British colonial policies. Schools and hostels undertook micro-exercises in self-government and management, propagated civic ethos and engendered a form of religious plurality.

The dominant strain of thinking within Protestant missionary circles, by the 1880s, albeit in a non-codified form, was that of ‘Fulfilment theory’. It became a significant component of the missionary educational enterprise, and it came into its ultimate culmination in John Farquhar’s *The Crown of Hinduism*. Roughly put, Farquhar argued that Christianity had to complete the world’s remaining faiths in order to fall in accordance with the words of the Bible: ‘*I have come not to destroy but to fulfil*’. Thus educational institutions were sought out as a neutral conveyor of knowledge and religious instruction that would neither be agnostic nor fan the flames of Hindu-Muslim religious rivalry.

Thus, Bellenoit argues that mission education must be placed within the broader narrative of the development of Indian nationalism, more than the carrying out of an imperial agenda.

**The Dilemma of Islam**

Ensuring the health of religious tradition and relating to the colonial state were two major concerns for Muslim thinkers in the late 19th century. This is especially pertinent in the light of the Hindu-Urdu Controversy. A number of historians have pointed out that school textbooks were crucial to this communally polarized battle over language.

The Dar ul-Ulum madrasa established at Deoband in 1867 represented one kind of effort at dealing with the new situation through a new way of linking Islam and education. According to Barbara Metcalf, at a philosophical level, the madrasa at Deoband represented a turn away from rational inquiry and towards greater emphasis on the hadith(traditions about the life of the Prophet). Western sciences were ignored in the curriculum. This was out of an opposition to western forms of knowledge or English. It was, rather, rooted in the conviction that the traditions were the most important form of knowledge. Interpretation of the hadith were the key to good religious practice. The madrasa was designed to create ulama who were learned in scriptures and would spread its word accurately across the country.

The other major school founded in the late 19th century was the Muslim Anglo-Oriental College (MAOC) at Aligarh. At the level of education, the Aligarh movement represented an almost opposite response to the one seen at Deoband. If the Deobandis were concerned about the purity of Islamic traditions, Sayyid Ahmad Khan's major concern was the relations between the colonial state and the Muslim community. In particular, he was worried by the allegation that Muslims had been disloyal to the British in 1857. Through the establishment of the MAOC in 1875 he was trying to bridge the gap between Islam and the colonial state.

Since it was aided by the government, the MAOC followed the curriculum laid down by colonial authorities. To this was added Islamic theology. The key agenda for MAOC, however, was to foster individuals who would be comfortable in working with Europeans. The students who would study at MAOC, were to be government servants, clerks or lawyers. Thus, there was much emphasis placed on debating, ways of behaving and conversational skills.

Both the institutions – at Aligarh and Deoband – underwent numerous changes over the 20th century and had complicated relationships with nationalist and communalist tendencies. However, we can see how important education could become in the effort to preserve 'tradition' and also become 'modern'.

**Women and Education**

The colonial state from the Hunter Commission Report and before, highlighted the reluctance to educate women as an instance of the backwardness of Indians. At the same time, there was no systematic effort on the part of the colonial state to rectify this situation. The state considered this the domain of Indian men.

Partha Chatterjee has argued that in the colonial period, the public realm was described as male, materialistic and modern while the private realm emerged as a place of tradition and spirituality embodied in the woman of the house. This explains the fear that the figure of the modern educated woman provoked in most circles. She was usually portrayed as one who violated or mocked traditions. This led to many questions about whether women should be educated, how much education they should receive and what the content of it should be. One kind of response was to persuade families that traditional roles would not be affected. Mataji Tapaswini, in 1893 established The Mahakali Pathshala in Calcutta which taught a curriculum in traditional rites, beliefs and practical instruction in sewing and cooking.

Gail Minault studies the efforts by Muslim reformers to tackle the question of women's education. A new genre of novels emerged – like Maulana Thanawi's Bihishti Zevar or Nazir Ahmad's Mirat ul-Arus – which outlined the qualities of the educated woman. She was virtuous in being able to manage the house perfectly, but also best equipped to pass on a correct understanding of Islam to children of the family. Provision of education to women and the regeneration of Islam as a religion after 1857, came to be seen as linked. A large number of journalistic and literary forms emerged to reinforce this message.

From the late 19th century onwards, the idea of a companionate wife took root among Muslim and Hindu elites. Women were now to be sympathetic and able to contribute to the lives and careers of their husbands, rather than be simply in charge of the household. Particularly for Indian civil servants keen to climb the bureaucratic ladder, it was important that their wives were well educated and able to socialize with British officials on quasi-public occasions. This became another kind of impulse that contributed to the spread of formal education among women.

