

DESTRUCTION OF THE INDIAN SYSTEM OF EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

During the time of the East India Company and later, in the British rule, there seem to have been two motives working in the minds of the rulers: plundering the wealth of this land and the 'white man's burden' of civilizing the natives (the term used by them to refer to all Indians). We shall see, how in order to achieve these ends, the British so cleverly played their cards that even after fifty years of independence we still continue to exist in a state of stupor, unable (and even unwilling!) to extricate ourselves from one of the greatest hypnoses woven over a whole nation.

Perhaps many of us do not know that India was the richest land till the British came here. Whereas Britain's share in world exports before was only 9% as against India's share of 19% today our share is only 0.5%. Most of the foreigners came to India in search of her fabulous wealth. Ernest Wood, in the book "A Foreigner defends Mother India" states, "In the middle of the eighteenth century, Phillimore wrote that 'the droppings of her soil fed distant regions'. No traveller found India poor until the nineteenth century, but foreign merchants and adventurers sought her shores for the almost fabulous wealth, which they could there obtain. 'To shake the pagoda tree' became a phrase, somewhat similar to our modern expression 'to strike oil'."

In India 35% to 50% of village lands were revenue free and that revenue was utilised for running schools, conducting temple festivals, producing medicines, feeding pilgrims, improving irrigation etc. The British in their greed brought down the revenue free lands down to 5%. When there was a protest they assured Indians that the government would create an irrigation department to take care of irrigation, an educational board to take care of education. etc. The initiative of the people was destroyed. But the rulers found to their chagrin, that though they had conquered this nation, it was still strongly rooted in its own culture. They found that as long as the nation was aware and even proud of its traditions, their 'white man's burden' remained as 'heavy and cumbersome as ever'! India had, at that time, a very well spread system of education and that system had to be made ineffective for their purposes. Now, most of us are taught to believe that the education was in the hands of the Brahmins and in Sanskrit medium and that the other castes had no education. But here are the facts about how the British destroyed the Indian educational system and made one of the most literate nations illiterate.

In the Round-table conference in 1931, Mahatma Gandhi in one of his speeches said, "The beautiful tree of education was cut down by you British. Therefore

today India is far more illiterate than it was 100 years ago." Immediately, Philip Hartog, who was a parliamentarian stood up and said, "Mr.Gandhi, it is we who have educated the masses of India. And therefore you must take back your statement and apologise or prove it." Gandhiji said he would prove it. But the debate did not continue for lack of time. Later one of his followers, Shri Dharampal, went to the British museum and examined the reports and archives. He published a book "The Beautiful Tree" where this matter has been discussed in great detail. By 1820, the British had already destroyed the financial resources that supported our educational system- a destruction that they had been carrying out for nearly twenty years. But still the Indians persisted in continuing with their system of education. So, the British decided to find out the intricacies of this system. Therefore a survey was ordered in 1822 and was conducted by the British district collectors. In the survey it was found that the Bengal presidency had 1 lakh village schools, in Madras there was not a single village without a school, in Bombay, if the village population was near 100, the village had a school. Teachers as well as students of all castes were in these schools. The Brahmins accounted 7% to 48% of the teachers, and the rest of the teachers in any district, came from other castes. Further all children had their education in their mother tongue.

The equivalent of the present day primary education lasted 4 to 5 yrs. We all know that it is universal primary education that is important for taking the nation ahead, not just a few getting higher education. The British administrators admired the dedication and capacity of the Indian teachers. By the time the students came out of the schools they had acquired the capacity to be competitive, and to understand and have proper insight into their own culture. One Mr.Bell, a Christian missionary in Madras took the Indian system of education back to England, and introduced it there. Until then, only the children of the nobles were given education there and he started education for the masses in England. So, we gather that it is from India that the British adopted the system for educating the masses.

THE CAUSE OF DEGRADATION: THE DOWNWARD FILTRATION METHOD.

But what happened in India? Foreign Christian missionaries even resented the nominal amount of one lakh rupees kept aside for the education of Indians. The British cut down the financial resources and brought in several regulations one after the other- regulations like "there has to be a 'pucca' building etc. That was not the end. They invited T.B. Macaulay to decide how to divert the money, what should be the medium of instruction and the mode of educating the Indian. He made English the medium of instruction and diverted the money for English education. G.D.Trevelyan writes in "Life of Lord Macaulay"(vol 1 pg164) "A new India was born in 1835". What Alexander, Ashoka and the western missionaries had failed to do was accomplished by Macaulay's educational minutes, decreeing that India was to receive through English education, the language of the West. "The very foundations of her ancient civilization began to rock and sway. Pillar

after pillar in the edifice came crashing down." But Macaulay did a more harmful thing, which is not generally known. He adopted the "downward filtration method" for educating the Indians. What is this method? The problem facing Macaulay was that Indians were numerous and The British were a handful. How were they going to educate the Indians? How could this nation be weakened so that in self-forgetfulness it would support the British Raj?

