



# The University Machine<sup>1</sup>: Critiquing the Colonial Education System in R K Narayan's *The Bachelor of Arts*

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This paper examines a crucial episode of colonial educational policy in India during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century - a period of about five decades from Wood's Education Despatch of 1854 to Lord Curzon's University Act in 1902 and the effects of this education system upon the natives with reference to R. K. Narayan's *The Bachelor of Arts*. As compared with India under the Company, this era was a period of peace and tranquility and is different regarding the attitude of the Indian people towards their British conquerors. Prior to 1854, there was a general unwillingness (except a few persons of the upper class) to study the language of the British, to understand their culture, and generally to come into closer relations with them. After 1902, there was again "a parting of the ways because the national sentiment had been reawakened and the Indian people had begun their 'war' against the British rulers" (Nurullah and Naik 125). Between 1854 and 1902, there existed the most harmonious relations between the rulers and the ruled. This peaceful social atmosphere was also supportive to the progress of education in India. The paper aims at the exploration of how new identity was created through education during this period by reassessing the educational policy taken by the colonial government to educate its colonized subjects. R. K. Narayan, himself a product of this education system, criticized it through the character of Chandran in *The Bachelor of Arts*. The novel describes in detail the last year of Chandran's graduation in Albert College and points out the imperialistic nature of the colonial education system.

The educational policies during the second half of the nineteenth century were formulated by two main documents- the Despatch of 1854 and the report of the Indian Education Commission of 1882-83. The Education Despatch of 1854, popularly and perhaps incorrectly, known as Wood's Despatch of 1854 laid the foundations of the system which emerged out of the various experiments and steps taken in education by Dalhousie and his predecessors till 1853. The education Despatch of 1854 which is divided into 100 paragraphs, expresses the factors that led the court of Directors to frame a comprehensive education policy for British India:

It is one of our most sacred duties to be the means, as far as in us lies, of conferring upon the natives of India those vast moral and material blessings which flow from the general diffusion of useful knowledge, and which India may, under Providence, derive from her connexion with England. (Richey 364)

The Despatch emphatically declares in paragraph 7 that the nature of Education was to be "improved arts, science, philosophy and literature of Europe" (Richey 366). Regarding the medium of instruction, it did not "desire to substitute the English languages, for the vernacular dialects of the country" (367). The Despatch points out in paragraph 13:

It is indispensable, therefore, that, in any general system of education, the study of them should be assiduously attended to, and any acquaintance with improved European knowledge which is to be communicated to the great mass of the people- whose circumstances prevent them from acquiring a high order of education, and who cannot be expected to overcome the difficulties of a foreign language- can only be conveyed to them through one or other of those vernacular languages. (367)

The Despatch agrees at the necessity for the establishment of universities to "encourage a regular and liberal course of education by conferring academical degrees as evidence of attainment in the different branches art and science and by adding marks of honour for those who may desire to complete for honorary dictionary" (371). The Despatch is also remarkable for the development of the system of great-in-aid, which has been so successfully adopted in England. This "aid was to be given on the basis of complete religious neutrality in all schools imparting a good scholar education under satisfactory local management and government inspection" (Ghosh 356). The Despatch pays attention to the questions of providing trained teachers and

suitable textbooks in the schools and recommended professional training in Law, Medicine and Civil Engineering. It stresses “the urgent need to establish vocational colleges and schools of industry and the urgency of spreading education among women” (357). Following the recommendation made in the Despatch, Lord Canning, in January 1857, passed the Acts of Incorporation which provided for the establishment of universities in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras on the model of the University of London. A considerable development in higher education is shown in the next two decades. The number of affiliated colleges under these universities had risen from 27 in 1857 to 72 by 1881-82. The number of students was also increased. “In 1857 the number of students who successfully passed the first matriculation examination of the universities was only 219 (C.U-162, M.U-36, B.U-21) but by 1881-82 it had risen to 2778 out of 7429 candidates who had appeared” (366). There was also a considerable increase in the growth of secondary schools in all the five provinces. In 1854, the number of government schools was 169, attended by 18,335 students. In 1882 it rose to 1362 attended by 44605 students (364). But the scenario in elementary education was disappointing. Out of a total population of 195,895,127 in the whole of British India only 20, 61,541 attended elementary schools in 1881-82 (317).

