



Education Policy under the British East India Company and Its Transformative Impact on the Indian Subcontinent: An Analytical Review

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Abstract

This study attempts to rigorously analyze the education initiatives enacted by the British East India Company (1757-1857) in the Indian subcontinent, emphasizing its characteristics, underlying motivations, and transformative effects. The primary issue examined is the intricate character of colonial education, which fluctuated between endorsing Oriental learning and fostering Western knowledge, ultimately shaping India's socio-political landscape. This research aims to examine significant educational initiatives—from Warren Hastings' founding of the Calcutta Madrasa to the introduction of Macaulay's English education system and the subsequent Woods Dispatch—and assess their enduring impacts on Indian society, governance, and cultural identity. The study utilizes a qualitative methodology based on historical analysis, using research records, texts, scholarly publications, and current accounts to explore the development of educational policies throughout Company rule. The findings indicate that initial initiatives to advance indigenous languages and research, including Persian, Arabic, and Sanskrit studies, were predominantly overshadowed by an English-focused educational agenda designed to cultivate a class of intermediates suited to British administrative requirements. This promoted governance, introduced Western concepts of democracy and equality, and established a pan-Indian lingua franca via English; however, it also resulted in considerable deficiencies, including the neglect of mass, female, scientific, and technical education, while maintaining elitist access to education. The results suggest that while British educational reforms altered specific social classes and intellectual discussions, their impact was constrained, and their framework predominantly catered to colonial administrative goals. This study highlights the twin impact of colonial education: facilitating colonial dominance while unintentionally fostering Indian socio-political consciousness. Comprehending this intricate historical backdrop offers significant insights into current issues in education and cultural integration, underscoring the necessity of egalitarian, inclusive, and diversified educational policy.

Keywords: Education Policy, Charter Act 1813, Lord Macaulay, Downward Filtration Theory, Woods Dispatch, Indian Subcontinent

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1. Introduction

The colonial encounter on the Indian subcontinent was not solely a narrative of territorial conquest and economic exploitation; it was, fundamentally, an endeavor of intellectual and cultural dominance (Cohn, 2020). This research centers on the contentious and transformational development of education policy under the British East India Company. From its origin as a commercial venture to its establishment as a territorial authority, the Company's educational strategy experienced a profound transformation—from a policy of cautious Orientalism focused on comprehending and assimilating indigenous elites to a calculated and assertive Anglicism intended to cultivate a class of intermediaries who were “Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.” This research study provides an analytical examination of this crucial period, contending that the East India Company's educational objectives were not a philanthropic effort for the “moral and intellectual regeneration” of India, but rather a strategic political tool. The principal objectives are to fulfil the administrative requirements of the colonial state, legitimize its authority, and facilitate a socio-cultural transition that would irrevocably change the intellectual landscape of the subcontinent, resulting in results that were both significantly empowering and profoundly detrimental.

2. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology rooted in historical analysis to examine the education policy introduced by the British East India Company and its impact on the Indian subcontinent between 1757 and 1857. The study focuses on interpreting historical developments, policy documents, and intellectual debates within their respective socio-political contexts rather than depending on numerical data. A historical-analytical review is the study's design. Through an analysis of primary and secondary sources, it aims to reconstruct the development of colonial education policy. The emphasis is on critically analyzing the goals, tactics, and outcomes of the business's educational programs.

3. Education Policy of the British East India Company

3.1 Initiative of Company Policy

The preliminary stage of company policy, illustrated by the endeavors of Warren Hastings at Calcutta Madrasa in 1781, Sir William Jones at the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784, and Jonathan Duncan was marked by an Orientalist inclination. This methodology, frequently idealized as an academic interaction with India's classical heritage, was really pragmatic. It was motivated by the need to manage a large and complex society regulated by elaborate personal rules. Comprehending Sanskrit, Arabic, and Persian was crucial for the Company's newly obtained legal and revenue responsibilities, enabling it to govern in accordance with, rather than in opposition to, indigenous customs. Likewise, establishments such as Wellesley's Fort William College in 1801 were founded to educate British civil officers in Indian languages and cultural practices, so enhancing their administrative efficacy. Nonetheless, this initial support for Oriental scholarship, while notable for its academic accomplishments, persisted as an elite endeavor with restricted accessibility, frequently encountering difficulties in attracting students and operating primarily for the advantage of the sovereign rather than the populace. The Charter Act of 1813 marked a pivotal moment by

explicitly obligating the Company to an educational function, allocating resources for the "revival and improvement of literature" and the "encouragement of learnt natives" (Momen et al, 2024). This action provoked an intense and prolonged discourse between the Orientalists, who championed the advancement of classical Indian scholarship, and the Anglicists, who contended the preeminence of Western knowledge and the English language. The resolution of this dispute was not based on educational principles but was significantly shaped by changing colonial priorities and the aspirations of an emerging Indian middle class, particularly expressed by reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy. Roy's fervent opposition to the exclusive promotion of Oriental education highlighted an increasing demand for Western scientific and liberal ideologies, perceived as a means to modernization and advancement.

