

CHAPTER 1

The Origins and Operations of the Indian Education System, 1757—1947

IN 1757, when the East India Company embarked on its political career in India, there was no education system organised and supported by the state. Both Hindus and Muslims, however, had their own indigenous systems, each deeply rooted, with a great tradition of learning and scholarship behind them. By the early nineteenth century, however, the indigenous school of higher learning and the village elementary schools were in a state of decline.¹

From Plassey onwards, as the British started acquiring their empire in India, they were soon faced with the question of what should be their policy and attitude towards indigenous Indian institutions and practices. The first answer came from Robert Clive who believed that there should be as little interference as possible. The immediate reaction of the East India Company's officers in Bengal was, therefore, to support the indigenous system of education. In 1781, Warren Hastings founded the Calcutta Madrasah to provide the customary pattern of Islamic studies. In 1792, Jonathan Duncan, the Resident at Benares, established the Benares Sanskrit College. The Commissioner of Deccan, Mountstuart Elphinstone, established a college for Hindu learning at Poona. In the Delhi district, Mr. Fraser founded schools for the instruction of children of *Zamindars* in reading and writing the Persian language. These men were influenced by practical considerations: the need for Indian officers well-versed in Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic to assist them in governing the country, as well as the desire to cultivate the goodwill of the traditional

Hindu and Muslim elites. But some of them were also inspired by a genuine admiration of India's cultural heritage. This was the decade of the oriental scholarship of Sir William Jones and the formation of the Royal Asiatic Society.

This early policy of encouraging oriental education was soon questioned in England: The challenge came from three groups—the Evangelicals, the Liberals and the Utilitarians. As it happened, those of their numbers who were concerned with India included the foremost exponents of the day of each of these three points of view. While there were numerous differences between these groups, they were all agreed that Indian society had to be radically transformed. In the same year that Duncan was planning the Sanskrit College at Benares, Charles Grant who had been associated with the East India Company's administration in London and Calcutta was pleading for a different kind of education.⁴ He believed that Britain had a mission of regenerating Hindu society "and she must do so through the English language". "The Hindus erred because they were ignorant", and this darkness could be dispelled by the introduction of Christianity and the art and sciences of Europe". Grant's treatise⁵ was the beginning of Evangelical pressure on the Company to adopt a more positive education policy in India. While Grant and other members of the Clapham sect⁶ among whom was William Wilberforce, urged the Company to introduce English education as a means of propagating Christianity, there was also an undertone in their writings that religious reformation would bring about an economic and political regeneration in India as it had done in the West. Free Traders soon joined hands with them hoping that Anglicized Indians would be potential customers of British goods. Liberals, like Macaulay, were convinced of the superiority of western education. To the Evangelical and Liberal pressure was added that of the Utilitarians. In 1817, James Mill published his *History of British India*, a penetrating analysis of the defects of Indian society. Though a supporter of English as opposed to oriental learning, Mill unlike the Evangelicals and Liberals did not believe that education was the panacea for all India's ills. He placed greater faith in legislation and sweeping administrative reforms.⁵ In 1819, Mill was appointed Assistant Examiner in the East India

Company and thus he carried his ideas into India House. The despatches from the Court of Directors written by Mill now started condemning the plan to support oriental institutions as "originally and fundamentally erroneous"; the aim of education should be the promotion of "useful learning rather than what James Mill termed "obscure and worthless knowledge".⁸ The Utilitarian influence was further strengthened by the appointment of John Stuart Mill as Assistant Clerk in the Examiners' Office at India House in 1823.

It had been no part of the East India Company's original policy to impose a westernised system of education on its Indian subjects. Its lack of interest in education is not surprising since its primary motive was trade and it did not in any way wish to tamper with social and religious institutions. This was particularly so in the years after 1789 when the French Revolution produced a conservative reaction in Britain. Besides, in England, education at this time was mainly a function of the family and the Church, and not of the state. In the nineteenth century, while most European governments provided financial assistance for education, England, the richest state, was the slowest to act.

