Early Colonial rule in the 19th Century and the initial steps in Education in Bengal

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Abstract: A great deal of change was effectuated in the colonial period in the educational sector, within the first half of the 19th century. At first the British did not interfere in the system of classical learning. They at first support and encourage the Oriental system of learning. But through decades with the ideals of Evangelicals and Utilitarians, coming of the missionaries mainly after 1813 in a large number, debates among Orientalists-Anglicists and for growing need of western educated Indians the British changed their policy. So the era from Hastings to Bentinck, and even after that, was a period of educational reforms passing through debates - passing through various types of experiments. From this time, started the modern system of institution based education and learning process in India. I have discussed in my paper the condition of education in Bengal as well in Midnapore during the first phase of Colonial rule.

Keywords: English, education, Indians, British, nineteenth century, Bengal

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During the inceptive decades, the English East India Company made limited efforts towards the spreading of western education amongst the Indians, owing to their policy of non-interference. Thus, their activity seemed to be like that of a co-operator or a collaborator, partnership with the Indians being viable in every field, having commenced mainly through commercial initiative. According to Blair B. King “In contrast to the later nineteen century with its bureaucratized, imperial leviathan , the first half of the century was a period of flexibility when alternative systems of relationships between ruler and ruled seemed possible.”1 This partnership between the Britishers and the Indians, in the first part of the British domination, was also warmly welcomed by the Indians, they being lured by the collaborative relationships, opportunities and protection provided by the British regime. This co-relative relationship was prevalent in almost every arena of the Indian subcontinent, either in socio-cultural or in commercial and political activities. Critically examining the activity of Dwarakanath Tagore as an Entrepreneur, Blair B. King rightly said, “He and his contemporaries were products of eighteenth-century rationalism and nineteenth-century liberalism, ideologies that supported such concepts as progress, liberty and internationalism.”2 Even this partnership had a great impact on the Indian Society. “For many Indian groups, the first half century of European colonial dominance offered opportunities for good business and good careers…….”3 Indians educated by the means of Western standards, initially acted as dubhass, or as collaborators of the Anglo-Indian commercial process or any type of dual relationship. Although most of the Indians had no idea or were unaware about the British policy, a few in number (mostly the ones who were associated with the British), eagerly desired their self- progression through the means of dual co-operation. During the first half of the establishment of the British Raj in India, the Britishers were much dependent or collaborative innature with the Indians, for their commercial activity or political centralization and territorial expansion, and thus, “……new attention was paid to Indian intermediaries who stood between the court of Directors and Indian Subjects.”4 Basically ‘Colonialism reorganized India politically and empirically at the same time, and the two reorganizations supported one another’.5 David Ludden critically analyzed the procedure of political centralization by the collaborative efforts of the Britishers and Indians in 19th century, having penned it down in the form of ‘Anglo-Indian Empire’, “The nineteenth century witnessed a slow but steady political centralization as urban elites expanded their power and urban centers became nodal points for professional administrative action in village affairs……… Company officials, Indians and Englishmen alike, adjusted that system as much as possible to their

4 Burton Stein, Quoted in Orientalist Empiricism: Transformations of Colonial Knowledge by David Ludden in Orientalism and the postcolonial predicament: perspectives on South Asia, Edited by Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993,-p 253
own needs, while they adjusted their own expectations and goals in a constant process of negotiation. By doing so they created an Anglo-Indian language of official discourse, which had come into being by the early 1820s. Second, using that language, the new ruling elite developed a working ideology that systematized the terms of transactions between power holders at various levels of state authority. The result was Queen Victoria’s empire, built by self-conscious and self-interested efforts by Indian and English men, village peasants, and urban elites.  

Although during the first part of colonial period, the British weren’t interested in interfering themselves into the country’s social system including education policy, private English schools commenced to develop (though they were Calcutta-centric) since then, and as well “The Company made its first grants for elementary education to schools founded north of Calcutta by the London Missionary Society.”

M. A. Laird has clarified the policy of the British Government before 1793 as thus, “The East India Company was in the early years of its control over Bengal opposed to missionary work and largely indifferent to education. It only slowly adjusted itself to its new situation of bearing the responsibilities of Government, rather than functioning simply as a trading company; and in matters of religion, with which education was intimately connected, it was particularly wary of arousing the suspicions and hostility of the people and therefore most reluctant to sanction any innovations. In any case, an educational initiative would not readily be taken by rulers from a country in which education was not regarded as being among the concerns of Government. Warren Hastings did realize that this was not true of India; he founded the Calcutta Madrasa in 1780, and the Sanskrit College at Benaras followed in 1791, but these isolated examples of Government patronage were institutions of traditional Indian learning rather than pointers to future developments.”

