



The Role of Education in Shaping the Indian Middle Class during the British Rule: A Research Review

Tamanna Tanwar¹, Dr. Amit^{2*}, Dr. Ravi Prakash³

¹Student, M.A. History, Department of History, CBLU, Bhiwani, Haryana, India.

^{2,3}Assistant Professor, Department of History, CBLU, Bhiwani, Haryana, India.

*Corresponding Author

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Abstract— This research review explores the transformative role of education in shaping the Indian middle class during British colonial rule. The introduction of Western-style education, particularly after the Charter Act of 1813 and Macaulay's Minute of 1835, led to the emergence of a new socio-economic class that was distinct in its values, aspirations, and functions. The British colonial government promoted English education to create a class of intermediaries loyal to the empire, but the unintended consequence was the rise of a critical and politically conscious middle class. This emerging class comprised primarily educated Indians—teachers, clerks, lawyers, journalists and professionals, who played a vital role in the development of nationalist ideologies and socio-religious reform movements. Education became a tool of both empowerment and negotiation, enabling Indians to access modern professions while also confronting the contradictions of colonial dominance. The review highlights the dual nature of colonial education as both a means of cultural control and a catalyst for socio-political awakening. Drawing from historical sources and scholarly analyses, this study underscores how education contributed to reshaping caste dynamics, expanding urban consciousness, and redefining Indian identity. It also examines the gendered aspects of education, especially the limited but significant entry of women into the public sphere through schooling. Ultimately, this review reveals that colonial education was a complex and contested space that played a crucial role in the formation and articulation of the modern Indian middle class—a group that would become instrumental in the struggle for independence and postcolonial nation-building.



Keywords— Western Education, Downward Filtration Theory, Consciousness, Renaissance, Middle Class, Christian Missionaries, Wood's Dispatch.

I. INTRODUCTION

Modern education in India was introduced by the British during their colonial rule which emphasized the use of English as medium of learning and western style education. Modern education marked a significant shift from traditional Indian education which focused on Sanskrit Arabic and Persian. It has a profound impact on Indian middle-class society and economic fabric. Indian society developed through distinct phases before British rule. In the Vedic period a tribal pastoral society valued oral education centered on Vedic texts for spiritual growth with a simple social structure. The post Vedic era saw urban growth, trade

and religious life, Buddhism and Jainism, which questioned caste and boosted critical thinking, loosening social hierarchies. The gupta period, a peak of learning, advanced mathematics and astronomy via Nalanda university, but the caste system became rigid, shaping stratified society. After its decline, regional kingdoms emerged, the caste system grew complex with the emergence of sub-castes. Education shifted to local temples.

The traditional education system declined with many ancient universities and centers of learning being destroyed with Muslim invasion resulting in Turks, Afghans and converted Indian Muslims becoming part of Indian society.

During the sultanate period Islamic education was introduced with focus on Quran, hadith and Islamic law. Madrasa were established to provide Islamic education and became a center of learning. During the Mughal period, education was mainly religious. Muslim studied in madrasas, and Hindus in pathshalas. Subjects included Persian, Sanskrit, theology, philosophy, and mathematics. Society was divided by caste and religion, but Mughals promoted cultural harmony.

With the establishment of British rule in India, the British gradually realized the need of western educated people in their administration. Thus, they introduced western education and administrative changes due to which traditional learning declined and a new middle class emerged.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

>The book "History of Modern India" by Bipin Chandra is a superficial book which provides a broad overview of Indian modern history while not exclusively focusing on modern education policy but explaining how modern Education was implemented in India with the support of Christian missionaries and Indian elites and reformers. However, their intention differed, missionary wanted to destroy the faith of people in their own religion and let them to adopt Christianity while Indian reformer believe that modern Education would be the best remedy to address social, economic and political ills of the country.

>A letter on English Education by Raja Ram Mohan Roy to Lord Amherst written on 11th December 1823, in which Roy expressed his concern about the government's plan to establish a Sanskrit college in Calcutta. He believed that there were so many colleges and schools already in India of the particular subject and the learning of Sanskrit language was so difficult which hinder the progress of the country. He argued that instead of promoting Sanskrit, they should focus on teaching science, literature, and philosophy so that students could acquire practical knowledge.