In 1813, primarily under the influence of Charles Grant, William Wilberforce and other members of the Clapham sect, Parliament included in the Company's Charter a clause which made it "not obligatory but lawful" for the Governor-General in Council to set apart for education a sum of not less than one lakh of rupees. This was to be spent on the "revival and improvement of literature and the encouragement of the learned natives of India" and "the introduction and promotion of a knowledge of the sciences among the inhabitants".⁷ There was, however, no clear directive as to how this one lakh of rupees had to be spent. The Court of Directors had initially tried to oppose the inclusion of this clause but was compelled to do so because of the Company's increasing financial dependence on the Government. The clause was a compromise inspired partly by Evangelical zeal for improvement and partly by the Company's knowledge that a negative attitude would no longer suffice. A via media had been suggested in Minto's Minute of 6-3-1811, in which he had stressed the Indian tradition of government patronage of learning and had suggested

that some such patronage might be revived.⁹ To begin with, the Company just continued the policy of encouraging Sanskrit and Arabic studies. Till 1823, it did little for education as it was more interested in wars, treaties and settlement of debts than in establishing schools.

The earliest efforts to introduce any form of education beyond the indigenous had emanated from the missionaries. Schwartz's schools in Tanjore, Ramnad and Shivaganga in the 1770s and 1780s were among the first to teach English to Indian Christians. Kierander started a school in Cuddalore. The Baptist Missionaries Carey, Marshman and Ward at Serampore, the London Mission Society, the American Methodists in Bombay, all did pioneering work. But all these missions were small affairs and it is doubtful whether in 1800 more than a thousand children were being educated in mission schools.⁹

Rich citizens of Calcutta and Bombay had in the meanwhile come forward to set up English schools and had been active, together with official and non-official Englishmen, in organising the Native School and Book Societies of Calcutta and Bombay.¹⁰ Individual European officials and businessmen such as Sir Edward Hyde East, David Hare, Sir Edward Ryan and James Young did much to promote English education in Calcutta. The culmination of these efforts was the foundation of the Hindu College in Calcutta in 1817 and the Elphinstone Institution in Bombay, a decade later.

In 1823, the Government appointed a General Committee of Public Instruction, and for the next decade the debate continued, both within the Committee and outside, as to whether the Company should encourage western or oriental learning, whether the medium of instruction should be English, a classical Indian language or the vernaculars and whether the aim should be mass education or schools for the elite.

In the meantime significant socio-economic changes were taking place in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. As a result of the Company's trade and the presence of British merchants, Indians found a knowledge of English very useful. Employment under the Company as clerks or in private agency houses was available to those who knew English. Consequently English education was becoming immensely popular. While Government had to pay Arabic and Sanskrit scholars, those

who learnt English were willing to pay themselves. Thousands of Arabic and Sanskrit books printed by the General Committee of Public Instruction lay unsold, but the Calcutta School Book Society was selling seven to eight thousand English books every year.¹¹ But not all Indians wanted to learn English only because it was useful for worldly success. There were those who believed that India must assimilate western knowledge for her own regeneration. The foremost of these was Raja Ram Mohun Roy who in a letter to Lord Amherst, the acting Governor-General, vigorously protested against the establishment of the Sanskrit College in Calcutta which would only "load the minds of youth with grammatical niceties and metaphorical distinctions of little or no practical use to the possessors or to society."¹² The students of Sanskrit College drew up a petition pathetically representing on the uselessness of their education.¹³ In the press and elsewhere, educated Bengalis were demanding more facilities for English education.¹⁴

The Committee of Public Instruction were not easily convinced.¹⁵ There were oriental scholars like H. H. Wilson and H. T. Prinsep who were supporters of the study of Indian classical languages. They maintained that there was public demand for indigenous learning and that the Charter Act of 1813 bound the Company to encourage it. Within the Committee there appeared in the 1830s a younger element which thought Sanskrit and Arabic studies a waste of time and money. The Committee was evenly divided between the Anglicists and the Orientalists and so the issue was submitted to the arbitration of the government. Macaulay was the President of the General Committee of Public Instruction as well as Law Member and so Bentinck turned to him for a ruling. The result was his famous Minute of 2 February 1835. Macaulay narrowed the problem to a decision on the medium of instruction to be adopted in higher education financed by the government. In view of the inadequacy of the vernaculars which he dismissed as "poor and rude", the choice, according to him, lay between English and the oriental classical languages. On grounds of utility and inherent merit of the knowledge it would give access to, he unhesitatingly decided in favour of English.¹⁶

Bentinck was a Liberal influenced by Benthamite and Utilitarian ideas.¹⁷ When confronted with the educational controversy, he supported Macaulay whose persuasive rhetoric no doubt moved him. But the Governor-General was also probably influenced by the views of his officials like Trevelyan and Metcalf, as well as by the Scottish missionary, Alexander Duff who shared Macaulay's supreme contempt for Indian classical learning. Barely a month after Macaulay had written his Minute, Bentinck put an end to the protracted controversy by ruling that "the great object of the British Government in India was henceforth to be the promotion of European literature and science among the natives of India; and that all the funds appropriated for the purpose of education would be best employed on English education alone."¹⁸