The Anglicist victory was subsequently formalized in the seminal Macaulay's Minute of 1835 and implemented by Governor-General Lord William Bentinck. This strategy dismissed Oriental study as unproductive and formally embraced English as the medium of instruction for higher education. The rationale was embodied in the notorious 'Downward Filtration Theory,' which asserted that by teaching a select, elite upper class, Western knowledge and values would progressively permeate the broader populace. This constituted a policy of intentional and effective social engineering, aimed at establishing a class of clerks, administrators, and translators who would be culturally estranged from their own society while remaining essential to the colonial apparatus. The definitive and most thorough expression of Company policy was the Wood's Despatch of 1854, frequently referred to as the 'Magna Carta of English Education in India' (Moore, 1965). Although it advocated for a better organized system featuring graded schools, universities in Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras, teacher training, and a recognition of vernacular basic education and female learning, its major aim continued to be the advancement of Western education. Notwithstanding its ostensibly progressive proposals, the proposed system was a servile replication of English models, inadequately aligned with the requirements of a large and varied population. The transformative effect of these programs was significant and inherently contradictory. It opened the subcontinent to contemporary concepts of rationalism, liberalism, and scientific inquiry, which unwittingly created a nascent national consciousness. English served as a cohesive lingua franca for the burgeoning nationalist movement, facilitating access to the revolutionary concepts of the Enlightenment. Conversely, the Company's education system was severely hindered by significant constraints: neglect of mass education, leading to dismal literacy rates; a near-total contempt for female education; alarming indifference towards scientific and technical training; and persistent financial underinvestment. It methodically demolished indigenous educational frameworks without providing a genuinely equal substitute. This article will examine the intricate legacy, scrutinising the motives, procedures, and many repercussions of the East India Company's educational initiative.

3.2 The Imposition of British Colonial Rule in the Indian Subcontinent

The narrative of the British establishment of dominion over the Indian Subcontinent is extensive and intricate. It was not an isolated occurrence but a progressive evolution that transpired over ages. It commenced with commerce and culminated in the total political domination of one of the world's most affluent territories. The inception of British dominion in India may be attributed to

the establishment of the East India Company's inaugural trading factory in Masulipatnam in 1611, marking the beginning of British influence in India. Initially designated as the "Governor and Company of Merchants of London Trading into the East-Indies," this British joint-stock Company was established in 1600 with the principal aim of developing and enhancing trade relations with nations in the East Indies, such as India, China, and Indonesia (Momen & Kamal, 2023). The EIC, initially concentrated on trading, progressively broadened its operations by establishing numerous factories in significant parts of India, including Surat, Madras, Bombay, and Calcutta (now Kolkata). This development was not solely commercial but also strategic, establishing the foundation for political and military supremacy (Wilbur, 1945). The British East India Company saw significant rivalry from other European nations with vested interests in Indian commerce, notably the Portuguese, Dutch, and French, each of whom had developed their own trading networks and colonies throughout various regions of India. Through a strategic amalgamation of military confrontations, diplomatic efforts, and alliances with diverse local sovereigns, the British methodically undermined these rival entities. An exemplary instance of this occurred during the Battle of Swally in 1612 near Surat, where the EIC forces successfully vanquished the Portuguese navy, thus terminating Portuguese supremacy in the Indian marine trade. By displacing these initial European competitors, the British East India Company progressively evolved from a commercial venture into a formidable political force, ultimately resulting in the foundation of British colonial governance that would endure for nearly two and a half centuries. The initial phase of commerce development was pivotal, initiating geographical acquisition, administrative control, and cultural impact that defined India's future under British colonialism (Al Fahmi & Bari, 2024). The British initially arrived in India for two primary objectives: primarily, for trade and commerce. India was renowned for its spices, cotton, silk, and indigo. The British East India Company, a commercial enterprise, was established to capitalize on this profitable commerce. Their secondary objective was the dissemination of Christianity. A significant number of early British visitors were missionaries' intent on disseminating their faith among the Indian populace. The Mughal Emperors' liberal policies facilitated their immigration. The formidable Mughal sovereigns, such as Akbar, espoused tolerance and permitted foreign merchants to establish their factories and engage in commerce. In 1619, Emperor Jahangir granted the British authorization to establish a factory at Surat. This generous disposition was misconstrued as frailty, prompting the British to gradually develop their own military forces and reinforce their commercial outposts.

The definitive transition from traders to monarchs commenced with the Battle of Plassey in 1757. The East India Company, under the leadership of Robert Clive, engaged in conflict with Siraj-ud-Daulah, the Nawab of Bengal. The British achieved a decisive victory because of the treachery of the Nawab's commander, Mir Jafar (Tahir, 2021). This triumph did not confer direct sovereignty over India, but it bestowed substantial wealth and established them as the proper authority behind the throne in Bengal. They had become a political entity.

The 1764 Battle of Buxar solidified this authority. The British forces vanquished the united armies of the Mughal Emperor, the Nawab of Bengal, and the Nawab of Awadh. This triumph was even more momentous than Plassey. The victory enabled the British East India Company to acquire the authority to levy taxes (Diwani) in the affluent regions of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa (Leonard, 2014). They were not merely traders accompanied by an army; they were the tax collectors and

governors of an extensive realm. Over the subsequent century, the Company extended its dominion over the subcontinent via military conflicts, agreements, and practices such as the 'Doctrine of Lapse'. Nonetheless, their authority was contested in 1857 by a significant insurrection referred to as the Sepoy Mutiny or the First War of Independence. Indian troops (sepoy) of the Company's army, with other monarchs and civilians, insurrected against British dominion.

Despite the British quelling the insurrection, it signified a pivotal juncture. In 1858, the British government resolved to terminate the governance of the East India Company. The Indian Subcontinent was placed under direct British authority, administered by the British Crown via a Viceroy (Fleming, 2025). The British Raj endured for over 90 years, concluding with the independence of India and Pakistan in 1947. So, the British colonial dominance was built gradually—through commerce, the exploitation of internal strife, significant military triumphs, and ultimately, by substituting Company governance with direct British Crown authority.

