



Development of Modern University Education (1915-1947): A Case Study of India

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Abstract

The legitimisation of any authority necessitates control over institutions of knowledge and when the ruler are not native people the requirement becomes more imperative as the authority itself requires legitimization from the other people whom it tries to rule. The British power in India was a colonial power and also a foreign power so it needed to control more the knowledge system of the native people. The Colonial powers have not only been ruling through brute power but their hegemony was established more by education and institution that they established in colonies and India was no exception to this experimentation. The paper talks about how the university system was established in India from 1915 to 1947 and how gradually it gets shaped by the freedom movement that started in a big way after the arrival of Gandhi ji in India. The Calcutta University Commission Report played a central role in shaping the university education in India. The official policies were more or less guided by its policy of 'controlling mind' of the colonised populace.

Keywords: Colonialism, Legitimacy, native people, institutions and knowledge system.

The legitimisation of any authority necessitates control over institutions of knowledge and when the ruler are not native people the requirement becomes more imperative as the authority itself requires legitimization from the other people whom it tries to rule. The British power in India was a colonial power and also a foreign power so it needed to control more the knowledge system of the native people. The Colonial powers have not only been ruling through brute power but their hegemony was established more by education and institution that they established in colonies¹ and India was no exception to this experimentation.² The paper talks about how the university system was established in India from 1915 to 1947 and how gradually it gets shaped by the freedom movement that started in a big way after the

arrival of Gandhi ji in India. The Calcutta University Commission Report played a central role in shaping the university education in India. The official policies were more or less guided by its policy of 'controlling mind' of the colonised populace.

The publishing of the Calcutta University Commission's Report led to the publication of Resolution of 1920 by the Government of India approving the suggestions of the Commission ordering the local government to consider them. Ironically Calcutta University gained least by the recommendations owing to the disagreement that cropped up between the University and the Bengal government on the monetary funding that was required to implement them. However, passing of the Report had far reaching impact on the successive university legislation in many parts of India. The Governments of Central and Uttar Pradesh implemented the recommendation that suggested that Intermediate Colleges and Boards of Secondary and Intermediate Education be set up. As per the Commission's Report Lucknow, Aligarh Universities, Dacca University and Delhi University were established as residential Universities. The Report was crucial in advocating the need for higher education in India by setting up many new universities in many parts and by infusing new ideas in exiting one.³

The administrative and academic roles of the university got a new direction through the various suggestions of the Commission. These suggestions were somehow based on the functioning of Oxford and Cambridge and also resembling in many ways to the reconstructed University of London thereby establishing colleges under universities and making teaching predominant.⁴ In this context A Basu has argued that putting too much stress on unitary residential universities by Sadler Commission was a meaningless recommendation as the disbursement on education was retained minimum in the Government's annual budgets.

In this context it must be mentioned that the Scottish and Continental universities were not residential. Even London and Berlin universities were not residential still the quality of education that was disseminated in these universities was in no way inferior to the education given in residential universities like Cambridge or Oxford. When the British could manage to disseminate education in non-residential universities in Britain possibly they could have done even in India as India was comparatively poor country at that time.⁵

Setting up of new universities led the Government of India to think on the line of establishing an organising a body to maintain coordination between all the universities of India. Keeping the above idea in mind the Government of India organised a Conference of Indian University Board in 1925 but the recommendations of the board was not very effective in impacting the university education as it did not have statutory recognition.

The Hartog Committee was published in 1929 and the Report "appreciated the improvements made by the universities so far but deplored the undue importance they had given to examinations and also the overpopulation of the college with students who were not fit for university education. The Report further recommended that in any province where there was a only one university it should be of the affiliating

nature as it was desirable to cover the area satisfactorily by doing this the government could avoid the need of closing the prevailing colleges. The Report emphasized that India was a large country and so the higher educational needs could not be fulfilled only by unitary universities and therefore, the affiliating university had to continue for long as this was an economic compulsion in a large and underprivileged country.”⁶

The Report of the Central Advisory Board of Education on Post-war Educational Development in India published in 1944 - the Report was also called the Sargent Report. The Report had very little to say on university education. It furthered the recommendations of the Hartog Committee by saying that affiliating universities were an monetary viability in a large and underprivileged country such as India and therefore higher education could not be concentrated in designated cities.

The first phase of setting up of universities continued from 1920 to 1927 after the publication of Calcutta University Commission Report. There was a lapse of almost of nine years and only after this gap that the University of Travancore was founded in 1937. India witnessed a growth in higher education during this time but the rate and pace of growth was not same throughout the country. Different parts of India witnessed different pace of growth as far as the expansion of higher education is concerned. In this context it can be said that English education was not evenly distributed in all parts of a particular province or among all communities and castes.

