

8th – Impact of British Rule on India Part-2 (Civilizing the Native, Educating the Nation Part B)



New routines, new rules: The Company was concerned primarily with higher education. So it allowed the local pathshalas to function without much interference. After 1854 the company decided to improve the system of vernacular education. It felt that this could be done by introducing order within the system, imposing routines, establishing rules, ensuring regular inspections.

It appointed a number of government pundits, each in charge of looking after four to five schools. The task of the pundit was to visit the pathshalas and try and improve the standard of teaching. Each guru was asked to submit periodic reports and take classes according to regular timetable. Teaching was now to be based on textbooks and learning was to be tested through a system of annual examination. Students were asked to pay a regular fee, attend regular classes, sit on fixed seats, and obey the new rules of discipline. Pathshalas which accepted the new rules were supported through government grants. Those who were unwilling to work within the new system received no government support. Over time gurus who wanted to retain their independence found it difficult to compete with the government aided and regulated pathshalas.

The new rules and routines had another consequence. In the earlier system children from poor peasant families had been able to go to pathshalas, since the timetable was flexible. The discipline of the new system demanded regular attendance, even during harvest time when children of poor families had to work in the fields. Inability to attend school came to be seen as indiscipline, as evidence of the lack of desire to learn.

The Agenda for A National Education: “English education has enslaved us”

Mahatma Gandhi argued that colonial education created a sense of inferiority in the minds of Indians. It made them see western civilization as superior, and destroyed the pride they had in their own culture. There was poison in this education, said Mahatma Gandhi, it was sinful, it enslaved Indians, it cast an evil spell on them. Charmed by the west, appreciating everything that came from the west, Indians educated in these institutions began admiring British rule. Mahatma Gandhi wanted an education that could help Indians recover their sense of dignity and self-respect. During the national movement he urged students to leave educational institutions in order to show to the British that Indians were no longer willing to be enslaved.

Mahatma Gandhi strongly felt that Indian languages ought to be the medium of teaching. Education in English crippled Indians, distanced them from their own social surroundings, and made them “strangers in their own lands”. Speaking a foreign tongue, despising local culture, the English educated did not know how to relate to the masses. Western education, Mahatma Gandhi said, focused on reading and writing rather than oral knowledge; it valued textbooks rather than lived experience and practical knowledge. He argued that education ought to develop a person’s mind and soul. Literacy- or simply learning to read and write- by itself did not count as education. People had to work with their hands, learn a craft, and know how different things operated. This would develop their mind and their capacity to understand.

Tagore’s “abode of peace”: Rabindra Nath Tagore started the institution named Santi-Niketan in 1901. As a child, Tagore hated going to school. He found it suffocating and oppressive. The school appeared like a prison, for he could never

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do what he felt like doing. So while other children listened to the teacher, Tagore's mind would wander away.

The experience of his schooldays in Calcutta shaped Tagore's ideas of education. On growing up, he wanted to set up a school where the child was happy, where she could be free and creative, where she was able to explore her own thoughts and desires. Tagore felt that childhood ought to be a time of self-learning, outside the rigid and restricting discipline of the schooling system set up by the British. Teachers had to be imaginative, understand the child, and help the child develop her curiosity. According to Tagore, the existing schools killed the natural desire of the child to be creative, her sense of wonder.

Tagore was of the view that creative learning could be encouraged only within a natural environment. So he chose to set up his school 100 kilometers away from Calcutta, in a rural setting. He saw it as an abode of peace (Santi-Niketan), where living in harmony with nature, children could cultivate their natural creativity.

Gandhi Ji was highly critical of western civilization and its worship of machines and technology. Tagore wanted to combine elements of modern western civilization with what he saw as the best within Indian tradition. He emphasized the need to teach science and technology at Santi-Niketan, along with art, music and dance.

Many individuals and thinkers were thus thinking about the way a national educational system could be fashioned. Some wanted changes within the system set up by the British, and felt that the system could be extended so as to include wider sections of people. Others urged that alternative systems be created so that people were educated into a culture that was truly national.