3.3 The Educational Policies of the British East India Company

Before coming under British dominion, the Indian subcontinent was under the governance of Muslim rule for over 800 years. During this era, a universal education system was established, predominantly founded on the principles and aims of Islamic education (Momen, 2024). Nevertheless, separate educational systems were also developed for individuals of different faiths. The Muslim monarchs allocated substantial territory and money to sustain these distinct educational institutions, demonstrating their dedication to tolerating many religious communities within their domain (Momen & Hossain, 2022). The educational system of the Indian subcontinent under Muslim rule was comprehensive, encompassing a diverse array of courses with a structured curriculum. The educational institutes established by the Firingi Mahal family during the Mughal era significantly contributed to the region, with their influence and legacy persisting in the Indian subcontinent to this day (Momen, 2023). The educational policies of the British East India Company in the Indian Subcontinent underwent considerable evolution, illustrating a transition from apathy to proactive engagement, and were profoundly shaped by the discourse between Orientalists and Anglicists. This development ultimately established the groundwork for the contemporary English-educated Indian middle class. This article discusses the educational policy of the British East India Company in three parts, which are discussed below.

3.4 Startling Indifference and Orientalist Policy

During the early period of the British East India Company's existence in India, approximately from the mid-18th to early 19th century, the Company's educational strategy was defined by significant apathy and a policy referred to as the "Orientalist" approach. Throughout this era, the East India Company mostly regarded itself as a commercial entity concentrated on commerce and profit, rather than a political or cultural ruling authority. Consequently, it deliberately embraced a policy of non-interference in Indian social, religious, and educational matters, honoring the existing frameworks instead of imposing external institutions. This approach demonstrated a realistic comprehension of India's intricate and varied society, with a strategic endeavor to preserve stability for the protection of business interests. During that period, education in India was mostly governed

by established indigenous institutions, including pathshalas, madrassas, and tools, which focused on the instruction of classical languages such as Sanskrit, Arabic, and Persian, in addition to vernacular languages (Bakshi, 2016). These institutions were intricately woven into the cultural and theological framework of Indian culture, functioning as hubs for classical education, religious teachings, and literary heritage.

The British East India Company's "Orientalist" strategy was evident in its selective yet strategic endorsement and funding of traditional institutes of learning, rather than their dismantlement or reform. The Company offered modest funds and patronage to scholars and institutions to promote the advancement of Indian classical scholarship. This indirect support facilitated the maintenance and enhancement of indigenous educational traditions during the initial years of British presence (Ludden, 1993). The Orientalists in British administration and academia exhibited a profound interest in Indian languages, literature, and culture, asserting that comprehension of these elements was crucial for efficient governance and intellectual discourse. The initial era of apathy and respect for Indian educational systems strongly contrasted with subsequent stages of British educational policy, characterized by direct intervention and the promotion of Western-style education. Nevertheless, the Orientalist doctrine established a significant basis for intellectual interaction between British officials and Indian intellectuals, while safeguarding India's extensive educational legacy throughout a pivotal phase of political and economic transformation (Rocher, 1993).

Warren Hastings, the inaugural Governor-General of Bengal, significantly influenced the initial educational policy of the British East India Company by promoting programs aimed at engaging with and comprehending the indigenous cultures of India. His significant accomplishment was the founding of the Calcutta Madrasa in 1781; an institution focused on the study of Persian and Arabic. The establishment of this Madrasa was motivated by Hastings's strategic intent to foster amicable connections with the local elite, especially the Muslim aristocrats and academics, who held significant sway in the region's social and political landscape (İzgi, 2015). Simultaneously, William Jones, a notable scholar and judge within the British administration, established the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784, which rapidly emerged as a crucial institution for Oriental studies. The Asiatic Society functioned as a prominent academic center for over fifty years, focused on the translation, preservation, and examination of important Sanskrit texts and other classical Indian literature. This initiative was essential in presenting Indian philosophical, legal, historical, and literary traditions to a wider global audience, resulting in a body of knowledge termed Asiatic Researches. Warren Hastings possessed profound respect for the Hindu legal systems, which he regarded as having remained immutable for millennia and as fundamental to Indian civilization. Hastings acknowledged that for the British to successfully establish and maintain their dominion in India, it was essential to understand the old rules and the Sanskrit language in which many were originally inscribed (Sen, 1997). The creation of organizations such as the Calcutta Madrasa and the Asiatic Society underscored an early British initiative to academically and administratively interact with India's native knowledge systems, establishing a foundation for subsequent colonial governance and scholarly programs. Warren Hastings, the inaugural Governor-General of Bengal, profoundly impacted the initial educational and cultural programs of the British East India Company by promoting interaction with indigenous knowledge systems. In 1781, he founded the Calcutta Madrasa, intended for the study and acquisition of Persian and Arabic languages. This

initiative was principally driven by Hastings' intention to cultivate amicable connections with the elites of the indigenous population, particularly the Muslim aristocrats and scholars (Suman, 2022).