In view of the slow progress of the primary education, in February 1882, Lord Ripon appointed the first Indian Education commission with William Hunter, a member of his Executive Council, as its Chairman “to enquire particularly into the manner in which effect had been given to the principal of the Despatch of 1854 and to suggest such measures as it might think desirable with a view to the further carrying out of the policy therein laid down”. The commission was appointed, as S.C. Ghosh points out, partly because of an agitation alleging the neglect in primary education in India and partly because “a national system of compulsory elementary education was built up in England two years ago with the passing of the Elementary Education Act in 1880” (369). The commission submitted its report in 1883 and the most notable part of its recommendations was that it freed the government from the responsibilities of mass education by entrusting these to the local boards and suggested a gradual transfer of government colleges and secondary schools to efficient private bodies. The management of primary education was left to the local boards introduced in India by Lord Ripon’s Local Self-Government Act. These boards, modeled on the Country Councils which managed primary education in England, were responsible for the management and

expansion of primary education of a particular locality (371). With all these recommendations the missionary hope of dominating the field of education was lost. S.C. Ghosh argues that there was a stronger political reason for this governmental withdrawal. By the end of 1870's, it was realized that the British education system was "raising a number of discontented and disloyal subjects" and the gradual extensions of the use of Western method of agitation and organisation acquired through the universities and colleges by the educated Indians was posing a real danger to British Rule in India (375).

If we look into the educational scenario in the post-Hunter Commission years, the progress of primary education was not satisfactory. Between 1885-86 and 1901-02, the increase in the number of pupils was only 66, 00,000 as compared to nearly 2, 00,000 between 1870-71 and 1885-86 (376). However, secondary and higher education showed considerable progress. The number of secondary schools rose from 3916 in 1881-82 to 5124 in 1901-02 and the number of students rose from 2, 14,077 in 1881-82 to 5, 90,129 in 1901-02. By 1901-02 the number of colleges had risen from 68 in 1881-82 to 179. Punjab University and Allahabad University were established in 1882 and 1887 by Special Act of Incorporation. Thus by the end of 1901-02, there were "five universities in India conferring degrees and diplomas on candidates who had successfully gone through a prescribed course of learning in an affiliated college" (370).

The colonial education policy failed to create a national system of education in India. The main reason behind it, as Syed Nurullah and J.P. Naik has rightly pointed out, is "the imperialistic nature of the British power" (357). The missionaries looked upon India as a recruiting ground for Christianity and the Company regarded her as a field of commerce and profit as expressed in 1854 Despatch:

This knowledge will teach the natives of India the mervellous results of the employment of labor and capital, rouse them to emulate us in the development of the vast resources of their country guide them in their efforts and gradually, but certainly, confer upon them all the advantages which accompany the healthy increase of wealth and commerce; and, at the same time, secure to us a larger and more certain supply of many articles necessary for our manufacturers and extensively consumed by all classes of our population. (Richy 365)

With this kind of attitude the proper synthesis of the two cultures became difficult, if not impossible. The majority of the British officials believed, with Kipling, that “East is East and the West is West; and never the twin shall meet”<sup>2</sup> and sneered at “Babu English”<sup>3</sup>. The nationalist Indians, on the other hand, evolved “a defiant and challenging, instead of receptive, attitude to Western culture” (Nurullah and Naik 358).

Educational progress of a nation is always proportional to the development in social, political and economic spheres of life. British educational policy during the era was inimical to such advancement. In order to create a feeling of national solidarity, the educational policy should inspire communal and religious harmony. In spite of doing that, the British educational policy allowed the education of two major communities of India- Hindus and Muslims- to grow in isolation from each other. The economic aspects of the British Rule were not adequate for the educational progress. “In 1859-60 education in Bengal received 1,032,021 rupees from the British government, which was about the same amount spent on rebuilding army barracks that year. The founding of education continued to be a low priority for the British throughout their rule” (Tharoor 226). Tharoor also points out that between 1882 and 1897, a fifteen year period which was marked by a significant expansion of public education worldwide, “the appropriation for the army in India increased by twenty-one and-a-half times the increase for education” (226). Furthermore, the educational development during the time which gave much stress on university education, were restricted to a small group of urban population only and thus “led to the division of Indian society into two distinct groups- a small minority of educational aristocracy which was distinctly urban and upper class in character, and a large majority of almost illiterate people who lived in rural areas and belonged to the lower castes” (Nurullah and Naik 181). All these help the British to impose their “intellectual and moral leadership”, to use Antonio Gramsci’s terms, in enormously complex way to the colonized Indians. It is “a mission that in the long run served to strengthen Western Cultural hegemony” (Viswanathan 2).