There were also some remarkable and courageous efforts to impart education which were organized by women. Pandita Ramabai opened schools for widows in Bombay and Poona. In 1911 Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, despite opposition by her relatives opened a school in Calcutta. This was intended for Muslim women who observed purdah, even though Begum Rokeya herself was a public and vocal opponent of the practice. Sister Subbalakshmi in Madras established a school for high-caste widows which would train them to become teachers. When she was widowed at 11 her parents decided to educate her. The opposition to this was so strong that they had to shift to Madras from their home in Tanjore district. As each of their stories demonstrates, the education of women remained a dangerous idea. Even by the end of the colonial period, female literacy rate stood at only 6 per cent. This is a low figure even if it was a huge leap from the 1.8 per cent according to the 1921 census.

**Caste and Education**

It might appear that as colonial education detached knowledge from the village community, it was making it more distant from caste prejudices. Pathshalas, for all their connection to the village community, were not attended by untouchables and had very few students from the lower castes. But the question remains, “Did the colonial state's idea of providing mass education extend it to the lower castes?”

In some ways, the new curriculum did detach education from some of its links with caste. For one, occupation-related skills that were once imparted at pathshalas – commercial or agricultural accounts, knowledge of sacred texts – were no longer offered at mainstream schools. Nita Kumar points out that this became a dilemma for the caste associations that were springing up through the 19th century. Groups like the Khatris and Agrawalas, which were consolidating their caste identities at around the same time, reacted by calling upon the community to carry out vocational and ethical training in the home (in addition to schools). One alternative that was often adopted was to set up institutions of their own that enshrined combinations of Western curriculum (for certification) and indigenous socialization. But these were inherently tense balancing acts between the stipulations of the colonial state and the traditions of the community.

The relationship of lower-caste movements to 'western', and 'modern' curriculum was also complicated. Shahidullah suggests that the reorganization of the pathshala in the 1870s resulted in a drop in the numbers of lower caste students attending schools. Nita Kumar finds something similar for low status Muslim weavers in Benares. The influence of a completely literacy-based instruction was seen as taking children away from their traditional work and religion. Educated children, it was felt, would not be prepared to engage in manual work. Thus, weavers relied on ways of instructing their children that lay outside the formal school system. Krishna Kumar points out that the exclusion of physical and manual exertion from education had a very specific effect in the Indian context. The hierarchy of intellectual work over manual labour translated was a reinforcement of caste prejudices even in a seemingly neutral curriculum.

Having said this, it cannot be doubted that modern curriculum in its very humanist content – literature, philosophy, etc. – was seen to be a liberating force by many of the leaders of caste movements. Indeed, there is evidence of a tireless and often lonely efforts being made by individual figures to establish schools and hostels for lower caste students. Eleanor Zelliot for Maharashtra and A Satyanarayana for Andhra trace some of the institutions that were established. Jotiba Phule, who established schools from 1852 to 1858. Bhaurao Patil (himself not even a matriculate) created a system of schools and hostels in Satara in the 1920s (Bhattacharya, 2002). In Andhra Pradesh, it was only after dyarchy and the coming to power of the Justice Party in Madras Presidency that a significant widening of educational opportunities for lower castes emerged. Even so, the efforts of the Adi Andhra Mahasabha were crucial in pressing for expansion.

Most studies agree that these effort did not result in widespread education among lower castes. Nevertheless, they did aid the emergence of a leadership within lower caste communities which could begin to articulate the oppression of lower castes and begin to organize them in future struggles. The modern, humanist education curriculum was a critical source for their visions of emancipation. Nevertheless, Krishna Kumar points out that by restricting their horizons to questions of employment, these movements often ignored struggles within the sphere of education per se. Alternative criteria, such as, the treatment of lower-caste children by teachers or the share of symbols representing the lower castes in curriculum were usually overlooked.

**Nationalism and Education**

Education was a ground upon which religious, caste and gender identities were all being reshaped. In some of these cases, caste for instance, there was an antagonism to the Congress which was seen as dominated by upper castes. In other cases, as with religious revivalism and gender, there was a more complicated relationship with nationalism and the colonial state. Here, we will consider the relationship between nationalism and education on two plains. First, we will examine how modern education might have been related to the emergence of nationalist thought. The second question is about the ways in which nationalists thought about education.

Both nationalists and colonialists felt that there was a relationship between the education being imparted to Indians and their nationalist aspirations. A traditional historiography, e.g., the work of Bruce McCully, views nationalism as emerging out of the exposure to western/modern ideas that education in English provided. This assumes that a modern education would automatically lead to the emergence of ideas of liberty and nationalism. Viswanathan disputes such a view in the Indian context. She highlights the fact that a humanist curriculum in India – with English literature and western philosophy, was created precisely in order to meet the needs of social control. Nationalism, she argues, did not arise out of such a curriculum. Rather, it arose out of the gap between the promise of upward mobility through education and the limited opportunities that were on offer.