William Jones, a renowned Orientalist and judge, established the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784, which became a significant academic institution focused on Oriental studies. For almost fifty years, the Society functioned as a center for the translation, preservation, and examination of important Sanskrit and other classical Indian texts, significantly enhancing Western understanding of Indian culture, history, and legal systems. This academic endeavor, termed Asiatic Researches, was essential in connecting cultural gaps between Britain and India. Warren Hastings asserted that Hindu rules, enshrined in Sanskrit for millennia, constituted the foundation of Indian culture and governance (Cannon, 1978). Jonathan Duncan, the British Resident at Benares, significantly advanced Oriental education in India by establishing the Sanskrit College at Benares in 1791. His principal objective for this program was to promote the examination of Hindu laws and philosophy, with the intent to safeguard and enhance the comprehension of India's ancient legal and religious traditions. The Sanskrit College was conceived as an institution to cultivate scholars proficient in traditional Indian knowledge, crucial for the interpretation and administration of Hindu law during colonial governance. Nonetheless, despite commendable objectives, these initial endeavors to advance instruction in Oriental languages encountered considerable obstacles. The effort experienced minimal success, mostly due to the low demand for formal education in these traditional topics, leading to an imbalance with a surplus of teachers relative to pupils (Dodson, 2002). Conversely, Lord Wellesley, the Governor-General of India from 1798 to 1805, adopted an alternative strategy by emphasizing the education and training of British government officers tasked with governing India. In 1801, he established Fort William College in Calcutta with the specific aim of training young British recruits for positions in the colonial civil service. Fort William College, in contrast to other institutions for Indians, was established to educate British officials about Indian culture, languages, laws, and traditions, so enhancing their capability to navigate the intricacies of government in a diverse and expansive nation. The college rapidly transformed into an essential store of knowledge on India, containing various departments solely focused on the research and study of Indian languages, literature, and traditions (Kopf, 1961). The Education Policy of the British East India Company in the Indian subcontinent underwent a pivotal transformation with the implementation of the Charter Act of 1813, which represented the inaugural formal acknowledgment by the British government of education as a governmental priority rather than merely a philanthropic or cultural issue. This Act signified a crucial policy transformation by designating a specific fund of one lakh rupees for the advancement and revitalization of Indian literature and academia. By allocating this amount, the British recognized the need to foster Indian intellectual traditions and aiding educated locals who could enhance and safeguard the nation's extensive literary history. This project was both cultural and strategic, as the East India Company increasingly acknowledged the significance of teaching Indians to efficiently operate the administrative framework of British governance (Bartle, 1994). The Charter Act of 1813 was pivotal in establishing education as a governmental priority, reconciling the preservation of indigenous scholarship with the practical needs of colonial administration, so influencing education policy in India for many years. The Education Policy of the British East

India Company in the Indian subcontinent advanced significantly with the implementation of the Charter Act of 1813, which officially designated education as a governmental priority. This gesture was noteworthy as it marked a shift from the Company's previous position of limited engagement in indigenous education to a more active participation in fostering learning (Sharma, 2018). The administrative requirements of the East India Company were crucial in formulating this education policy, since the British increasingly necessitated Indians skilled in classical and vernacular languages for many administrative roles. Proficiency in Sanskrit, Arabic, and Persian was highly esteemed as these languages were essential for comprehending and implementing Hindu and Muslim laws, which were fundamental to the colonial legal framework. Individuals proficient in these languages served as crucial intermediaries, responsible for elucidating ancient rules and practices to British officials unacquainted with the intricacies of Indian jurisprudence. The simultaneous emphasis on the rebirth of indigenous scholarship and practical administrative utility highlighted the pragmatic elements of the educational requirements in the Charter Act (Webster, 1990).

The educational strategy of the British East India Company on the Indian subcontinent was significantly influenced by a pivotal intellectual debate referred to as The Great Debate, occurring inside the Company's administration in the early 19th century. The discussion focused on the optimal utilization of the annual educational stipend established by the Charter Act of 1813, significantly shaping the trajectory of Indian education during British governance. On one side were the Orientalists, a faction spearheaded by officials like H.T. Prinsep, who advocated for the advancement and conservation of classical Indian scholarship. The Orientalists contended that the profound intellectual legacy inherent in classical languages such as Sanskrit, Arabic, and Persian was indispensable and ought to be the foundation of the educational curriculum (Mufti, 2010).

The Anglicists, most notably represented by Thomas Babington Macaulay, held a fundamentally divergent and unwavering position on this matter. Macaulay and his proponents asserted that Indian languages lacked substantive knowledge and advocated for the allocation of educational budgets only towards the advancement of Western literature, science, and philosophy via the English language. They contended that Western education and English language training were vital for modernizing India and cultivating a new class of Indians to serve as cultural and intellectual intermediaries between Britain and India. Macaulay envisioned the establishment of "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect," thus creating Anglicized Indians who would further colonially interests by embracing British values and perspectives (Thirumalai, 2003).

3.5 The Triumph of Anglicism and the Theory of Downward Filtration

The General Committee of Public Instruction, founded in 1823, was a crucial entity established by the British East India Company to supervise and guide the development of the educational system in India. This committee primarily consisted of people affiliated with the Orientalist movement, indicating a significant inclination towards the advancement of traditional Indian education above Western learning. The committee's Orientalists fervently championed the preservation and growth of Oriental studies, encompassing the classical languages of Sanskrit, Arabic, and Persian, which they regarded as essential for sustaining India's cultural and intellectual history. Their strategy

prioritized the support of local educational institutions and experts, rather than the imposition of foreign systems or languages (Momen et al, 2024). Nonetheless, despite the committee's initial Orientalist predominance, this era of Indian education policymaking was characterized by much intellectual discord and conflicting perspectives within the administration concerning the trajectory of India's education under British colonial governance.

