
Women's Education in Bihar: Policy, Issues and Challenges

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Abstract

The article explores the historical development of education in colonial India during British rule, highlighting the roles of various educational institutions and the East India Company. It covers the evolution of the company's stance on education, the impact of the Charter Act of 1813, and the controversies surrounding language and curriculum choices. The article also discusses the influence of reform movements and the role of missionaries. It concludes with the transformative effect of Lord Harding's declaration in 1844, emphasizing the importance of English knowledge for government positions, and the subsequent shift in public perception towards English education. The government's initiatives in both Western and vernacular education are outlined, illustrating the changing dynamics of education in colonial India.

Keywords

Colonial India, British rule, East India Company, Charter Act of 1813, Educational institutions, Language controversy, Curriculum choices, Missionaries, Lord Harding's declaration, English education, Vernacular education, Reform movements, Government initiatives, Western education, Social perceptions

The advent of the British rule in Indian saw four types of educational institutions engaged in the pursuit of imparting education in this country: Sanskrit *Chatushpathi* or *Tol*, *Pathshala*, *Madarsa* and *Maktab*. The *Tol* and *Madarsa* were institutions of higher learning in Sanskrit, and Persian and Arabic, respectively while *Pathshala* and *Maktab* were schools of elementary education.*

East India Company and Education in India

The East India Company was purely a commercial concern at its inception and very naturally it did not consider that promotion of education in India was any of its concern. Not unlike all commercial companies then or since, it was primarily interested in the profits that it derived from its trade and if people desired education they must make the best of what they could. Further, if any territorial acquisition was made it was more in the nature of investments of capital for the future than in laying the foundation of future imperial domination. But in the latter half of the 18th century with the grant of the *Diwani* in 1765 ruling power was conferred upon the company and it was now obliged to pay heed to education and its encouragement among its subjects[†].

* A.N.Basu (ed.) *Indian Education in Parliamentary Papers: part I 1832*, Bombay, 1952, p.12.

† J.S.Jha, *Beginning of Institutions in Mithila*, Patna, 1986, p. 14.

This was brought about only by a radical change in the circumstances fortuitous as they were. The period from 1765 to middle of the 19th century though mainly marked by the expansion of the British Empire in India and consolidation of the British administrative system as a natural sequel to it, witnessed also some significant measures on the part of the East India Company's Government to encourage education in this country by extending patronage to it in different ways.

For sometimes, however, the attitude of the East India Company's Government towards Indian educational and social matters was one of indifference. This was probably because a state system of education was then absent in England, and state interference was not relished by the English people. The same analogy was adopted in India too. Moreover, the administrators of the East India Company clearly realized that attempts at interference in the educational or religious life of the people by rulers belonging to an alien faith were bound to provoke strong opposition and shake the foundations of its rule. As a natural consequence of this policy, it refrained from developing an educational policy of its own. But needs of administration soon compelled it to take some interest in education.

Various reform movements had begun making headway in England by the third quarter of the eighteenth century. Undoubtedly, this must have also influenced some officers of the Company in India. This led to attempts being made for the revival of India's past culture and traditions. Warren Hastings established the Calcutta Madarsa in 1781 with the intention to promote the study of the Arabic and Persian language and of Muslim Law with a view to supplying officers for the Courts of Justice. In 1784 was founded the Asiatic Society of Bengal with the object of inquiring into "the history and antiquities, the natural productions, sciences, and literature of Asia"[‡]. Hastings encouraged Charles Wilkins to study Sanskrit and Wilkins published a translation of the *Hitopadesh* in 1787. In 1791 Jonathan Duncan, the British Resident at Benaras established the Hindu College there, "for the preservation and cultivation of the Laws Literature and Religion of that Nation, at this centre of their faith and the common resort of all their tribes"[§]. The Company also respected the endowment which was made earlier to educational institutions, and the Permanent Settlement of 1793 recognized the rent-free grants of land enjoyed by educational institutions^{**}.

