

Chapter I

**Colonial Educational Policies and Inequality in India**

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**Abstract**

This article critically examines the role of colonial educational policies in perpetuating and deepening systemic inequalities in Indian society. It argues that education in colonial India was a tool for consolidating the socio-economic and political hegemony of both the British colonizers and privileged sections of Indian society, particularly the upper castes. The British designed education policies to serve their administrative and economic interests, emphasizing English education for upper-caste elites while neglecting mass education for marginalized groups such as Dalits, tribals, and women. Introduction of Sanskritized Hindi, disregard for vernacular languages, and the exclusion of technical and vocational training further marginalized lower castes and artisan communities. Moreover, economic dislocation caused by colonial policies forced lower sections of society to abandon education in favour of subsistence labour. The article also highlights how upper castes actively resisted mass education to preserve their dominance, exacerbating educational disparities. These entrenched inequalities, shaped by colonial frameworks, persisted into the post-independence era, influencing national education policies that largely ignored the socio-economic realities of the masses.

**Keywords:** *Colonial education, educational inequality, Vernacular languages, Downward*

*filtration, technical education, colonial educational, policies and inequality*

### **Colonial Educational Policies and Inequality**

Education is more than merely the transmission of knowledge. Its development raises critical questions concerning various aspects, such as the curriculum content, the language of instruction, and the segments of society that will have access to education. These aspects of education are determined by existing socio-economic and political order and those who remain in power. Basically, the ruling classes then use the tool of education, by determining the different aspects of education, to preserve the existing socio-economic and political order which also assures their hegemony and dominance. Satyanarayana argues that the spread of education involves notion of conflict and competition inherent in the process of acquisition and dissemination of knowledge (Bhattacharya 2002: 52). In colonial India, the development of education was not solely focused on imparting knowledge but also aimed at maintaining the dominance of the social groups in power. There were two terrains of contestation in colonial India in the development of education (Bhattacharya 1998: 3). One was between the colonizers and the colonized and the other one was between the privileged and the under-privileged sections of the Indian society. The contestation over development of education itself implies that those who were in the power wanted to preserve the existing socio-economic and political order and their hegemony through education.

The British colonizers wanted to introduce specific type of education, which was to be given to certain sections of Indian society, to preserve their dominant position in the colony and also to fulfill their political and economic interest. B.R. Tomlinson rightly argues that “the expansion of British political power in India was accompanied by the control, transmission, production and reproduction of system of knowledge” (Bhattacharya 1998: 323). The nature of colonial education and the targeted sections to whom they wanted to educate, changed with their changing political and economic interests. For instance, when Britain became industrialized and they needed markets for their industrial goods, they emphasized on a form of education which could generate tastes for British goods among Indians (Bhattacharya 1998: 39). On the other hands, the privileged sections of Indian society wanted to preserve their hegemony in the society which they already felt threatened with the arrival of Britishers, who now replaced these upper castes as the dominant power in the subcontinent.

They wanted to control the content of education and to limit the expansion of education to preserve their hegemony over lower sections of the society; Dalits and lower castes. They vehemently opposed any British policy which tried to change the status quo by providing education to the masses.

The unequal access to education in colonial India, divided along lines of caste, tribe, class, and gender, served to reinforce systemic hierarchies. This deliberate stratification perpetuated the dominance of privileged groups, ensuring their social and political control while marginalizing others. Such disparities were instrumental in maintaining the broader structure of colonial hegemony. This broader setting was the overarching cultural hegemony of the colonizers of the imperial metropolis over the colonized societies (Bhattacharya 2002: 3). So, it was the first contestation, colonizers vs. colonized, which determined the nature of the second contestation, privileged vs. marginalized, to a larger extent. Positioned within the unequal dynamic of metropolitan-colonial relations, the pre-existing inequalities within indigenous societies—particularly regarding access to education—were not only perpetuated but often deepened. The colonial framework amplified these disparities, leveraging existing hierarchies to consolidate power and marginalize disprivileged groups further, thereby entrenching systemic inequities (Bhattacharya 2002: 7). So, to understand how old inequalities were reinforced and new one came into being in the educational development of colonial era, the British educational policies should be analyzed thoroughly in different contexts. At the same time, the role of upper castes in isolating lower castes from colonial educational development and from the avenue of employment it created should not be undermined.

The content of Western education and the language of instruction played a major role in depriving masses from the western education. The English education did not provide any technical or skill enhancing education which could help lower sections in honing their skills and earning livelihood, instead they provided particular type of education which was aimed at making Indians good clerks who could help the company in lower administration. Also, these government jobs were monopolized by the upper Hindu castes. So, for the lower castes, English education proved irrelevant as it didn't provide them livelihood. The traditional artisan castes and lower castes sought the development of vocational and technical education. For instance, caste association of *Kamsali* (Goldsmith), the

*Viswabrahmana Mahasabha*, pleaded the government to encourage the traditional crafts and technical education among their community member in Andhra. But the Colonial state preferred and largely encouraged non-technical education (Bhattacharya 2002: 59).