Included on the group was Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay, a pivotal individual who ultimately shaped British educational policy in India. Macaulay, as a member of the executive council, composed his esteemed Minute on Indian Education on February 2, 1835, which he submitted to the council with a compelling and resolute argument advocating for the preeminence of Western education and the English language (Rzegocki, 2000). Macaulay envisioned the establishment of "a class of individuals, Indian in ethnicity and complexion, yet English in preferences, beliefs, ethics, and intellect." His objective was to develop an Anglicized Indian elite capable of acting as intermediates between the British authorities and the populace, embodying Western values and knowledge to enhance colonial governance. Macaulay's minute had a significant impact, signifying a pivotal transition from the Orientalist focus on traditional education to the Anglicist promotion of English instruction and Western scientific understanding. The General Committee of Public Instruction, originally influenced by Orientalist perspectives, evolved into a significant platform for contesting the future of Indian education, ultimately resulting in policies that would define the colonial education system and its effects on Indian society for many years.

From 1828 until 1835, under Lord William Bentinck's governorship, the education policy of the British East India Company experienced a significant transition that solidified the ideals articulated in Macaulay's Minute on Indian Education. Bentinck endorsed the Macaulay Committee's findings and clearly articulated that the principal aim of the Company's administration should be the advancement of European literature and sciences via the English language. This signified a pivotal policy transition that allocated all subsequent educational resources to promote Western education, consistent with the Anglicist perspective (Seed, 1952). The Macaulay system was intentionally devised to educate the elite of Indian society, rather than the broader population. It indicated a calculated approach aimed at cultivating a class of English-educated Indians to serve as middlemen between the British authorities and the populace. This method relied on implicit confidence in the infiltration or "Downward Filtration Theory," which posited that knowledge acquired by the elite will progressively and efficiently disseminate to the wider populace through vernacular education. This theory logically emphasizes the acquisition of local languages solely to facilitate English instruction, rather than as objectives in their own right. The education policy implemented by Bentinck was a meticulously planned initiative to propagate Western knowledge via a hierarchical approach, employing English as the medium to access the elite strata of society (Iritani et al, 1991). One of the principal tenets of the 1835 resolution articulated by Bentinck was the cessation of Persian as the official court language, which was wholly supplanted by English. This was a pivotal move that epitomized the increasing preeminence of British influence in governance and culture. Furthermore, the production and publication of English books were rendered free and accessible at relatively modest prices, enhancing access to Western literature and scientific knowledge among the educated elite. The government expanded funding for English

education while markedly reducing financial support for Oriental studies, so solidifying the Anglicist triumph in the ideological conflict between Orientalists and Anglicists (Ehrlich, 2018). This represented a critical step in establishing English as the lingua franca of higher education and administration in colonial India.

The Anglicist triumph under Bentinck's guidance was founded on the belief that Western science and literature epitomized the highest form of knowledge deserving of advancement. Government resources were specifically allocated for the instruction of these subjects in English, indicating a distinct shift from previous initiatives aimed at preserving traditional Indian education. English was established as the medium of teaching in all higher education institutions, reinforcing its significance as essential for contemporary education and societal progress. This program attempted to provide a specific segment of Indians with Western knowledge while also seeking to culturally, intellectually, and morally alter them to match more closely with British beliefs and objectives (Filsinger, 2021).

The Downward Filtration Theory was fundamental to this approach, asserting that training a select elite from the upper class would be adequate for the dissemination of knowledge across Indian society. This notion served as an economic strategy by reducing the necessity for widespread education while also cultivating a loyal, English-speaking administrative class (Basu & Sarkar, 2022).

3.6 Consolidation and the Wood's Despatch in 1854

Wood's Despatch, dispatched in 1854 by Sir Charles Wood, President of the Board of Control of the British East India Company, to Lord Dalhousie, the then Governor-General of India, signified a pivotal shift in the educational policy of British India. This official communication advocated for a holistic educational strategy that aimed to harmonize the utilization of vernacular languages with the advancement of English. Wood proposed that vernacular languages be utilized as the medium of instruction in primary schools to enhance educational accessibility for the general populace, while secondary schools should implement a bilingual policy that includes both English and vernacular languages. Colleges, the pinnacle of education, were urged to implement exclusive use of English. This hierarchical language policy sought to promote English language acquisition while also honoring local languages during the foundational phases. Wood's Despatch significantly contributed to the proliferation of English education in India and emphasized the necessity of enhancing female education, vocational training, and establishing an English-speaking class to function as a competent administrative workforce for the British colonial administration (Moore, 1964). It included a more systematic and institutional methodology in education, prioritizing both academic advancement and practical competencies, as well as broader social inclusion, especially through the education of women.

The era subsequent to Wood's Despatch was marked by substantial social reforms implemented by the British government during the concluding phase of East India Company governance prior to the establishment of the British Raj in 1858. These reforms integrated educational programs with extensive social agendas intended to modernize Indian society in alignment with British values. The establishment of an English-speaking class was essential to this vision, functioning as both a mechanism for effective governance and a method to instil Western ideas in Indian culture

(Moore, 1965). The focus on practical training and female education represented a significant transition towards integrating many educational modalities beyond conventional classical studies and elite institutions. These reforms transpired under escalating political tensions and social discontent, culminating in the Indian Rebellion of 1857. Following the insurrection, British policy adopted a more reactionary approach, becoming cautious and frequently restricted in various aspects to retain control over the increasingly agitated populace. Nevertheless, Wood's Despatch constituted a seminal document, influencing educational practices in India and establishing English as an essential medium of teaching, so exerting enduring effects on India's educational framework and societal organization during British colonial control.