Krishna Kumar argues that in their own efforts the elite came to place the classes below them in much the same way as they were placed below the British. Their discourse about the other castes and classes was posed in the language of uplift and reform much as the British saw themselves as uplifting and reforming elite Indians. This was often opposed, by caste groups who would call upon western ideas of equality for very different purposes. Revivalist groups might portray different narratives of nationalism – rooted, e.g., in civilizational greatness. These too can be seen as emerging out of engagement with legacies of Western Romanticism. Perhaps nationalism is best viewed as an ideology that emerged to cope with these cracks and convergences.

A landmark nationalist initiative was the National Council of Education (NCE), set up during the Swadeshi agitation in early 20th century Bengal. This was a series of schools, inspired by the ideals of that movement, that chose to link up and create a system of schooling that was not controlled by the colonial state. The curriculum offered in these schools, however, was not very different from that of Calcutta University. The same subjects were taught, but slightly greater emphasis was placed upon nationalist symbols and the development of physical strength and technical ability (the lack of these was often an accusation made by nationalists). However, the success of these 'national' schools tended to vary. Affiliations to the NCE would rise during times of agitation and popular movements. However, the number of affiliated schools would often drop soon after.

There were many nationalist leaders who were concerned about the question of education. Most significant, perhaps was G. K. Gokhale. He was an early voice in support of education for women and lower castes. In 1910, he unsuccessfully introduced a resolution in the Imperial Legislative Council that elementary education should be made free and compulsory. Maharaja Sayaji Rao of Baroda had already made this a law in his princely state. Lajpat Rai was another figure who was involved with university education and broader questions of the spread of knowledge.

These were all important struggles. However, Krishna Kumar suggests that their key limitation was that they were unable to articulate an alternative pedagogical framework. At the root of this inability was an acceptance of the principles upon which British-prescribed curriculum was based. There was a widespread idea that it was the superior scientific advancement of the West that had led to its conquest of India. Nationalist criticism, as a result tended to be related to the lack of Indian content in courses, or the medium of instruction, rather than the pedagogical principles upon which the school was constructed.

Another noted figure is Rabindranath Tagore whose project at Santiniketan and Sriniketan, Krishna Kumar argues, was based on a particular notion of childhood. For Tagore, childhood represented the pure urge to explore. Tagore was also personally fascinated by science as a pursuit of truth for its own sake. The unique curriculum at these schools wove together tribal and folk traditions with knowledge of the sciences. The idea was to self-consciously nurture a universal impulse among students – an appreciation of a variety of cultures and knowledge systems. Rather than viewing it as an attempt at the revival of Indian culture, Krishna Kumar suggests that it had more to do with a modernist project of a search for a universal model of civilized man.

Gandhi’s ideas on the question of education underwent numerous shifts. His early appeal, during the Non-Cooperation Movement, was for the introduction of religion into curriculum. By the late 1930s, he had a more comprehensive vision which was enshrined in the plan for what came to be called Basic Education. This plan was based on a model of the self-sufficient community. Gandhi envisaged students having to take up a craft and producing goods that would enable the financial (and consequently intellectual) autonomy of the school.

Kumar, in his analysis of Gandhi’s pedagogical programme, suggests that the introduction of productive handicrafts was a unique and innovative way to address caste inequality. He points out that all handicrafts were traditionally made only by lower castes. In transforming what constituted useful/appropriate knowledge in this fashion Gandhi aimed to alter the meaning of education. With the parameters of success so re-defined, children from the lower castes could ‘succeed’ more easily. With respect to the teacher too, Gandhi’s framework was the first to recognize the degradation of the status of the teacher in the colonial period and chalk out a mechanism, outside the textbook-examination nexus for the initiative of the teacher.

What is clear is that the dominating concern was an attempt to re-negotiate some of the central conflicts thrown up by colonial rule and create a different way of being modern.

**Conclusion**

Education was a terrain of many contestations. Most of these revolved around the questions posed by modernity. The systems of standardization and accreditation that the colonial state introduced wiped out a traditional form of education. Exams, prescribed curricula and inspections were attempts to control what was taught in schools. However, this was not always successful. Students would cram for exams rather than internalize the ethos of empire. But modernity, nevertheless, posed difficult questions about what their own culture and tradition should be. Thinking about the content and form of education was one of the ways in which these questions were answered. Struggles over various kinds of identity – caste, religion, gender and nation – were fought through education. However, it is also noted that education did not translate into pedagogy - how instruction should be put imparted. Nita Kumar argues that many of the failures in the realm of education can be traced back to this neglect of pedagogy and the related failure “[that] adults did not discover the child at the appropriate time”.