The story goes that once when he was in Ooty, in his residence, he saw an Indian officer coming and touching the feet of a peon sitting outside his office (which was near his residence.) and was obviously surprised. Why was an officer touching the feet of a peon? He was told, "You don't know, this Indian society is a peculiar one. Here the Brahmins are respected and the peon belongs to that caste." The changes that Macaulay brought after this are well documented and authenticated in books. The downward filtration method was formulated according to which the forward caste (even this was much later) was given preference in schools. To put it in his own words," But it is impossible for us with our limited means to educate all in English. We must at present do our best to form a class of persons Indian in blood and colour but English in tastes, in opinion, in morals, and in intellect.' To gauge how much he succeeded in his mission, we only need to look into the history of the Indian educated classes since that time onwards. The fact is that we have not tackled the Macaulayian issue even after Independence, and graver still, few realise that the problem exists at all. The system of giving preference to Brahmins in the govt. and missionary run schools went on for nearly hundred yrs. In the meantime other castes practicing any trade had lost their business due to the flooding of Indian markets with British goods and also due to the deliberate strangulation of their business by the British. Due to the land policy of the British, born out of their greed, the farmers had become landless labourers in their own lands, and the landlords the cruel stooges of the British. The systematic destruction of the Indian system of education deprived certain castes of education. Thus over a hundred years these castes had become impoverished and ignorant and the Brahmins who were supposed to lead the society became distorted in their understanding of things, due to foreign education.

THE DESIGNS OF MACAULAY FRUSTRATED

In Macaulay's letter dated 12th Oct.,1836, he wrote to his father:

"Our English schools are flourishing wonderfully; we find it difficult to provide instruction to all. The effect of this education on Hindus is prodigious. No Hindu who has received an English education ever remains sincerely attached to his religion. It is my firm belief that if our plans of education are followed up, there will not be a single idolater among the respected classes 30 years hence. And this will be effected without our efforts to proselytize; I heartily rejoice in the prospect'

That was the confidence with which they set out. But the missionaries, after years of toiling in vain realised that their efforts of proselytization had not been successful. So after some years there was a conference of missionaries in India in 1882. They sat together and discussed the effects of their education on the Brahmins. They found that though to an extent they were successful in taking away the Brahmins from their ideals, their conversion had not taken place. A decision to slowly target the other castes and tribals in their educational institutions, was taken. Till the British started ruling India most of the castes were educated and prosperous but the delicate policies of the British are responsible for their later condition. The Brahmins who were supposed to set the standards of behaviour in the society were targeted, and when they strayed away from their path they were blamed for the condition of the other castes. The point to note here is that they are responsible not because they kept all the education to themselves, as is generally believed, but because they allowed themselves to be intellectually corrupted by the British and because they entered into all the professions practiced by other castes. They also took on government jobs thus paving the way for competition and hatred among castes in the society. Today they stand discredited in general, and are no longer considered to be the examples to be followed. But although the Brahmins became corrupted, it is to the credit of all the other castes that though they too were targeted, they stood firm, and thus foiled the designs of the British.

But as the poison induced by Macaulay continues to weaken this nation, we hardly even care to know about "Indian thinking", Indian problems and Indian models and solutions to these problems. The best brains and the best energies are concentrated on evolving and applying western models and solutions. We seem to know less and less about our own nation. After all how does a nation die? One way is by physical destruction as the Europeans who settled in America destroyed whole civilizations there. Another is that people lose faith in their own way of life, their philosophies, their principles, their thought currents etc., and the nation is destroyed. Take for example, the Greek and Roman civilizations. What great civilizations they were! But there came a time when the intelligentsia lost faith in their own way of life, in their own wisdom. They adopted a totally different philosophy in their lives and where are these nations and their civilizations now? In a sense, in the museums and monuments!

Compare that with India! The land with the most ancient cultural continuity, the oldest living nation Greece did not physically die. People did not die. People now in Greece, Italy and Persia are the descendants of those who were the originators of those great civilizations. But today if we ask them what are the ideals that sustained their nation they would say, "we do not know, it is in the books; it is in the museum; you may refer to it better there." That is how a nation is destroyed, rather mummified. Now these countries are nothing more than geographical or political entities trying to evolve a nation out of their statehood. How does a nation get weakened? A nation gets weakened when the ignorance of the people about their own roots increases, or when they become ashamed of

themselves or of their forefathers. Actually that is where real regression of a nation starts. A nation which wants to forget about itself and imitate other nations cannot redeem itself but is on the path of self-destruction. The regression is there in our nation at present. And if we truly do not want to weaken ourselves as a nation, we need to extricate our educational system out of its Macaulayan traits, and obtain a fresh and untainted understanding of our ideals; for these have held us together as a nation for nearly ten thousand years. Then put them up for renewed enquiry before the younger generations so that if at all they are imbibed, they are expressed with feelings that become stronger, nobler and grander with time.