>Thomas Babington Macaulay's "Minute on Education" (1835) was a landmark document that shaped British education policy in India. He advocated for English as the primary language of instruction, believing it would help Indians access Western knowledge and ideas and also emphasized the importance of teaching Western subjects like Science, Mathematics, and Literature, rather than traditional Indian subjects. He criticized traditional Indian education, calling it barbarous and useless. He aimed to create a class of Indian intellectuals who would be educated in Western thought and values, and could act as intermediaries between the British and Indian population.

>The article "Impact of Modern Education on Indian Society and Economy" by Dr. Shabir Ahmed Bhatt, attempts to justify the act of imposition of modern education in India by the British. It aims to explain that the British did not merely involve ruling and plundering India. But also reforming Indian society by eliminating social evils and superstitions by replacing the indigenous education system with the British education system.

>The book "An Advanced History of Modern India" by Sailendra Nath Sen explores the social and cultural awakening in the 19th century. It highlights the contribution of Orientalist and Anglicist like Charles Trevelyan and India liberals like Raja Ram Mohan Roy in promoting western education. The book discusses the emergence of Bengal Renaissance, Young Bengal movement, and key figures Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Derozio, Debendranath Tagore and Vidyasagar who championed Modern Education and women's rights. Furthermore, the book examines the growth of national movement influenced by western Ideas and philosophy, which challenged British colonial rule.

>Tara Chand's History of the Freedom Movement in India, Volume-2, (1967) provides a detailed analysis of Indian middle class and Modern Education. The book highlights the growth of European enterprise in India led to the development of a new middle class, and how they introduced English-medium education, through institutions like colleges and schools, creating an educated middle class comprising professionals such as lawyers, teachers, and journalists. This class, exposed to Western ideals of liberty, equality, and nationalism, became instrumental in driving the freedom movement, forming the backbone of organizations like Indian National Congress.

First Phase of Education:

The British East India Company showed a very little interest in education during the first phase of education (1758-1812). The two minor exceptions being the Calcutta Madrasa and Sanskrit college at Varanasi. The Asiatic Society of Bengal was another institution founded by the British in this phase but the purpose of the establishment of this society was just learning and research in Asia. When the British started to establish their colonies in India, initially the company's officials learned Persian and Sanskrit to communicate and understand the law and practices of locals thus not interested in the educational changes. They also employed Dwibhashi to serve as interpreter. Company's only motive was to maximize economic profit. For the first time "Lord Minto on 6th March 1811 in a memorable minute drew attention to the progressive decay of literature and science in Bengal and proposed the establishment of four new colleges"¹. Two for

the promotion of Sanskrit learning and two for Arabic and Persian. The proposal met with poor response from the court of directors. With the beginning of 19th c when the requirement for the administrative purpose increased and company's officials started recruiting educated Indians to fill various positions in the government which eventually gave birth to a new class that is middle class of India. "The Indian middle class which the British aimed at creating was to be a class of imitators, not the originators of new values and methods"².

In this phase, Christian missionaries played a very important role to change the local education system because they came to India to propagate Christianity which led them to preach gospel and opened schools for the education of children in a Christian atmosphere. Christianity in India has roots dating back to the 1st century AD but with the advent of Portuguese, it was resumed. "Both in the matter of conversation to Christianity and of education, missionary activity was, by and large, confined to lower classes among Hindus, while the influential upper class was secretly affected and the new middle class had not yet come into existence"³. In the second phase of missionary work in India, Alexander Duff, one of the most noted Christian missionaries, made up his mind to bring the youth of India under Christian influence with the help of modern education to gain entrance into the higher class of India society.

On the other hand, Indian reformers supported modern education because they wanted the society to get rid of social evils and superstitions by adopting modern education. Raja Ram Mohan, a pioneering figure, was the one who supported English Education in its initial phase. He himself worked with the East India Company which gave him insight into western ideas and administrative system, influencing his later reformist work.