Despite the efforts of individual officers, the East India Company had not yet come to regard the promotion of education as part of its duty. Until now the imperative needs of administration and the desire to promote friendly feelings towards the rulers were the motive force behind the educational activities of the company. At the time of the Charter Act of 1793 Charles Grant wrote a treatise on the "State of Society among the Asiatic Subjects of Great Britain" in which he strongly pleaded for the introduction of sound European knowledge and especially the elevating truths of the Christian faith. He influenced Wilberforce, who moved in the House of Commons that it was the duty of the

[‡] *Ibid*, p.15.

[§] *Ibid*.p.17.

^{**} *Ibid*, p.18.

British Government to send Chaplains and school masters to India. This was opposed tooth and nail by the Court of Directors. They urged that “the Hindus had as good a system of faith and of morals as most people and that it would be madness to attempt their conversion or give them any more learning or any other description of learning than what they already possessed”^{††}. Wilberforce’s resolution was negated, especially when Randle Jackson, a member of the parliament remarked, “we have lost our colonies in America by imparting our education there, we need not do so in India too”^{‡‡}.

The policy of non-intervention in educational matters continued. The interest of the Government in Indian education depended as before on individual officers. Sometimes the officers on their own initiative moved the Government for establishing schools or colleges in certain localities under their jurisdiction. Lord Minto’s Minute of the 6 March 1811 is another instance on the subject. He accordingly recommended the establishment of Sanskrit colleges at Bhaur (in Tirhut) and Nadia (in Bengal) and Madarsas at Bhagalpur, Jaunpur and at some other important places in the ceded and conquered districts.

Before any action could be taken on Minto’s Minute the company’s charter came again for renewal in 1813. The general consensus of opinion was in favor of the officials of the company who, as a matter of political wisdom, wanted the company to undertake educational work for the natives of the land. A resolution was, therefore, moved and passed in the House of Commons in 1813. It assigned educational responsibility to the company in the following words “.....a sum of not less than one lac of rupees in each year will be set apart and applied to the revival and improvement of literature and encouragement by the learned natives of India and for the introduction and promotion of the knowledge of science among the inhabitants of the British territories in India.....”^{§§} The resolution after being passed was incorporated in the Company’s Charter Act of 1813.

Another striking point about the Charter Act of 1813 was that it opened the doors of India for free and unfettered activities of the missionaries in the field of proselytization. The best tool for this work, they thought was education and so started opening schools. In 1816 the Christian Missionaries opened a school^{***} for the children of the Indian converts. The children were taught to read and write and commit to memory selections from the Gospels translated into Hindustani by the Catholic clergy. The school was under the supervision of a Christian lay teacher, and it had twenty students on its roll. The missionaries also opened one such school at Digha (Patna) in 1819^{†††}.

However, nothing substantial was done. In 1823 a Committee of Public Instruction was formed by Adam, temporary successor of Marquis of Hastings: from among the civil servants, with Horace Hayman Wilson as its Secretary, to supervise the expenditure of the sum sanctioned according to the charter of 1813. But a new difficulty soon arose, as to

^{††} H. Sharp, *Selections from the Educational Records, Part I, 1781-1839*, Calcutta, 1965, p. 17.

^{‡‡} Syed Mahmood, *History of English Education in India*, Delhi, 1981, pp. 2-3.

^{§§} H. Sharp, *op.cit.* p. 22.

^{***} This was the first school to be opened by Christian Missionaries in Bihar, cf., J.S.Jha, *op.cit.* p.56.

^{†††} K.K. Dutta, *Unpublished Correspondence of Judge and Magistrate of Patna*, Patna, 1978, p. 318.

whether the medium of instruction was to be English or vernacular and if the type of education was to be classical, oriental or modern and western in content.

After a fierce controversy which raged for some years between the Orientalists; who advocated the oriental medium of education, and the Anglicists who urged the introduction of Western education, the decision was made in favor of the Anglicists in 1835.