India was witnessing many socio-economic and political transformations during the period and that also made it necessary to increase the number of students as well as universities. Initially the Colonial power wanted to impart education to limited number of people belonging to the elite section of the Indian society and the supporter of this limited dissemination of knowledge to limited Indian people were Elphinstone and Macaulay. It was believed appropriate to “impart a high degree of education to the upper classes than to diffuse a much lower sort of it among the common people”⁷ This concept of limited access to education was furthered by ‘downward filtration’ theory which emphasised strongly at that time. Despite this constricted idea of higher education, it advanced rapidly. This development can not be comprehended except in the light of the changes that India was witnessing in its social and political arena.⁸ But it had a flip side too due to the sizeable number of students at university, the standard of teaching at university level could not be maintained and consequently failure number in university examinations was very high during this time. The language was also one the reasons that was becoming responsible for higher failure rate in university examination as o English medium was becoming a major stumbling block. Very few Indians had mastered the English language from the entire university students during this time. The other reason for low standard of teaching at university level was lack of competent teachers as the students who were securing first class M.A and M.Sc were able to get good administrative positions in government departments, and therefore those who had managed to secure second and third class were largely pursued lectureship in universities and colleges.⁹ Another

lacuna in higher education was lack of sufficient number of scholarships that could have helped many promising poor students to continue pursuing higher education. It was desirable that no promising young candidate should be debarred from higher education simply on the ground of paucity of fund.¹⁰

The time that is under consideration one finds that the universities in India were unable to bring about amalgamation of what the East and the West had to offer. Since we were ruled by the British they focused on Western knowledge and completely ignored Indian the knowledge system and cultural heritage of a nation and therefore the university education of the period could not be called a national system of education.¹¹ Since the western education was commenced to meet the requirements of the British government in India, it had a limited progress and its nature was substandard and unsatisfactory from the point view of Indians. The total number of students studying in higher educational institutions was 1,59,254 in 1941-42 or about 0.5 percent of the total population.¹² The British authority was never keen in educating larger population of India and therefore the fund that was allocated to education department was very meagre in comparison to defence, military. This state of affairs in education field was not due to either the World War I, World economic depression and resultant consequences but it was constant state of affair as the British government was never interested in educating the Indian masses. Higher education institutions like universities were not attracting private charity and philanthropic support exceptions were few such as University of Calcutta, University of Nagpur an example from south India was Annamalai University was set up by the generous endowment given by a merchant prince. The universities were completely dependent on public funding and fee collected from student to maintain themselves. Combining both public funding and fee collected from students was still less in comparison to most of the universities in Great Britain and a large number of universities of Western countries.¹³ The other lacuna was too much emphasis on good marks in universities' examinations rather than focusing on originality and genuine research. Since the universities were more or less fully dependent on public funding they had to face government's interferences from time to time.¹⁴ There was constant demand to teach subjects through vernacular medium as foreign medium of instruction for instance English had far reaching limitations. Gandhi ji's entry into Indian politics during the Independence Movement affected the university lives of many students as they started participating in the movement. In 1920 during the Civil Disobedience Movement for the first time a very large number of students participated in the movement. During this period universities mainly focused imparting education in the field of liberal arts and students of these fields were keen on understanding emerging socio-economic and political issues of the world. Mention may be made of the students who were studying law and were more interested in following independent legal profession and had little opportunity to be inducted in government jobs were readily interested in taking part in independent

movement. Given this the leadership of Indian national movement was mostly in the hands of university educated individuals that in many ways led to high levels of discussions.¹⁵

With all its flaws the introduction of western education system in India was in many ways progressive as it was more or less secular in nature and could be accessed by anyone irrespective of caste or creed unlike the education that was imparted before the advent of the British administration. In fact, in many senses it opened the doors of rationalist and democratic thinking of modern west to the educated Indians.¹⁶ The nationalist leaders were mostly educated and therefore they were having ample knowledge of English language which made it easier for them to acquire understanding of modern western thought and literature. In a way modern western education played a self-contradictory role. Initially the British introduced the western modern education to prepare a small number of elite Indians to assist them in the administration and play a role of intermediary between the British rule and Indians but it also led to the questioning of the British rule in India and inspired Indians to struggle against the British rule and demand for self-rule and independence. A section of educated Indians was entirely discontented with the English education started focusing in setting up Indian institutions of higher education that could put emphasis on Indian culture, heritage and philosophy. Many of them were successful in their efforts and the outcome was the establishment Vidyapeeths of Kashi, Bihar and Gujarat and Jamia Millia which was first started in Aligarh and later in 1925 shifted to Delhi and the Rabindranath Tagore set up The Viswa Bharati at Santiniketan and started functional from 1921. Thus, we see the very complex and paradoxical nature of western higher education that was implemented in India by the British. The university educated Indians played very important roles in Indian national movement. The western education also made many Indians realised that opportunities and knowledge it could provide and Indians could also professionally rise by acquiring English education. During the period under consideration 1915 -1947 India saw the advent of nineteen universities in the British India and in Indian states.