Charter Act, 1813:

This Act was the first step to promote education and the beginning of British involvement in Indian education. It required the company to spend rupees 1 lakh annually on education and allowed Christian missionaries to promote religion. Controversy between Orientalists and Anglicists started just after the 1813 Charter Act about the medium of instruction and type of education to be imparted. Initially the committee was dominated by Orientalists. The Orientalist led by Princep brothers and H.H Wilson who favored indigenous education system while the Anglicist led by Indian liberals like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Sir Charles Trevleyan, Advocated for Western education with English medium, focusing on modern sciences, literature, and European thought to modernize India. In this context Ram Mohan Roy wrote a letter to lord Amherst on

December 11, 1823 advocating for the establishment of western style education system with English as a medium of instruction and expressed concern about the effectiveness of promoting Sanskrit education and wrote "we find that the government are establishing a Sanskrit college under Hindu pandit to impart such knowledge as is already current in India. This seminary can only be expected to load the minds of youth with grammatical niceties and metaphysical distinction of little or no practical use to the possessors or to the society"⁴. He critiqued the traditional Sanskrit education system.

The General Committee of Public Instruction (1823):

After ten years of the Charter Act, 1813, The general committee of public instruction formed by the governor general in council to oversee and guide education in the Bengal presidency. The committee was formed of ten members. H.T Princep and H.H Wilson were also the members of the committee. The committee faced a problem over how to spend the fund which was allotted in 1813, Charter Act but the controversy between Anglicist and orientalist was settled in 1835, when Macaulay favored western education and English as a medium of instruction by saying that "I am quite ready to take the oriental learning at the valuation of the orientalists themselves. I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia"⁵ English education being prioritized over Sanskrit and Persian learning.

Macaulay's Minute on Education:

In 1834, Thomas Babington Macaulay, as a member of the Governor-General's Council, arrived in India. He was a staunch Anglicist, believing Western education was superior. Later William Bentick appointed Macaulay as the president of the committee. On Feb. 2, 1835, Macaulay delivered his famous minute on Indian education - advocating for English education in India to create a class of Indians who could serve as intermediaries between the British ruler and Indian masses according to him- "We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect"⁶.

English Education Act, 1835:

This Act made English the medium of instruction in schools and colleges and very soon English replaced Persian as an official language in higher Branches of administration, while in district administration vernacular language become the official medium in place of Persian. The Government policy of opening a few English schools instead of a large number of elementary schools led to the neglect of masses. Lord Macaulay promoted an educational theory that is

Downward filtration theory. This theory assumed that western education would trickle down from the elite to masses in India which was rejected in 1854, Wood's Dispatch.

Wood's Dispatch:

The dispatch of 1854 proposed by Charles Wood favored primary education, women education, promotion of vernacular languages and establishment of universities and laid stress on mass education. "The main object of the former despatch is to divert the efforts of the Government from the education of the higher classes, upon whom they had up to that date been too exclusively directed, and to turn them to the wider diffusion of education among all classes of the people; and especially to the provision of primary instruction for the masses"⁷. This Act led the establishment of universities in major cities such as Calcutta, Bombay and Madras.

Emergence of Indian Middle Class:

The political and social systems were against capitalism and hindered the growth of the business class in India before the British intervened in the Indian system of economy resulting in the emergence of the middle class in India. Initially the growth of European enterprise in India led to the development of a new middle class, primarily in urban centers such as Bombay, Calcutta, Madras that served as commercial and administrative hubs. In the Western countries the middle classes emerged basically as a result of economic changes and technological advancement But in India they emerged more in consequence of changes in public administration, land and legal policies followed by the introduction of Western education and economic changes. As the East India Company established its trade in India, it relied heavily on local assistance and cooperation. As its business grew, more Indians were drawn into its sphere of influence, taking on various roles such as Contractors, Dadani merchants, brokers, Shroffs and Dubhasis. The traditional Indian social classes gave way to new groups that were distinct in wealth, education, profession, and occupation, yet shared common characteristics that defined them as a single social class. In between the foreign rulers and the Indian masses came the new middle class which was composed of landed gentry, the businessmen and the professional group. The spearhead of the society was the educated section.