The Anglicists wanted the moral and social regeneration of India through assimilation of European ideas and knowledge. Many of the young civil servants of the East India Company influenced by Utilitarian and Evangelical ideas believed that England represented a higher civilization and had a moral mission to perform. Lord Grey, the Prime Minister in 1830, attached great importance to education as the foundation of progress in colonial areas.¹⁹

Spreading English education was not an act of disinterested magnanimity. It was to provide a positive bond between the rulers and the ruled. "The spirit of English literature cannot be but favourable to the English connection", wrote Trevelyan. English education would stop the Indians from regarding their rulers as foreigners and in fact make them "intelligent and zealous co-operators".²⁰ It would lead to the permanence and stability of the British raj. The political benefits of the diffusion of western knowledge were clearly perceived.

In framing his education policy Bentinck was also guided by practical administrative considerations. In 1833, when the Charter Act was passed, the East India Company was in the midst of a grave financial crisis. One of Bentinck's principal tasks was to economise and one of the main items of expenditure was the high pay of English officers. He, therefore, considered employing Indian subordinates in the judicial and revenue branches.²¹ The new modes of revenue assessment

under Regulation VII of 1822 and in Regulation IX of 1833 in the North-West Provinces were based on detailed investigations and survey, and this required the employment of a large number of Indians. Holt Mackenzie, in his evidence before the Parliamentary Committee in 1831-32, adduced facts and figures to prove that the finances of India would be improved by the employment of natives. He also argued that the employment of Indians would strengthen their attachment to British rule and improve their condition and character.²²

The East India Company's primary educational aim was to turn out clerks who could be employed cheaply; the Free Traders hoped that English educated Indians would develop a taste for the products of Lancashire. For the missionaries, the new education was the first step towards the conversion of Indians to Christianity. To the Liberals, what was important was the civilising and human influence of western learning. For Macaulay, the aim of English education was to form "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect"; a class which would serve as interpreters between the government and the millions whom it governed". This was a refinement of the idea of cultural conquest, first formulated by Charles Grant. Thus the decision to introduce English education was the result of a combination of complex economic, administrative, political, religious and moral motives. The pressure for introducing western learning was not confined to groups in England only. In India, missionaries as well as individual officers of the Company were working for it. By the 1820s there had also emerged an Indian demand for it. The impulse behind the educational changes did not, therefore, flow from the calculations of British policy-makers alone.

The popularity of English increased when it replaced Persian as the official and court language in 1837, and even more so when Lord Hardinge announced in 1844, that Indians who had received English education would get preference in all government appointments. Education in the new schools became a passport for entrance to the professions and government service.

1813 was the first important landmark in the East India Company's education policy; 1835 was the second. The next

important move came in 1854. In connection with the renewal of the East India Company's Charter in 1853 a Committee was set up to survey the educational scene in India. Its conclusions and recommendations were embodied in a Despatch from Sir Charles Wood, who was then President of the Board of Control.²⁵

The Government was under pressure to pursue a more active education policy. Among its suggestions put forward was that of starting universities. Sir Charles Trevelyan who was prominent in the educational controversies of the 'thirties', C. H. Cameron who had been the Law Member in the Governor-General's Council in the 'forties', the missionaries Alexander Duff and John Marshman were among those who urged the need of universities before the Select Committee of the House of Lords on India in 1853.²⁶ Wood was initially not too enthusiastic about universities. He did not visualise Indians being appointed to senior posts in any large numbers.²⁵ To encourage a university in such circumstances seemed to him both unnecessary and dangerous.

I care very little about teaching Hindoos to read Bacon and to be examined as we should for honours at Oxford. . . I am inclined to think that these highly educated natives are likely to be a very discontented class unless they are employed, and we cannot find employment for them all.²⁶

Wood was much more interested in the "useful avocations in a lower sphere."²⁷ Under pressure from Marshman and the missionaries, however, he agreed to the idea of universities primarily for examining and conferring degrees on students who came up from all kinds of colleges. He was against government subsidising higher education—"I am for leaving higher education to be mainly supported by those who are anxious for it."²⁸ Wood was attracted by the model of London University whose main purpose then was to hold examinations, affiliate colleges and grant degrees. Thus the Universities of Calcutta, Madras and Bombay were set up in 1857 on the model of London University.