Wood's Despatch is fundamentally connected to the changing perspectives of the British East India Company on education in India, which had predominantly been an overlooked aspect of governance until the mid-19th century. Initially, the Company exhibited less interest in establishing an educational infrastructure in India, concentrating mostly on commercial and political dominance. As the British solidified their governance and acknowledged the intricacies of administering a large and diverse populace, divergent viewpoints arose within the Company concerning the function of education. Certain members contended that the British possessed a civilizing mission aimed at transforming Indian society through the introduction of Western principles and swift cultural alterations intended to "modernize" India. Others, more pragmatic, viewed education as a means to cultivate a class of Indians competent in English, who might be enlisted into the Indian Civil Services (ICS) and facilitate effective colonial administration (Kale, 2021).

This conviction was notably expressed by Lord Macaulay, whose educational ideology influenced British policy for numerous decades. Macaulay emphasized the necessity of establishing "a class of individuals who would serve as intermediaries between the governed populace and ourselves," highlighting that these individuals may possess Indian physical characteristics yet would embody English preferences, ethics, and intellect. This idea embodied the colonial objective of cultivating an intermediary class—educated Indians who would assimilate British cultural standards and function as loyal assistants to the colonial administration. The East India Company's advocacy for English education was not solely focused on linguistic proficiency but was a calculated cultural and political initiative designed to promote colonial supremacy. Wood's Despatch arose from this environment as a formalized policy declaration aimed at systematizing education across various strata of Indian society, promoting English while preserving indigenous languages for practicality, and enhancing educational access, including for women (Sasmal, 2024). Delivered in 1854, Wood's Despatch's proposals marked a turning point in the development of Indian education policy under the British East India Company. The assumption that English-language instruction would not only improve Indians' moral character but also create a pool of reliable civil officials who could effectively meet the administrative demands of the colonial government was at the heart of the dispatch. This was in line with the larger British plan to create a devoted, English-trained class to serve as a bridge between the Indian people and the rulers. Wood underlined the necessity of establishing a separate education department in each province to guarantee appropriate administration and progress of the educational system, acknowledging the complexity and scope

of building an educational infrastructure across the large Indian subcontinent. The goal of this structural change was to give the scattered and frequently primitive educational initiatives of the era structure and consistency (Ghosh, 1975).

In order to promote higher education and intellectual development, Wood's Despatch also promoted the founding of institutions in major towns like Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras that were modeled after the University of London. This suggestion emphasized the significance of establishing regional centers and institutionalizing higher education in order to meet the nation's increasing need for professional training and Western knowledge. The Despatch demanded that at least one government school be established at the district level, increasing accessibility and decentralizing education. Additionally, it suggested giving linked private schools grants-in-aid, which would promote the expansion of educational institutions outside those that are solely run by the government. The concentration on teaching Indian natives in their own tongue, especially at the primary level, while emphasizing English as the medium of instruction at the secondary and higher levels was another crucial component of the dispatch (Moore, 1965). In keeping with a vision for an integrated and unified educational structure, the dispatch also emphasized the significance of developing a methodical educational pathway from elementary school to university education. As one of the first official acknowledgements of the significance of female literacy and education in India, it also emphasized the necessity of advancing women's education. All levels of teacher training were highly encouraged, and it was suggested that teacher training institutions be established to guarantee high-quality instruction and efficient teaching strategies. Wood acknowledged the necessity to upgrade infrastructure in order to support educational objectives and advocated for the remodeling and rebuilding of current government schools and colleges. The support of secular education and the promotion of an inclusive curriculum free from religious bias—a last, significant aspect of Wood's Despatch—were meant to appeal to India's diverse religious landscape while encouraging a more scientific and logical approach to education (Chatterjee, 1973).

In order to produce an educated elite that could support colonial administration, these recommendations collectively set the foundation for a modern education system in India during British rule that integrated Western scientific knowledge with respect for vernacular languages. By institutionalizing policy reforms that would impact Indian education for decades, Wood's comprehensive vision for education signaled a significant departure from the East India Company's previous haphazard and restricted educational initiatives (Mondal, 2022).

Subsequent to the enactment of Wood's Despatch in 1854, the East India Company undertook numerous pivotal measures to reform the educational framework of the Indian subcontinent, establishing the groundwork for a more systematic and structured system. A significant effect was the creation of prominent universities styled after the University of London, designed largely as examination and degree-awarding institutions rather than educational centers. In 1857, the University of Calcutta, the University of Bombay, and the University of Madras were established as the inaugural universities, significantly contributing to the formalization of higher education in British India. These universities instituted consistent academic standards, administered examinations, and conferred degrees, serving to control and standardize higher education

throughout extensive and varied regions. Subsequent incorporations into this network comprised the University of the Punjab in 1882 and the University of Allahabad in 1887, therefore enhancing access to higher education in northern India (Sasmal, 2024).