Impact of Western Education on Indian Middle Class:

The credit for the emergence of consciousness in the middle class goes to modern education and western thoughts as well. Modern education created opportunities for professional advancement, cultural transformation, introduced modern ideas of governance and socio- religious

reform, women empowerment, and fostered a sense of nationalism.

Emergence of Socio-Religious Movements:

During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, several reformers worked tirelessly to eradicate social evils and bring about significant changes in Indian society. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, a pioneering figure, championed women's rights and education and played a crucial role in abolishing Sati through the Bengal Sati Regulation Act of 1829. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, a prominent social reformer and educator, advocated for women's education and widow remarriage, leading to the passage of the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act in 1856. Other notable reformers included Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, who promoted rational thinking and social reform through the Young Bengal Movement, and Jyotiba Phule and Savitribai Phule, who worked to promote education for women and lower castes, challenging the prevailing social hierarchy. These reformers, along with others, contributed significantly to the social and intellectual awakening of India during this period.

In the awakening of Bengal, which had been compared in some aspects with the Renaissance of Europe, the contribution of the Serampore missionaries was not negligible. William Carey's work for Bengali was laying the foundations of modern Bengali prose. He established the Serampore Mission Press, which played a crucial role in publishing Bengali texts, including the first Bengali newspaper, "Samachar Darpan". William Carey collaborated with a group of Indian writers, including Mrityunjay Vidyalankar, Ram Ram Basu, Rajib Lochan Mukhopadhyay, Chandi Charan Munshi, and Mohan Prasad Thakur, among others. These individuals were all involved with Fort William College, an institution established by the British primarily to train civil servants in Indian languages and customs. their association with Western scholars and missionaries like William Carey, suggests they were exposed to and influenced by Western educational methodologies. These Indian scholars and writers played a significant role in translating and producing literary works, contributing to the Bengal Renaissance and the development of modern Bengali literature. Carey's association with them helped facilitate cultural exchange and intellectual growth.

In the late 19th century, Arya Samaj, Prarthana Samaj, and Satya Sodhak Samaj played significant roles in Indian society as social and religious reform movements. These movements contributed to the country's social and cultural awakening, challenging traditional practices and promoting progressive ideas.

Cultural Transformation:

English became a prominent language for communication and exchange of ideas and symbol of status among educated Indians. "The old upper classes might scorn the foreign tongue, but the new class was impatient to avail itself of the opportunities which the new order offered them. English promised to be the talisman which could open new vistas of wealth and influence, of material gain, and, therefore, of advancement in social status and personal dignity."⁸

Women Empowerment:

Many significant legislative reforms such as Abolition of Sati Act in 1829, Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act in 1856, Age of Consent Act in 1891, Sharda Act in 1929, aimed at empowering women, were driven by both British officials and Indian reformers. These reforms were influenced by modern western education, which introduced new ideas and perspectives that challenged traditional Indian society. Raja Rammohan Roy campaigned vigorously against Sati. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar played a pivotal role in the enactment of Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act. "Rammohun had already argued that no substantial improvement in the condition of women can be brought about without giving them the right to property. He had also identified lack of education as the principal reason for their inferiority"⁹. Along with Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj and Ramakrishna Mission, Christian missionaries also played an important role in promoting female education by establishing Girls' schools. In 1916 Indian Women's University was established, promoting women's education and empowerment. "The steady growth of women's education was reflected in the fact that the number of girls attending school rose from 1,230,000 in 1917 to 2,890,000 in 1937"¹⁰. "As late as 1920 only two out of 100 Indian women were able to read and write; and in 1919, only 490 girls were studying in the four top forms of higher school in Bengal presidency"¹¹.

Scientific & Rational Approach:

The newly emerged middle class was not rigidly stereotyped into caste, although the old upper classes predominated among them. They possessed a mobility which permitted change of occupation and avocation.