Wood's Despatch also recommended the establishment of a

Department of Public Instruction and giving grants-in-aid where desired and deserved. With the establishment of the Education Departments and the Universities, the new education system took firm roots.

The policy laid down in 1835 and reaffirmed in 1854, was on the whole adhered to till 1947. Limited funds, administrative needs, small staff, and the inability to identify itself with the people, made the Company shrink back from the colossal task of educating millions in a multitude of languages with which they were not familiar. Prior to 1835, some officers had made efforts to promote mass education,²⁹ but these were discouraged³⁰ and the policy enunciated by Lord Auckland in 1839 was to concentrate on the education of the upper classes who have "leisure for study and whose culture would then filter down to the masses."³¹ This 'downward filtration theory' was not immediately successful because of the highly stratified nature of Indian society. Most of the educated men who usually came from the higher castes got comfortable jobs and became absorbed in bettering their own prospects than sharing their learning with the masses.

An excessive emphasis on examinations dominated high school and university teaching and encouraged cramming and parrot-like learning. Lessons were imparted in a mechanical way, learnt by rote and reproduced by students. A similar method of teaching had prevailed in the indigenous system of education as well as in elementary schools in Britain in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³² Growth of inquisitiveness and an experimental bent of mind were not cultivated. There was too much stress on information gathering and little effort was made to develop the students' problem-solving ability or critical faculties. The quality of teaching also suffered from a lack of trained teachers. The training of school teachers both at the primary and secondary levels was neglected. In 1936-37, the percentage of trained male teachers in government primary schools was 57.0 and of trained secondary school teachers 57.2, only 23.1 per cent of whom possessed any university degree.³³ In aided and unaided schools, the position was much worse.³⁴ Even the trained teachers were not of a particularly high calibre. Their salaries were low and

usually those who could not join government service or law became teachers.

As regards content, there was an over-emphasis on the study of languages and humanities.³⁵ Although Wood's Despatch made specific reference to the spread of western science and the Indian Education Commission (1882), the Calcutta University Commission (1917), the Sargent Committee (1944) etc., suggested the inclusion of natural sciences and of vocational and technical subjects in secondary schools,³⁶ these recommendations were ignored. Pleas for a more diversified curriculum in the high schools were repeated by successive committees right till 1947.³⁷

The main object at the elementary stage, where the mother-tongue was the medium, was to teach the three 'R's and some elementary geography, history and simple general knowledge related to day-to-day use.³⁸ The vast majority of Indians were educated in such schools.³⁹ Until about 1875-76, the term secondary school was not known, these were referred to as English schools, because English was the most important subject in the curriculum. Some knowledge of western literature and science was imparted but no modern Indian language was taught. Gradually the use of English as the medium of instruction at the lower level in schools was being abandoned, specially since the third decade of this century and almost completely by 1947, except in European and Anglo-Indian schools. However, the importance and popularity of English as a subject continued undiminished, since high schools were preparatory steps rather than self-contained stages and the medium in colleges continued to be English. A good deal of what was taught in colleges should have been really taught in schools and this led to lowering of standards of higher education.

The *laissez faire* policy, enunciated by the Indian Education Commission (1882), had led to the rise of numerous privately managed schools and colleges which charged low fees and admitted students freely. Many of them were inefficient, badly housed, poorly staffed, ill-equipped and over-crowded. They had become in fact coaching institutions with too many students and too little learning.

Till the closing years of the nineteenth century, though

these defects had been noticed, the problem had not appeared too serious because colleges and high schools were still few in number and small in size. But, as their numbers and enrolment continued to increase, many British officials became seriously concerned. Lord Curzon upon his arrival in 1898 felt that Indian education was in a mess and must be 'jiffed from this furrow' before it was finally 'dragged down and choked in the mire'.⁴⁰ The high hopes of early enthusiasts had faded and the system of public instruction was regarded as an example of what not to do. Criticism was directed against two points—the content of education and its political consequences.