Indigenous System of Education

The impact of the educational policy of the Government began to be felt soon. Institutions for Western education, set up by the Government, began to spring up at different places throughout the British dominion. In Bihar, schools were established at several places. In these schools English, Urdu and Hindi (*Nagri*) were taught and accordingly the schools were divided into three departments. There were four classes in both English and Urdu departments but only two in Hindi department. Boys were taught to read and write. The subjects taught were English, Mathematics, History, Geography, Poetry etc. Two types of examinations were held: public examination and school examination. The students were examined at certain intervals by the headmaster and once a year the public examination was held. Examinations were both, oral as well as written. The examination result was announced immediately and prizes were awarded to the successful candidates.^{†††}

Thus, efforts were made to establish schools at various places to promote English education among the natives, but the schools did not progress much. People did not pay much importance to English education, as they thought that it would only make their children clerks in the Government offices. While the common folk thought that the British, after giving them English education, would take them to England and make them their slaves. Besides, the caste and class restrictions also proved a big hindrance to the progress of these schools. Both, the socially higher and the lower-class students were made to sit together. This was not liked by some of the higher caste people, and they withdrew their sons from these schools. Those who wanted their sons to know English arranged for private tuitions in English for them.^{§§§}

Another factor which affected the growth and development of the schools was the resumption proceedings (takeover of the Zamindaries) on the part of the Government which impoverished several big hereditary landlords. The people lost all confidence in the security of their property and so looked suspiciously at every activity of the Government. As for example, Raja Mitrajit Singh of Tikari refused to even pay the subscription for the PatnaSchool.^{****}

But Lord Harding's declaration of 1844 turned the tables in favor of English education. According to the declaration, in all Government appointments preference will be given to persons with knowledge of English. As a result of this declaration, the Council

^{†††} 'From Secretary of the Local Committee to the Secretary of the General Committee' dated 18 March, 1837, c.f. J.S. Jha, *Education in Bihar*, P.U., Patna, 1976, p.34.

^{§§§} Extract of a letter from the Headmaster, PatnaSchool of the General Council of Public Instruction, dated, 14 August, 1835, c.f. J.S.Jha, *op.cit.*p.56.

^{****} Mr. Cliff's letter to C.E. Traveled (G.C.P.I), 14 August, 1835, H.Sharp.*op.cit.* p.45.

of Education in Calcutta was authorized to conduct competitive examination every year for selecting suitable persons for public posts and successful candidates were arranged in order of merit. The resolution further prescribed that even for lower posts under Government, preference would be given to those who could read and write English. The lingering prejudices against learning English vanished for ever; the English education began to be valued in terms of livelihood.

It thus became quite evident to the people that knowledge of English was a necessity and after Bentinck's resolution the educational grant was spent mainly on Western education. The General Committee adopted a policy of opening an English school at the headquarters of each district and of developing a few of the more progressive of these to the status of college.

The Government also took steps for the promotion of vernacular education, the Governor General determined "to sanction the formation of village schools in several districts of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in which sound and useful instruction may be imparted in the vernacular language." The schools were to be established in the principal towns of each district. Accordingly vernacular schools were established at Arrah, Buxar, Sasaram, Gaya, Saran, Champaran, Bhagalpur, Purnea and several other places. Urdu, Hindi, Arithmetic and Geography were taught in these schools.^{††††}

The progress made by these schools was far from satisfactory. The absence of teaching of *Persian* and *Arabic* in these institutions was an important cause for their unpopularity and subsequent closure of many of them.^{††††}

Two factors exercised a decisive influence upon the educational policy in our country at this time. Firstly the evaluation of political theory in England had by that time brought about the gradual acceptance of the doctrine that popular education was one of the duties of the Government. Secondly, the adoption of the concept of State education coincided with a great refashioning of the educational structure in India. This action so far reaching in its consequences was both natural and desirable. Some thirty years of English education, however beneficial, had not failed to reveal various defects in the system, or to elicit, from time to time, proposals for their remedy. Missionary and privately maintained institutions, it was intimated, ought to receive material support from the Government through some form of grants in aid. At the same time the Government would seek to broaden the base of the educational pyramid by making provision for a much greater extension of vernacular schooling than hitherto.