Simultaneously with the establishment of these universities, education departments were created in every province, adhering to Wood's mandate to guarantee effective supervision and enhancement of education at the regional level. The provincial education departments played a crucial role in executing policies that advanced English-language education, which grew increasingly prevalent in academic and bureaucratic domains. In governance and public service sectors, English knowledge was crucial, since it served as the language of administration, law, and higher education during colonial rule. The promotion of English was strategically connected with British objectives to cultivate a class of Indians capable of functioning professionally within the colonial framework as clerks, civil servants, and professionals. The proliferation and formalization of English education facilitated the incorporation of Indian scholars into the empire's administrative frameworks, hence enhancing governance and oversight (Sasmal, 2024). Wood's Despatch significantly influenced the educational framework of colonial India, introducing some key advantages that determined the future direction of education throughout British governance. Wood's approach culminated in the foundation of three prominent universities in 1857 in Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras, which institutionalized higher education and implemented a standardized curriculum and examination system based on the University of London. These universities emerged as essential entities within the colonial education framework, drawing students from throughout the subcontinent and cultivating an educated elite that significantly contributed to administration, law, and many professions. Subsequently, two more universities were founded in Lahore (University of the Punjab) and Allahabad, thereby enhancing access to higher education in northern India and strengthening the structure of colonial education. The growth of universities represented a substantial structural enhancement of formal education, establishing centers of intellectual advancement that would impact Indian society for decades (Ahmed & Kumari, 2018).

A significant advantage of Wood's Despatch was the establishment of specialized entities to supervise education across India. The formation of the education department, or Directorate of Public Instruction, in 1855 was a significant organizational advancement that enhanced coordination and governance in educational administration at both provincial and central tiers (Chakma, 2023). This infrastructure enabled the organized expansion of educational institutions, leading to a significant rise in primary schools in India, which increased from 3,916 in 1881-82 to 5,124 in 1900-02. The expansion of primary education indicated an increased accessibility to fundamental education, but it remained constrained in scope relative to the nation's extensive populace. In 1896, the establishment of the Indian Education Service codified administrative positions responsible for overseeing education policy and its execution, therefore professionalizing educational governance within the colonial framework. The era witnessed the establishment of multiple commissions, including the Hunter Commission (1882-83), Raleigh Commission (1902-04), and Sadler Commission (1917-19), assigned to examine and propose strategies for the enhancement and expansion of education in India (Sovani, 1954). These commissions highlighted the persistent British dedication to educational advancement, while also reflecting the intricacies and constraints of colonial objectives. Ultimately, Wood's Despatch and its consequences

established a lasting foundation for the modernization of education in India, impacting social and political transformations that resonated well beyond the colonial period.

Although Wood's Despatch represented a crucial advancement in the organization and expansion of education in colonial India, it also introduced numerous substantial adverse effects that underscored the limitations and inequities of British educational policy. A significant drawback was the urban-centric focus of the Western education initiatives advocated in the Despatch. The focus on founding universities, schools, and administrative institutions was mostly centered in big towns like Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras. This emphasis on urban areas resulted in the significant exclusion of extensive rural populations from the advantages of Western-style schooling. India's mostly agricultural civilization, characterized by a majority of its population residing in villages, lacked sufficient access to these burgeoning educational opportunities (Chandio et al, 2014). A notable disadvantage of Wood's educational program was its substantial dependence on English as the medium of instruction, particularly at advanced levels of education. As English was a foreign language for the majority of Indians, this constituted a significant obstacle to wider educational engagement. The general populace, especially in rural areas, frequently possessed minimal exposure to or interest in acquiring English, which was perceived as unattainable and inconsequential to their quotidian lives and economic pursuits. The language barrier hindered widespread excitement and adoption of formal education among the populace, so limiting the influence of Western education to a relatively tiny, English-speaking elite. As a result, the program exacerbated social divisions by favoring individuals who could afford and access English education, while marginalizing substantial portions of the population who communicated solely in regional languages or dialects (Sen, 1958).

The interplay of urban density and linguistic obstacles resulted in the fact that, notwithstanding the official proliferation of education, the vast bulk of India's populace remained beyond the reach of colonial educational reforms. Wood's Despatch established an educational system that, while its innovative elements, ultimately benefitted a limited elite class catering to colonial administrative requirements and cultural assimilation strategies. This restrictive access constrained the social mobility of lower-class and rural inhabitants, exacerbating the socio-economic stratifications that defined colonial Indian society. The disregard for rural education and vernacular languages hindered the establishment of a genuinely inclusive education system, essential for broad literacy and empowerment (Chakma, 2023).

4. Transformative Impact of Education Policy under the British East India Company

The educational framework established by the British East India Company in the Indian subcontinent significantly influenced governance, society, and culture, hence shaping the course of colonial India and its aftermath. A principal aim of British educational policy was to cultivate a cohort of Indians skilled in English to function as clerks, administrators, and civil officials in the colonial bureaucracy. English-language education emerged as an essential instrument for preparing persons to operate effectively in diverse administrative offices, thereby aiding the extension and sustenance of British dominion over extensive territories (Chandio et al, 2014). This emerging elite of educated Indians, commonly known as "babus," was crucial in the administration of the empire, serving as intermediates who connected the colonial authority with the local populace across

cultural and language divides (Mizutani, 2018). The establishment of this administrative elite not only reinforced British authority but also established the groundwork for a more bureaucratic and systematic government structure in India.

A notable and lasting legacy of British education policy was the creation of English as a lingua franca in a linguistically heterogeneous nation. The diverse languages and dialects of India presented obstacles to communication and administration; the British established English as the medium of instruction and governance, so creating a unifying language that overcame regional disparities. This enhanced cooperation within the colonial government and ultimately contributed to the unification of diverse language communities under a common linguistic framework. For some Indians, especially those involved in education and professional fields, English emerged as a conduit to broader social, economic, and political prospects. The proliferation of English also enabled the flow of ideas and cultivated a feeling of pan-Indian identity, as educated Indians from many places discovered commonality through a shared language (Bakshi, 2016).