In most cases, Hindi was chosen as the medium of instruction. The Hindi used as a medium of instruction was not a part of popular language but was very sanskritized Hindi and poor sections were alien to this. So, providing education in a language known to few, instead of using popular language further made English education unpopular among masses (Bhattacharya 1998: 207). As Joseph Bara has argued, even *Mundas* and *Oraons* tribe in Chhotanagpur region were taught in Hindi which was as alien as English to them (Bhattacharya 2002: 130). Textbooks were printed in Hindi as colonial government found *lok bhashas* uncultivated, barbarous and rude and unsuited to the medium of instruction. So, the new shisht bhasha was used which also didn't fulfill the cultural needs of the masses. This led to the strengthening of cultural hegemony of English educated upper castes who started speaking shisht bhasha to make their identity distinct from the rest of the masses (Bhattacharya, 1998: 208). Racial dimension was also added to the question of language. Britishers considered that only those who are proficient in Sanskrit and Hindi can be proficient in English language as they belong to Aryan race and are superior than rest of the Indians. The colonial education policy not just reinforced pre-existing inequalities, they also added other inequalities on the racial line in the Indian society. The racism was also evident when it came to appointments, promotion, and monetary incentives. British teachers were paid more than their Indian counterparts (Bhattacharya, 1998: 292).

The lower sections of the society were also deprived of western education because of economic policies of the British rule which led to the destruction of village-based handicraft. There was dislocation of traditional occupation which had severe economic consequences on the lower sections. There was a gradual shift of the artisan communities from non-agricultural to agricultural sector. They were forced to migrate to remote parts of countryside which had no education facilities. Also, English education didn't provide any economic incentive after getting educated to lower sections. At the same time, these sections of society used children to assist in their field work. To them, agriculture

and wage labour, rather than education provided the immediate alternative for meeting the challenge of the loss of livelihood based on handicraft. Therefore, by the very logic of their socio-economic situation, the lower caste group were forced out of the modern education system (Bhattacharya, 2002: 62).

On the one hand, English education proved irrelevant and became unpopular among marginalized group as there was no incentive for getting educated. On the other hand, for privileged sections of the society, who had long tradition of learning, English education became a good tool to further reinforce their hegemonic position in society. These sections further monopolized the government jobs and got employed in the lower rung of the company's administration in huge number. So, traditional hierarchy and inequalities in Indian societies were reinforced by secular modern education. Satyanarayan in his study on Andhra has shown how the traditional or ritual superiority of upper castes of Andhra, Brahmins, *Raju (Kshatriya)*, *Komati* (trading communities), were reinforced in the secular hierarchy of the modern period through the instrument of English education (Bhattacharya, 2002: 57).

One must understand that the content of education and the language of instruction which Britishers decided favored upper castes not by coincidence, but British themselves had elitist biases in providing education. James Mill categorized certain Indian section such as landlords, Brahmin, merchants as "upper class" whom Britishers wanted to educate (Bhushan, 2012). Politically, this policy makes sense. As by educating upper castes and employing them in government services, they incorporated erstwhile ruling sections of society in administration, albeit in lower positions. This clearly implies that British education program was not really to educate Indians but was aimed at preserving their own hegemony, which they did by educating upper castes and incorporating them and at fulfilling their interests which they did by introducing English education to produce tastes for European tastes in Indians. And Gandhi knew that the British were using education for their own political purposes. According to Gandhi, the colonial system of education did not meet the requirements of the country. He argued that English has created a permanent bar between the highly educated few and the uneducated many (Bhattacharya, 1998: 291).

The British provided a particular kind of education. They avoided giving any such education which didn't serve their purpose of preserving their hegemony and fulfilling their interests. This attitude can be seen in their unwillingness to provide technical education to the Indians. Britishers argued that Indians stressed on culture over artisanal skills i.e.; gentlemen would not soil their hands in manual work. But this assumption seems problematic given the evidence of Brahmins who were working as coolie in Gujarat in the eighteenth century (Bhushan, 2012). The main reason behind not giving technical education was not the attitude of Indians but was British unwillingness to provide such education as it was of no worth for them. Tomlinson has argued that the government was unwilling, for the most part, to see education as a way of technical knowledge beyond what was required for their interests (Bhattacharya, 1998: 327).

The British were not interested in educating lower sections of the society can be validated by their policy of downward filtration. They decided to educate upper castes and assumed them to percolate knowledge to the lower section of society. This policy failed miserably, as instead of transmitting knowledge to the lower sections of the society, upper castes monopolized not just institutions of education but also the avenue of employment. Although the role of upper caste in failure of this policy should be admitted, the colonial rule must be held responsible for bringing such policies at the first place. The colonial state brought this policy of downward filtration because they wanted to spend only that much of money which was required to strengthen their position in the society. Their policy of not giving education to lower castes directly helped upper castes monopolize the education system and hence helped them in strengthening their hegemonic position in the society. Clearly, the British education program of downward filtration reinforced traditional hierarchy and inequalities in Indian society.