Adaptation of wrong methods was also responsible for the failure in the creation of a national system of education. British administration depends entirely on English models and attempted to impose all schemes and ideas that were evolved in England without considering the differences in the socio-economic background of the two countries. This assumption, that English model is ideal for India, made them “neglect the indigenous traditions as well as the patterns of those progressive countries of the world which are closer

to India in their socio-economic structure” (Nurullah and Naik 360). The British higher education system in India “did little to promote analytical capacity or creative thinking and certainly no independence of mind” (Tharoor 223). Instead of encouraging Mass English education, the British educational policy during the 19<sup>th</sup> century gave stress on University education which will produce, as Tharoor points out, “a group of graduates with a better-than-basic knowledge of English, inadequate in ninety percent of the cases to hold one’s own with an Englishman, but adequate to get a clerical position in the lower rungs of government service or a teaching position in a government school” (223). The colonial education system left the individual graduate Westernized enough to be alienated from his own Indian cultural roots. The English educated man became a sort of ‘hybrid’ because their English masters were obsessed with the idea that the only way to “educate” an Indian is to turn him into a plaster Englishman. Homi Bhabha in his “Signs Taken For Wonders” addresses “the problematics of colonial representation of authority” and provides “a compelling philosophical framework for analyzing native interrogation of British authority in relation to the hybridization of power and discourse” (Viswanathan 96). Bhabha argues that the English book, instead of presenting the fixed nature of European rule becomes an emblem of colonial ambivalence, betrays these foundations of authority and empowers the colonized subjects by allowing them to resist the oppression of the imperial power in terms of hybridization, a way of strategies of subversion:

Hybridity is the name of this displacement of value from symbol to sign that causes the dominant discourse to split along the axis of its power to be representative, authoritative. Hybridity represents that ambivalent ‘turn’ of the discriminated subject into the terrifying, exorbitant object of paranoid classification – a disturbing questioning of the images and presences of authority. (113)

The failure of the colonial education system to formulate a national system of education leading to the inappropriate synthesis of two cultures is evident from Professor Brown’s attitude towards his students in Narayan’s *The Bachelor of Arts*. The principal of Albert College, Professor Brown is, according to Chandran, a “humbug and a scoundrel at heart” (Narayan *Bachelor of Arts* 8). A custodian of the British prestige, he is like all Europeans taking “their thousand or more a month, but won’t do the slightest service to Indians with sincere heart” (5). Narayan- a strong critic of the colonial education system is also critical in



describing the attitude of the Indian professors educated in colonial education system. Describing Professor Ragavachar of the department of History, Chandran says,

If he were asked what the country needed most urgently, he would not say Self- Government or Economic Independence, but a clarified, purified Indian History. (37)

Narayan who is often criticized for his aloofness to engage with the social evils and political causes of the time and lived like Jane Austen in his own ivory tower, could not have remained totally blind to adverse effects of the colonial education system. In many of his novels, we find young people abandoning their formal education to chase their own goals in life. His apathy towards the joyless, overburdened learning is very impressively expressed at the opening paragraph of his first novel, *Swami and Friends*:

It was Monday morning. Swaminathan was reluctant to open his eyes. He considered Monday specially unpleasant in the calendar. After the delicious freedom of Saturday and Sunday, it was difficult to get into the Monday mood of work and discipline. He shuddered at the very thought of school: that dismal yellow building; the fire-eyed Vedanayagam, his class teacher; and the Head Master with his thin long cane. (1)

In his speech as a member of the Rajya Sabha, Narayan sympathizes with the young tender minds overburdened by the educational system. The big and loaded school bag causing severe damage to the spine of the children is a beautiful analogy through which Narayan attacked the contemporary education system designed following the colonial educational policy. He pleaded for the changing of this education system with a new one where students will get the adequate time to play, dream and imagine. In the prevalent education system, the students are not engaged equally throughout the year. In *The Bachelor of Arts*, Chandran spent the first four months of the session without any serious study, whereas the entire pressure of the examination is taken during the last four months between November and March. The end of his course in Albert College gives Chandran a relief – “a freedom he had never experienced in his life before” (Narayan *Bachelor of Arts* 53). In his memoir *My Days*, Narayan remembers how the inadequate school education was completed at home by his grandmother:

My grandmother examined my slate when I returned home, and remarked, “They don’t seem to teach you anything in your school.” Every day she commented thus and then ordered, “Wash your feet and hands under the tap and come into the kitchen.” When I have accomplished these difficult tasks, she would have coffee and tiffin for me in the kitchen. (10)

The most important achievement of the British education was “the spread of Western literature and science and which adopted English as a medium of instruction at all stages except the lower secondary, where it was taught as a subject” (Nurullah and Naik 174). It was through the portals of this Western education that the Eastern minds first met with the Western philosophy and it is this educational system, according to Nurullah and Naik, is “responsible mainly, if not exclusively, for the modern renaissance in all walks of life” (174). It gave birth to new literature in modern Indian languages. The missionaries started the printing press and established the newspaper. They studied the modern Indian languages, compiled dictionaries, wrote grammars, and translated the Bible into them. Their intention was never to create a literature in modern Indian languages, rather to create aids for the study of these languages by European missionaries and to translate the Bible and allied literature into them. It is interesting to note that the early hopes that Indians educated in Western knowledge would espouse Christianity in large numbers, were proved false. On the other hand, the new education system gave birth to various waves of social and religious reform in Indian society. Brahmo Samaj by Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Arya Samaj by Swami Dayananada Saraswati were made to reform and rejuvenate the Hindu society on the pattern of the Vedic Aryan culture. The Ram Krishna Mission started in Bengali in 1897, under the leadership of Swami Vivekananda, was another reformist movement of great importance (176). These social and religious reforms were not the only channel through which the educated intelligentsia tried to serve the country. Besides admitting the several good things that Britain had done for India, they also raised their protest against the exclusive British monopoly of all higher posts under the Government, the growing poverty of the people and the economic exploitation of their country under the British Rule. It is out of these protests that a political agitation slowly grew up in course of time and led to the establishment of the Indian National Congress in 1885. It was “the new system of education, therefore, that gave educated Indians an insight into Western political life, created or strengthened their love of liberty and showed them the way in which to