Role of the Middle Class in the Development of Press & Literature:

Newspapers played a crucial role in shaping public opinion, promoting social reform, and fueling the nationalist movement. Press in India was first introduced by the Portuguese. In 1557, Portuguese missionaries established the first printing press in Goa. Later many newspapers such as Hicky's Bengal gazette (1780), The Bengal Hurkaru and chronicle, The Bombay gazette (1789), Madras courier

(1785), Mirat-ul-Akhbar (1822), Sambad Kaumudi (1821) published. Initially the Indian press was more concerned with social and religious affairs more which later shifted to politics. The middle class, often educated and urban, played a pivotal role in shaping the press. The Hindu (1878), Amrita Bazar Patrika (1868), Kesari (1881), Bengalee (1862), Indian Mirror (1861), The Tribune (1881), Hindoo Patriot (1853), These newspapers were primarily run by middle-class individuals—lawyers, teachers, journalists, and reformers—who were educated in Western or traditional systems. The Young Bengal Movement made significant contributions to the Indian press during the early 19th. The Enquirer and Bengal Spectator (1840s) promoted rationalism and reformist ideas, education, and focused on political rights, continuing Derozio's legacy. The Enquirer strongly condemned the activities of the general committee of public instruction as it patronized traditional Hindu learning through Sanskrit college. Press, particularly the vernacular press, faced many restrictions due to criticism of colonial policies. These restrictions and censorship were met with resistance from Indian journalists and nationalists who saw the press as a crucial tool for raising awareness, education, and mobilizing public opinion against colonial rule. "The progress of education has in all countries been intimately and naturally connected with the liberty of the Press"¹².

Economic & Occupational Changes:

Economic changes led by the British to secure their economic benefits in India, became the major cause of the emergence of the middle class and decline of the previous upper class. The advent of modern education and new employment opportunities led to a significant shift in India's occupational landscape. As traditional industries and commercial activities declined, many conventional occupations became obsolete. With limited industrial, commercial, or social service opportunities, Indians increasingly turned to modern education as a means to secure government jobs, which offered a path to respectable livelihoods. This transition marked a substantial change in the country's economic and social fabric.

Political Awareness & Consciousness:

By the 1880's the educated middle classes had begun to exercise a palpable degree of political influence. Many political organizations such as landlords' society (1837), Bengal British India society (1843), British India association (1851), madras native association (1852), Poona Sarvajanik Sabha (1870), Bombay presidency association (1885), Indian national association (1876), Indian national congress (1885) formed till the end of 19th century by the educated elites. By bringing people together, these

organizations helped build a sense of national identity and unity among diverse groups.

Emergence of Nationalism:

The spread of modern education in 19th-century India sparked a profound transformation in thought and ideology. As a result, a significant number of Indians adopted a modern, rational, and secular worldview, embracing democratic values and nationalist sentiments. They drew inspiration from European nationalist movements, studying and admiring the struggles for freedom and self-determination led by figures like Mazzini and Garibaldi, as well as the Irish nationalist movement. Furthermore, they immersed themselves in the ideas of Western thinkers such as Rousseau, Paine, Jones, Stuart Mill, and others, whose writings on liberty, equality, and democracy profoundly shaped their own aspirations for India's future. This exposure ignited a desire to emulate these movements and ideologies, fueling India's own quest for independence and self-expression.

Growth of Political Activities & Freedom Movement:

Many middle-class leaders, including Surendranath Banerjee, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Dadabhai Naoroji, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawahar Lal Nehru and Lala Lajpat Rai, played a pivotal role in dominating the freedom movement. As they were educated and influenced by Western ideas, they utilized constitutional methods to challenge British rule. Press was the powerful tool for mobilizing anti-colonial sentiment and laying the groundwork for independence. Non-cooperation movement, Civil disobedience movement, Quit India movement became the mass movement ultimately led India to freedom. Modern western education and ideas empowered the leading figures of these movements to challenge colonial policies, fostering a sense of political consciousness and unity that fueled the freedom struggle, while also reshaping middle-class aspirations and identity.

III. CONCLUSION

Modern education introduced by the British in India. The initial economic policies of the British East India Company and their administrative changes unwittingly gave birth to the Middle class. Modern education played a transformative role in shaping Indian middle-class society. It awakened political consciousness, western democratic ideals and created a class of intellectuals, reformers and nationalist leaders. The educated middle class became the driving force behind social reforms, economic awareness and political movements and challenged colonial rule and contributed to India's freedom struggle and laid the foundation for a progressive, democratic society post-independence.

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