



THE EDUCATIONAL POLICIES OF THE BRITISH AND THEIR IMPACT ON INDIGENOUS EDUCATION IN NORTH INDIA (1854–1947)

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Abstract

This paper examines the educational policies pursued by the British colonial government between Wood's Despatch of 1854 and Indian Independence in 1947, and their cumulative impact on the indigenous educational institutions of North India — principally the pathshalas, maktabas, and madrasas of the North-Western Provinces, Oudh, and later the United Provinces. It traces the shift from the pre-colonial landscape of decentralised, community-funded vernacular schooling documented in early colonial surveys, through the formalisation of a state education system under Wood's Despatch, the mid-course corrections attempted by the Hunter Commission of 1882, and the later reassessments of the Sadler Commission (1917–19), the Hartog Committee (1929), the Wardha Scheme (1937), and the Sargent Report (1944). The paper argues that colonial policy, while formally committed to supporting and improving indigenous schools through mechanisms such as grants-in-aid, in practice subordinated vernacular and religious education to an English-medium, examination-driven system oriented toward the production of clerical and administrative labour. This produced a lasting bifurcation between an anglicised urban elite and a rural population whose traditional educational institutions were starved of patronage, contributing to the low literacy rates and structural inequalities that independent India inherited in 1947.

Keywords: British colonial education; North India; Wood's Despatch; Hunter Commission; indigenous education; pathshala; madrasa; vernacular education; Sadler Commission; Wardha Scheme; literacy

1. Introduction

The history of education policy in colonial North India offers a particularly clear illustration of the broader tension between the declared aims and the practical effects of British rule. Between the promulgation of Wood's Despatch in 1854 — often described as the "Magna Carta of English

education in India" — and Independence in 1947, successive colonial commissions and despatches repeatedly professed a commitment to the improvement and expansion of indigenous schooling even as the structural logic of colonial administration, revenue constraint, and English-medium elite formation worked against that professed aim. This paper focuses on North India — broadly, the North-Western Provinces and Oudh, reconstituted from 1902 as the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh — a region with an unusually well-documented pre-colonial network of vernacular and religious schools, to examine how colonial policy reshaped, and in important respects undermined, indigenous educational institutions over nearly a century of British rule.

2. Indigenous Education before Formal Colonial Intervention

Early colonial surveys, most famously William Adam's reports on vernacular education in Bengal and Bihar in the 1830s, and subsequent district-level investigations in the North-Western Provinces, documented a dense, decentralised network of indigenous schools that predated and existed independently of British administration. These included Hindu pathshalas, typically run by a single teacher and funded through fees, land grants, or community patronage, teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic through vernacular languages such as Hindi, Urdu, and regional dialects; and Islamic maktabas and madrasas, which combined religious instruction in Persian and Arabic with basic literacy and numeracy, often attached to mosques or supported by waqf endowments. This system was informal, unevenly distributed, and almost entirely outside government oversight, but it was also embedded in local social and economic life in ways that later colonial institutions, however better resourced, struggled to replicate.

3. From Macaulay's Minute to Wood's Despatch

The 1835 Minute on Indian Education by Thomas Babington Macaulay had already set an important precedent by asserting the primacy of English-medium, Western-content education over Oriental and vernacular learning, on the reasoning that a class of persons "Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste" would serve as intermediaries between the government and the wider population. This orientation was substantially formalised nearly two decades later by Wood's Despatch of 1854, issued under Sir Charles Wood as President of the Board of Control. The Despatch recommended the creation of a Department of Public Instruction in each of five provinces, including the North-Western Provinces, headed by a Director assisted by inspectors; the establishment of universities on the London model, realised at Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras in 1857 and later at Punjab (1882) and Allahabad (1887); a hierarchical pyramid of institutions

from primary schools through high schools to university; and, significantly for the fate of indigenous education, a system of grants-in-aid intended to extend government support to private institutions, explicitly including existing indigenous schools, provided they met specified standards of instruction.

In principle, the grant-in-aid mechanism offered a route by which pathshalas and maktabas could be incorporated into, and strengthened by, the new state system without being replaced by it. In practice, implementation over the following decades was constrained by chronic underfunding, a pronounced administrative preference for English-medium and Anglo-vernacular institutions where government employment prospects were concentrated, and a persistent bias among district officials toward measurable, examination-based outcomes that indigenous schools, with their more informal pedagogy, were poorly positioned to meet. The consequence, widely noted by contemporaries and later scholars alike, was that indigenous schools remained comparatively neglected relative to the government and missionary institutions that absorbed the bulk of new investment.