According to Thomas Metcalfe—“The British Government, however, dared not introduce the teaching of Christianity into the schools it sponsored in India, for its officials, even those who looked forward eagerly to the Christianization of India, realized any such patronage of religion might well provoke intense hostility. The British of necessity made of religions neutrality, like the nation of the state as ‘Secular’ a liberal virtue of its own. A symbol of free intellectual inquiry, religious non-interference generated an image of the English man as benign, disinterested, and impartial.”

Ever since its beginning, the Britishers marked a difference in their policy, not taking the ideals of religious schooling or even the ideals of evangelization of the Missionaries towards spreading education, which was perhaps suited with their policies of a partner or a collaborator. Though the word ‘Non-interference’ is very much appropriate in describing the policy of the British during the inceptive stages, the partnership among the Britishers and the Indians or collaborative nature of the ‘Anglo-Indian Empire’ also had a great effect on the educational policy of this subcontinent. The Orientalist approach of Warren Hastings was very much essential for the stability of the new regime as well as to govern the Indians without any obstacle—many famous oriental institutions were the product of that regime. “Hastings basic convictions became the credo of the Orientalist movement, to rule effectively, one must love India; to love India, one must communicate with her people; and to communicate with her people, must learn her languages.”

Ever after the foundation of the Asiatic Society in 1784, “In pursuing their studies, the members of the society, including Hastings himself, employed pandits to teach them Sanskrit and to interpret texts for them.”

Though the educational system prevalent in Midnapore in the 18th and the first part of 19th century greatly benefitted the society and served the basic needs of some classes, but it had its limited nature. Basically, at that period of time, Indian society had the needs of a modernized policy for its social progression and development through education as “If the prime mover of the 19th century social revolutions in England and some other Western countries was technology, in India, as in some other underdeveloped countries, it was education.”

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The effect of Renaissance literature and modern educational system, which the Indians gained after a long journey of British colonial period, were very vital and has taken a very crucial role for the modernization of India in the 19th-20th century. Through decades, with the ever changing attitude of the British administrators, the scenario altered. Emergence of wealthy, educated and progressive Indians by the provisions of the Charter Act of 1813 in favour of the Missionaries, started a long term debate among the Orientalists- Anglicists has changed the situation which affected greatly the educational progress of the Indians. At that time, in the first half of the 19th century, Ram Mohan Roy quoted at a meeting organised in Town Hall that, “the greater the intercourse with European gentleman the greater will be our improvement in literacy, social and political affairs.”

Hence, since the first part of the 19th century, the educational scenario slightly underwent a change, progressive attitude towards modern education having been developed, and obviously being Cuttaca-centric at first-- 'Cuttaca becoming the centre of a new middle class culture, provided the convenient social and cultural setting for the meeting of East and West.'

After the establishment of the Hindu College in 1817, followed by many schools, even for the girls, by the Missionaries, European and educated Indians, though mainly Cuttaca-suspiring at first, (being established all across parts of Bengal), it created an awareness, i.e., “in 1836, as many as 407 students studied in the upper classes of the Hindoo College while in the Hooghly College, as many as 1500 students rushed to get admission within 4 days of opening of the college in August 1836”. It was reported in the Samachar Darpan that after foundation of Hooghly College on 1st August, within two days, there was a stupendous admission numbering 1000 pupils/boys.

On September 10th, 1836, it was again reported in the Samachar Darpan, that, within a few days, there admitted a minimum of 1600 students. Thus, with the changing attitude, and with the progressive mentality or after being inspired by the ideology of Orientalists and the Anglicists, we have seen a parallel progress “In the one hand Scottish Church College with its totally westernized curriculum represented the Anglistic value system designed to eradicate the false learning of the East and supplant it with the model of superior Christian learning of the West. In Contrast, Serampore College, at least until Carey’s death in 1834, was founded on a value-system that was clearly Orientalist in educational philosophy.”

Hence, from 1772-- time of Warren Hastings to 1835-- period of Bentinck & Macaulay, the progress of educational history circumambulated through a very crucial time Firstly non-interference, after that the changing of attitudes of the later Governor-generals, the commencement of a contradiction on the ideals of Orientalists and Anglicists, and through this, the growth of the feeling of the necessity and relevance of English education towards modernization of the society among the educated Indians. So, through decades, most wealthy western educated Indians began to believe, “Westernism does not mean a blind copying of Europe, just as Orientalism in our sense does not imply the aim at impossible revision to the past without any change. Westernism has a greater appropriateness and relevance in the task of building up the Indian Nation”.

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15Goutam Chattopadhyay (Ed.) - Awakening in Bengal in Early Nineteenth Century Volume One Published by Progressive Publishers p-XIX.


17Samachar Darpan, 10th September, 1836, cited in Brajendranath Bandyopadhyay, ibid, p-38.

18David Kopf-ibid- p-261.

19Susobhan Sarkar— On the Bengal Renaissance, published in 7th July, 1979, Papyrus, Cuttaca, pp. - 70&75.