As time wore on these suggestions crystallized into a fairly definite programme which was the famous educational dispatch (Wood's Despatch) of 19 July, 1854. It was drafted by Sir Charles Wood, President of the Board of Control and forwarded by the Court of Directors to the Governor-General of India in Council, it contained highly

^{††††} 'An extract of a letter from the Deputy Collector, Maldah to Commissioner's of Revenue', Bhagalpur dated 26 March, 1845, cf. Syed Mehmood, *op.cit.*p.73.

^{††††} 'An extract of a letter from Collector of Monghyr to the Commissioner of Revenue', Bhagalpur, dated 12 March, 1847, cf. Syed Mehmood, *op.cit.*p.74.

significant recommendations. It continued to be the basis of the system of education in our country for long.

The Despatch touched almost all the important points bearing on the subject. It began with the view of the Court of Directors regarding the objects of education and ended with the question of employment of educated “natives” in public offices. It also critically reviewed in brief the progress of education in the several presidencies, and made important recommendations. The Despatch received recommendation from the authorities on Indian education. For the first time the British Parliament made an authoritative declaration in a very unambiguous language that education of the people (of India) was one of the principal duties of the Government, and that it was no longer to remain confined to the upper classes. The theory of downward filtration which had so long been the guiding principle of the authorities and found quite infructuous was discarded at least in principle. Several measures were suggested not only for promoting the mass education but also for preserving the indigenous educational institutions. By the system of grant-in-aid, it was intended as a long-term plant to transfer even the existing government schools and colleges to the management and control of the public and thus limiting the departmental activities to supervision work only. The educational funds were no longer to be spent on only a few government institutions but they were to be utilized in producing a number of simultaneously organized institutions. Under the new system endeavours were to be made to take both Government and indigenous institutions side by side and make them work as partners in the same concern and not as rivals.

The historical narrative provided sheds light on the evolution of the education system in colonial India under British rule, particularly during the East India Company era and the subsequent efforts to define and structure the educational landscape. The East India Company, originally a commercial entity primarily interested in trade profits, found itself compelled to consider education with the grant of the Diwani in 1765, which conferred ruling power upon the company. Despite its initial indifference, the company's government began to take an interest in education due to administrative needs and the desire to maintain friendly relations with the Indian population. The Charter Act of 1813 marked a significant turning point, as it assigned educational responsibilities to the East India Company. A sum of money was allocated for the "revival and improvement of literature" and the promotion of scientific knowledge. This marked a departure from the company's earlier disinterest in education. The Act also opened the doors for missionary activities in India, allowing them to engage in educational work and proselytization. The debate over the medium of instruction (English or vernacular) and the content of education (classical, oriental, or Western) became prominent during this period. After a fierce controversy, the Anglicists, who advocated Western education in English, prevailed in 1835. This decision had far-reaching consequences for the future of education in India. Efforts were made to

establish schools at various places, including Bihar, to promote English education among the natives. However, these schools faced challenges. Some people viewed English education as a means to produce clerks for government offices, while others feared that it might lead to enslavement by the British. Caste and class restrictions also hindered the progress of these schools. The resumption proceedings by the British Government, involving the takeover of Zamindaries, further strained relations with the local population. Lord Harding's declaration in 1844, stating that knowledge of English would be a preference in government appointments, shifted perceptions. English education began to be valued as a necessity for livelihood, and the government's educational grant was increasingly directed towards Western education. The General Committee adopted a policy of establishing English schools in the headquarters of each district and elevating some of them to the status of colleges. Simultaneously, steps were taken to promote vernacular education in Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa. Vernacular schools were established in various towns, teaching subjects like Urdu, Hindi, Arithmetic, and Geography. In conclusion, the colonial era in India witnessed a complex transformation of the education system. From the East India Company's initial indifference to the Charter Act of 1813 and subsequent developments, education became a key aspect of British governance. The debates over language and curriculum, the influence of missionaries, and the changing perceptions towards English education all played crucial roles in shaping the trajectory of education in colonial India. The policies and decisions made during this period had a lasting impact on the educational landscape, leaving a legacy that continued to influence India's educational journey after gaining independence.