It was from the time of Lord Dufferin that higher education came to be regarded as the root cause of the political unrest in the country. As the educated class became more vocal in their criticism, earlier doubts about the wisdom of launching English education through its passage in India were reinforced and gave new point to an awareness of its dangers in an Indian setting. Curzon's object in attacking the education system was not merely to make it more efficient but also politically safe for the *Raj*. Curzon formally abandoned the doctrine that the state should not interfere in education. In fact, he urged that government alone could ensure improvements. He felt that in its desire to decentralize, government had surrendered its control to a dangerous degree with the result that Indians were now in command and showed "a mischievous independence of government".⁴¹ There were too many schools and colleges managed by Indians, too many 'ill-educated *vakil*s' in the senates and too many *babus* in text-book committees.⁴² He wanted to re-assert government's "responsibility which there had been a tendency to abdicate".⁴³ He felt that from sheer lack of courage his predecessors had allowed university education to get out of hand, and that if left unreformed the Indian universities would develop into "nurseries of discontented characters and stunted brains".⁴⁴ He set about the task of framing a new education policy by summoning all the Directors of Public Instruction to a Conference in Simla in 1901. This was followed up by the appointment in 1902 of the Indian Universities Commission with Sir Thomas Raleigh as its Chairman. The Commission proposed reduction in the size of University senates and stricter condi-

tions of affiliation for colleges. The recommendations of the Commission led to the Indian Universities Act of 1904 which streamlined university governance and strengthened teaching at the university level to a small extent.

Educated Indians did not agree with the policy of control and improvement of quality. They held that a wide diffusion of English education was important, even if in some cases it was not up to the mark. Surendranath Banerjee, Pherozeshah Mehta, Gopal Krishna Gokhale and others attacked Curzon's University Bill because they felt that it would increase official control and restrict the growth of higher education.⁴⁵ Despite the storm raised by Curzon's Universities Act (1904), the changes actually brought about were small—"out of all proportion either to the amount of time and thought which the Viceroy had devoted to them or to the violence of the opposition with which they had been assailed".⁴⁶ Both the Raleigh Commission and the 1904 Act failed to influence the direction or ethos of higher education.

In 1917, Sir Michael Sadler was profoundly shocked by the state of Indian education. After an exhaustive enquiry he and his colleagues of the Calcutta University Commission (1917-19) found the University system of Bengal "fundamentally defective in almost every aspect".⁴⁷ In 1929, a Committee under Sir Philip Hartog's chairmanship⁴⁸ and in 1948 the Radhakrishnan Commission still complained about low standards and poor quality.⁴⁹

The same system seemed to satisfy most educated Indians, till the early years of this century. Then, gradually from the initial almost blind admiration, the attitude of many Indians turned to one of growing dissatisfaction. A number of educational movements were started directed towards the replacement of English by the mother tongue. Arya Samajists established a Gurukul at Hardwar in 1902 where Sanskrit was emphasised and Hindi was used as the teaching medium.⁵⁰ A year earlier Rabindranath Tagore started his experimental school at Shantiniketan where instruction was through Bengali.⁵¹ The educated elite which had been mainly interested in increased funds and facilities for higher education, began to demand free compulsory elementary education.⁵² Gopal Krishna Gokhale introduced a Bill in the Imperial Legislative Council asking

that a beginning be made to this direction⁵³ but the Government opposed this on the ground that it was premature and financially unsound.⁵⁴

Since the 1880s, educated Indians had been pressing for more government expenditure and facilities for technical education.⁵⁵ In 1887, the Victoria Jubilee Technical Institute had been established in Bombay largely through private efforts. In 1901 an Association had been started in Calcutta for the advancement of the Scientific and Industrial Education of Indians, the main object of which was to send students to Japan, the United States and other European countries.⁵⁶ The National Fund and Industrial Association of Madras, and the Indian Industrial Development Scheme in Bombay, were started with the same object in view. The leaders of the Swadeshi Movement in Bengal started a college of engineering and technology at Jadavpur in 1907, which started granting diplomas in mechanical engineering in 1908, and in chemical engineering in 1921.⁵⁷

There was a feeling among many nationalists that the existing schools and colleges were imparting an education which did not lead to the growth of patriotic sentiments or pride in one's country. It was to rectify this that 'national schools' were started in Bengal and Maharashtra at the turn of the century⁵⁸ and later by Mahatma Gandhi when he launched his first Non-co-operation Movement and asked students to boycott government schools and colleges.⁵⁹ Gandhiji also condemned the literary bias of the education system and its divorce from manual work. It was with this in mind that he launched his Basic Education or Wardha Scheme which envisaged free compulsory elementary education in the mother tongue for eight years, with the curriculum organised around manual and productive work.⁶⁰

In spite of the emphasis placed by the successive committees and commissions on improvement of quality and restriction of quantitative expansion, there was a continuous increase in the number of institutions as well as of the pupils under instruction. Table I gives the statistics of educational institutions and enrolment covering almost a hundred years from 1855 to 1947. Several conclusions emerge from this. The simple fact of growth is patent. There was a continuous