4. The Hunter Commission and the Politics of Primary Education

By the late 1870s it was apparent that primary education, intended by Wood's Despatch to form the base of the educational pyramid, had received the least attention and investment of any tier. The Indian Education Commission of 1882, chaired by Sir William Hunter and appointed by Viceroy Lord Ripon, was the first education commission with substantial Indian membership and was tasked specifically with reviewing the progress of the 1854 Despatch. Its report, submitted in 1883 after ten months of province-by-province investigation, recommended transferring responsibility for elementary education to newly created district and municipal boards under the Local Self-Government Act, reaffirmed and extended the grant-in-aid principle to cover a wider range of private and indigenous institutions, and introduced a controversial "payment by results" mechanism linking grants to examination performance. While this produced a measurable rise in enrolment at the primary and secondary levels over the following two decades, critics both contemporary and subsequent argued that payment by results distorted indigenous pedagogy toward rote preparation for standardised tests, further eroding the distinctive character of pathshala and maktab instruction in favour of a curriculum defined by colonial administrative priorities.

5. Higher Education, Communal Institution-Building, and the Limits of State Provision

The gap left by the state's uneven support for indigenous primary education was partially filled, particularly from the 1870s onward, by community-led institution-building that combined religious or communal identity with a modernising educational agenda. In North India this produced institutions such as the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh, founded by Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan in 1875 (later Aligarh Muslim University), which sought to reconcile Islamic education with English-medium instruction and modern science; the Dayanand Anglo-Vedic (DAV) school and college movement associated with the Arya Samaj, which combined Vedic instruction with a modern curriculum; and the Central Hindu College at Banaras, founded in 1898 and later absorbed into Banaras Hindu University in 1916. These institutions were not, strictly speaking, continuations of the older pathshala and madrasa tradition, but represented a distinct, community-financed response to the colonial state's failure to adequately fund either indigenous vernacular schools or accessible higher education for Indians, illustrating how educational initiative increasingly passed to religious and social reform organisations operating alongside, rather than through, the government system.

6. Early Twentieth-Century Reassessments: Sadler, Hartog, and Wardha

The early twentieth century brought a series of official reassessments of the education system's shortcomings. The Calcutta University Commission of 1917–19, chaired by Michael Sadler, though focused nominally on university education, offered an influential critique of the entire system's overemphasis on examination and English-medium instruction at the expense of vernacular grounding and vocational relevance. The Hartog Committee of 1929 similarly criticised the poor quality and high wastage (dropout) rates in primary education and recommended consolidating resources on fewer, better-run schools rather than continuing to spread limited funds across a large number of poorly resourced ones — a recommendation that, if implemented, risked further marginalising the smaller indigenous institutions it was ostensibly meant to strengthen. The most significant indigenous counter-proposal of the period came from Mahatma Gandhi's Wardha Scheme of Basic Education (1937), developed through the All India National Education Conference, which explicitly rejected the colonial curriculum's alienation from productive craft work and proposed a vernacular, craft-centred, self-financing model of primary education rooted in Indian social and economic conditions — a direct nationalist critique of the trajectory set in motion by Wood's Despatch eight decades earlier.

7. The Sargent Report and the Approach to Independence

The final major colonial education policy document, the Sargent Report of 1944, produced by the Central Advisory Board of Education, proposed an ambitious forty-year plan for universal, free, and compulsory elementary education, along with a substantially expanded system of secondary, technical, and university education. Its proposals, however, were never implemented under colonial rule, overtaken first by the demands of the Second World War and then by the transfer of power in 1947. North India entered Independence with literacy rates that remained low by any absolute standard, a primary education system still heavily dependent on a small number of urban centres, and a persistent divide between an English-educated administrative and professional elite and a much larger rural population whose access to schooling — whether through surviving indigenous institutions or the underfunded government primary system — remained limited and uneven.

8. Assessing the Impact on Indigenous Education

Taken as a whole, the record of British educational policy in North India between 1854 and 1947 reveals a persistent gap between stated intention and practical outcome. Successive despatches and commissions repeatedly affirmed the value of vernacular and indigenous education and proposed mechanisms, chiefly the grant-in-aid system, intended to support it. In practice, however, the incentive structure of colonial administration — the concentration of government employment in English-medium graduates, the preference for measurable examination outcomes, chronic fiscal constraint on primary education, and an underlying assumption, traceable to Macaulay, that English and Western learning represented a superior civilisational standard — consistently channelled resources and prestige away from pathshalas, maktabas, and madrasas and toward Anglo-vernacular and English-medium institutions. Indigenous schools that survived did so increasingly at the margins of the formal system, sustained by community and religious patronage rather than by the state support that Wood's Despatch had, in principle, promised them.

9. Conclusion

British educational policy in North India between 1854 and 1947 produced a formally impressive institutional architecture — departments of public instruction, universities, a graded system of schools, and a succession of reform commissions — that nonetheless failed to arrest, and in significant respects accelerated, the decline of indigenous educational institutions. The colonial state's structural preference for English-medium, examination-oriented schooling, driven by the

administrative needs of empire rather than by the educational needs of the wider population, left independent India in 1947 with an educational inheritance sharply divided between a small anglicised elite and a much larger population underserved by both the surviving remnants of indigenous schooling and the incomplete colonial state system that had been built, at least partly, at their expense.

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