The emergence and extensive dissemination of English literature, periodicals, and newspapers significantly contributed to the development of national consciousness in India. Exposure to Western political philosophy and principles, like liberty, democracy, equality, and fraternity, acquainted Indians with novel perspectives on governance and society. These conceptions stimulated discourse and debate among the educated Indian elite, who began to scrutinize colonial governance and contemplate alternate futures for their nation. The propagation of contemporary concepts via English-language media facilitated the emergence of reform movements and ultimately the Indian nationalist movement (Rao, 2025).

The influence of the British school system was not devoid of contradictions. Although it facilitated social mobility and intellectual enlightenment for a portion of the population, it simultaneously perpetuated existing social inequalities and marginalized significant segments of society from its advantages. The prioritization of English education undermined indigenous knowledge systems and languages, resulting in cultural alienation for several individuals. The educational framework formed by the British East India Company in India exhibited considerable deficiencies that affected its efficacy and scope, especially regarding mass education. A significant deficiency was the disregard for universal literacy and fundamental education among the majority of the Indian populace. Notwithstanding several efforts to enhance educational infrastructure, by 1911, a staggering 94% of Indians were illiterate, a statistic that exhibited only a slight improvement to 92% by 1921. This startling figure illustrates the inadequacy of British education policy in reaching rural and underserved regions, where access to education was significantly restricted or entirely absent (Vajiram, 2025).

A notable deficiency in the British education system was its almost complete neglect of female education. During the initial phases of colonial governance, the administration provided minimal to no financial support for the education of girls and women, illustrating the prevailing gender biases and the insufficient emphasis on inclusive educational programs. This negligence resulted in exceedingly low female literacy rates, perpetuating the ongoing marginalization of women in Indian society. The absence of educational possibilities for half the population not only impeded

individual growth but also obstructed overall society advancement, as women's education is essential for enhancing health, economic involvement, and social fairness (Vajiram, 2025).

The educational philosophy of the British East India Company also exhibited a disregard for scientific and technical education. Notwithstanding the rise of contemporary industries and technological progress in Britain and other regions, colonial India had minimal investment in practical and vocational training that could have promoted industrial and infrastructural improvement (Singh, 2023). By 1857, India possessed merely three medical colleges in Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras, along with a solitary engineering college in Roorkee, which was inadequate to generate the skilled workforce required for burgeoning infrastructure projects, healthcare services, or technological advancement. The insufficient focus on scientific and technical education hindered India's acquisition of the necessary tools for self-sustained development and economic modernization (Bhattacharya, 2015).

The fundamental cause of several deficiencies was the lack of adequate financial support for education. Financial support for the expansion of educational buildings, teacher training, and curriculum development was persistently insufficient, indicating the British administration's unwillingness to invest significantly in a system that primarily suited its administrative and political objectives. Education was primarily perceived as a mechanism for cultivating a compliant bureaucratic class rather than a vehicle for extensive social revolution. The restricted financial investment significantly hindered initiatives focused on universal education and the inclusion of marginalized demographics, including women and rural communities. The limitation of insufficient funding intensified disparities and restricted the scope and quality of education throughout India (Vajiram, 2025). British educational practices and attitudes contributed to the formation of several movements among Muslim reformers such as Aligarh Movement, Deoband Movement, Jihad Movement, Tariqa Muhammadiya Movement, Ahl-e-Hadith Movement, Faraiji Movement etc (Momen et al, 2023). Darul Uloom Deoband Madrasah is the biggest example whose influence is worldwide and even today thousands of Qawmi Madrasahs are the successors of Darul Uloom Deoband (Momen, 2025).

So, the native educational system was supplanted by the British Education System in India. Numerous Englishmen endeavored to advance oriental scholarship; however, the Anglicists triumphed over the Orientalists. New educational institutions were founded to advance learning. Innovative social, political, and economic concepts emerged via the conduit of Western education. The British education system in India neglected scientific and technical education. Furthermore, the primary beneficiaries of this schooling were predominantly the elite class of society. The revolution resulting from English education was inherently constrained.

5. Conclusion

The British East India Company's entry into India, initially motivated by commerce and economic pursuits, rapidly transformed into a multifaceted colonial endeavor with significant political, social, and cultural consequences. Their initial dependence on the Mughal Empire's lenient policies enabled them to secure positions in vital commerce hubs, which then evolved into political supremacy after significant military triumphs such as the Battles of Plassey and Buxar. The transition from traders to rulers signified the onset of significant transformations in Indian society,

especially in governance and administration, as the British instituted novel methods of control. In addition to political control, the Company's developing education policies indicate a calculated colonial initiative aimed at both governance and the cultural transformation of India. These measures, influenced by the tension between Orientalist appreciation for native customs and Anglicist promotion of Western education, established the foundation for the contemporary Indian educational framework while concurrently bolstering colonial authority. The education initiatives of the British East India Company had a contradictory effect on India. They provided contemporary Western knowledge, analytical reasoning, and institutional structures that strengthened a newly educated English-speaking middle class. This nascent elite would thereafter play a crucial role in India's quest for independence, promoting democratic principles acquired through English education. The measures intentionally fostered a culturally detached elite aligned with British objectives, hence maintaining colonial governance and social stratification. Conventional Indian education was sidelined, leaving the bulk of Indians excluded from formal learning opportunities. The legacy of the Company's educational initiatives is intricate, signifying both the modernity of Indian education and the reinforcement of colonial supremacy, with enduring impacts on the subcontinent's social, cultural, and political landscape.

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