organize a fight against their foreign rulers” (177). Sashi Tharoor, on the other hand, looks at the point from a different angle:

“Indians seized the English language and turned it into an instrument for our own liberation- using it to express nationalist sentiments against the British, as R.C Dutt, Dinshaw Wacha and Dadabhai Nauroji did in the late nineteenth century and Jwaharlal Nehru in the twentieth- was to their credit, not by British design”. (Tharoor 219)

Nurullah and Naik point out another great achievement of this period the change of ‘the Western attitude to Eastern religion, philosophy and literature’ (170). We may cite the notorious comment made by Macaulay in his 1835 Minute on Education:

“I am quite ready to take the oriental learning at the valuation of the orientalist 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. The intrinsic superiority of the Western literature is indeed fully admitted by those members of the committee who support the oriental plan of education.” (Macaulay 3)

During this period we also witnessed a kind of rival views about the Eastern religion, philosophy and literature among Europeans like Warren Hastings, Lord Minto, Wilson, Henry Princep and others. An epoch-making event in this field is the translation of *Upanisads* from Persian to French by A. Duperron which played an important role in stirring Western academic interest in the wisdom of the subcontinent by giving them “the first glimpse of Hindu philosophy” (Sen 61). About this time Sir William Jones and Max Muller were translating Sanskrit works into English and popularizing them. But these noble efforts of the Orientalists were unable to change the attitude of Anglicists towards Indian Literature who believed that “the system of science and philosophy which form the learning of the East abound with grave errors and eastern literature is at best very deficient as regards all modern discovery and improvements” (Richy 366). Tharoor has given another example of this attitude in his controversial *An Era of Darkness*:

The British colonialists considered many of the great works of Indian Literature to be ‘marked with the greatest immorality and impurity’ - and that included Kalidas’s *Shakuntala*, described by Horace

Wilson, the major nineteenth century Sanskrit scholar, as the jewel of Indian Literature, but disapproved of as a suitable text for study in Indian schools and colleges in British India. (229)

Yet the “critical and scientific study of the classical languages” led to a better appreciation of ancient culture, removed the misconceptions about ancient history and religion. If English education was trying to interpret the West to the East, these pioneering efforts of the Orientalists, according to Nurullah and Naik, were ‘trying to interpret the East, not only to the West, but to the East itself in a light and content that had not been known before” (179).

As stated by Macaulay, the main intention of the English education was to create a class of interpreters who will work as mediators between the rulers and the native. In *The Bachelor of Arts*, even after being a graduate Chandran was unable to set a definite goal in his life and was confused at the suggestions of his friends and relatives. He was advised by all sorts of persons “to apply for a clerk’s post in some Government office” (Narayan *Bachelor of Arts* 52). The colonial education system not only deserted its students of the chances to bloom but also fails its teachers – a theme elaborated by Narayan through the character of Krishna in *The English Teacher*. Krishna raises the fundamental question of the need to learn the language of the colonial masters. Here we are reminded of Rabindranath Tagore – the poet and educationist who established Viswa Bharati on the lines of the educational ideals of Vedic India and not following the educational policy of the colonial government. Tagore’s 1906 public lecture “The Problems of Education” begins with the line- “What we call a school is really a factory” (Ghosh Sisirkumar 118). The appropriateness of the line can easily be conceived if we study the effects of the education system forced by the colonial government upon the native. Narayan very effectively points out the joylessness and purposelessness of this education system on the part of the native, which only strengthens the colonial hegemony.

## References:

1. University machine is the name of a painting by Gaganendranath Tagore where three dimensional human beings enter into the factory made up of stacked books only to come out as two dimensional puppets.
2. The line is taken from Rudyard Kipling's famous poem "The Ballad of East and West". It was first published in 1889.
3. "Babu English" is the verbose, unidiomatic and funny variety of Indian English. The phrase has its origin during the British rule in India and was originally used by the English colonizer to refer to the English (language) used by Indian middle class people.

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