The British education policies should be analyzed in relation with political and economic order of the day. In the second half of the eighteenth century when the company was still in the process of becoming dominant power in the subcontinent, the colonialists decided to give funds for higher education of indigenous learning. They encouraged the learning of classical languages. In pre-colonial indigenous learning system, lower castes were given practical knowledge to learn skills and

crafts in vernacular languages. The British policy of funding education in classical languages only favored upper caste while the indigenous institutions of learning for masses gradually withered away due to lack of funds. They wanted to reconcile upper sections of society through education. But their education policy, particularly the content of education and the language of instruction, started to change in 1830s as Britain became hub of industrial goods. They wanted to use education as a tool to generate tastes for British goods among Indians. So, they emphasized on English education. Also, at this point of time, the company had huge territories under their control and administering them became a costly affair. So, they decided to cut the cost of administration by incorporating Indians in lower rung of administration. And for that they needed English educated Indians. This was the time when Evangelicals also started influencing policies in Britain. Evangelicals, unlike Orientalist, saw nothing valuable in Indian culture and argued that it was the duty of British state to civilize Indians through the introduction of English education. This evangelical discourse of civilizing Indians hence needed colonial rule to formulate the policy of mass education. So, even though they provided very less funds for mass education, they just kept repeating the rhetoric of mass education to legitimize their rule over India which they claimed was essential to civilize Indians.

The policy of mass education was just a rhetoric can be easily seen in their efforts to educate masses- dalits, tribal and women. Wood's Despatch of 1854 recommended the policy of mass education. It passed a resolution that there would be no discrimination in providing education on the ground of class, caste or gender. But the actual efforts which were put in by the state to educate masses was very minimal. For instance, just about four per cent of total education expense was used to provide education to women (Bhattacharya, 2001: xii). Certainly, the opposition of upper castes against mass education was a big obstacle but it is also true that Britishers succumbed to upper castes because it was in their political interest as these sections helped colonial rule in grass root administration. More so, they themselves were never interested in spending money on mass education in reality. Their negligence towards mass education can also be seen in their rejection of William Adam's recommendations. William Adam conducted a survey and recommended establishing chain

of schools in villages to provide mass elementary education in vernacular languages but the company officials rejected his proposal as it needed huge financial investments.

Joseph Bara in his article “Tribal Education, the Colonial State and Christian Missionaries: Chhotanagpur 1839-1870” has demonstrated how colonial government invested very little for tribal education and it was missionaries who introduced western education among tribals with their own vested interest of converting them into Christianity (Bara, 2005). In the case of tribals, as Chinna Rao Yagati has shown, the colonial government took many steps. For instance, first they introduced “Rate Schools”. Then they started separate school as per recommendation of Education Commission of 1884 (Yagati, 2002). Later, they also started Labour schools. However they started many policies, most of them just remained in theory as it was evident in the educational progress of dalits which was very slow. Surely one big obstacle was upper caste opposition, but British rule also didn’t provide much funds to carry out these policies on the ground. In case of dalits as well, Yagati writes, it was Christian missionaries which did huge efforts in educating them.

Similarly, as Bhattacharya argues, the colonial rule gave very low priority to women’s education. The fund provided for women’s education was very minimal and again it was Christian missionaries who actively engaged in educating women and establishing educational institutions for them. The colonial government spent just about four per cent of total education expenditure on women’s education. While the role of British rule should be in the center stage for analyzing the extent of inequality in Indian society with the development of education in colonial era, the role of upper castes should not be undermined as well. From pre-colonial times these classes had created such education system which favored existing social formation and their hegemony. These classes not just tried to continue giving such education, they also tried to limit the expansion of mass education in colonial education system. Sumanta Banerjee has shown how Bengali western educated elite class engaged in educating labour and peasants. Laborers were mentally oriented towards the type of work that they were expected to do through education. It was an instrument to facilitate the integration of laborers into the logic of the prevalent economic system and bring about conformity to it (Sabyasachi, 1998: 8). Satyanarayan has demonstrated how upper castes opposed against any colonial policy which



avored mass education. He argues that children of dalits were made to sit in separate sections or outside the class. dalits were also very much insecure with upper class antagonism towards their education. Hence, even after opening of separate school, dalits feared going there. As they thought this might annoy upper castes over whom they were economically dependent (Sabyasachi, 2002: 76). Poromesh Acharya shows that the attitudes of Hindu *Bhadraloks* of Bengal towards the primary education of the masses were not sympathetic (Bhattacharya, 1998: 8).

In conclusion, it can be argued that the traditional inequalities and the colonial framework of education and its inequalities became so internalized in the Indian society that it could be seen in post-independence discussion over national education policies. For instance, poverty and hunger were not taken into consideration while formulating mass education. The content of education which was to be imparted to masses was still more or less irrelevant to the masses as it didn't really take their economic reality into consideration.

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