Calcutta University Commission

The British authority in India passed the Education Resolution in 1913 and it had planned to appoint a Commission on university education in India under Lord Haldane who had chaired a similar Commission on London University. But due to the outbreak of World War I it could not materialize and he also became reluctant to take up the assignment after the outbreak of World War I. Once the War ended the British Government in India constituted the Calcutta University Commission under the Chairmanship of Michael Sadler, the Vice Chancellor of Leeds University. Michael Sadler had rejected Curzon's offer of the post of Director General of Education in India in 1904.¹⁷ The other members were Philip Hartog, the Director of Public Instruction in Bengal, Prof. Ramsay Muir, Dr. Gregory, Asutosh Mukhopadhyaya and Ziauddin Ahmad. The Commission took almost one and half year to submit the report after lengthy deliberations and gave a critical account of the functioning of the Calcutta University and also made many recommendations on which higher education in Bengal should be

following the direction in future. The Commission also investigated the other four existing universities in India at that time and put forward many recommendations that became the base for the forthcoming progress of university education in India.¹⁸ The Commission had the power to study all aspects of university education,

“to study the organization and working of universities in India other than that of Calcutta.’ The mandate permitted it to view, “the school foundations of university education, its compositions giving it the benefit of both British and Indian experience and informed opinion.¹⁹

The recommendations of the Calcutta University Commission were important for the affiliating universities:

“According to the view of almost all progressive societies, a university ought to be a place of learning, where a corporation of scholars labour in comradeship for the training of men and for the advancement and diffusion of knowledge. In the context of this definition Indian universities, in their first form, were no true universities. They were not corporations of scholars, but corporations of administrators; they had nothing to do with the training of men, but only with the examining of candidates; they were not concerned with learning, except in so far as learning can be tested by examinations. The colleges were the only ‘place of learning’, but the system tended to weaken the responsibilities of the stronger colleges and to reduce them to coaching institutions. The university, being merely a group of administrative functionaries or boards, had no direct contact with the real work of teaching; it could contribute nothing to strengthen the intellectual resources of the colleges, and little to stimulate free criticism and independent thought among teachers and students. With its uniform curricula and exaggerated emphasis upon examinations, the system reduced the colleges too much to the same pattern. It encouraged them, for the sake of economy, to limit their teaching to the ordinary conventional subjects and to disregard those more practical issues to which the dispatch of 1854 had attached so much importance; it often prevented the teacher from teaching the things he cared most about and understood best; it led the student to value the discipline of his training not for its own sake but mainly as a means for obtaining marketable qualifications. In the long run, such a system must have a sterilizing influence.”²⁰

The Sadler Commission was mainly mandated to enquire about the problems of Bengal. The Commission had the power to assess Calcutta University’s standard and examinations process, its constitution and also its relation with the affiliating colleges and its relation with the Government and suggest ‘any changes in constitution, administration and educational policy which may appear desirable’. The Commission also had power to consider ‘at what places and in what manner provision should be made in Bengal for teaching and research for persons above the secondary school age’. But it was ample clear from the beginning that the members of the Commission were also interested into looking at the functioning of other universities of India

‘for the purpose of comparison’ as they were expected to give suggestions that would be pertinent to the university system as a whole, “that if the Government of India had chosen to concentrate on the problems of Bengal because it was there that the defects of the affiliation university were most acute, it was also because Bengal offered a representative cross section of the problems which called for solution in Indian higher education”.²¹

From the beginning the Commission was in favour of decreasing the size of Calcutta University, which “is in respect of the number of its students was the largest university of the world... The University of Calcutta has to deal with 26,000 students scattered over an immense province wherein communications very difficult; it is responsible also for the educational control of more than eight hundred schools- a function such as no university outside of India is called upon to perform; and in those conditions it is unreasonable to expect that its governing bodies should be able to deal with this immense and complex task in a wholly satisfactory manner”.²²

This scenario was not only for Calcutta University alone its size might have aggravated the situation, the other existing universities in India were facing the similar issues. Champa Tickoo argued that

“throughout the sub-continent a weakened and inefficient system of secondary education prepared candidates for university entrance which in turn led to a narrowly conceived unprofitable higher education. The result was obvious in terms of the country’s economy- a vastly increasing proportion of educated unemployables.”²³

The Commission recommended sweeping changes in the sphere of constitution of the Calcutta University. In this context Eric Ashby argued that,

“addressing primarily to the outstanding problems at Calcutta, the members devised a detailed scheme for transforming the overgrown affiliating university into a viable teaching institution. But in doing so, they did more than prescribe a new relationship between the university and its component colleges. They prescribed a new form of university government and a new connection between the university and the state. Thus, in catering to the special needs of Calcutta, they not only supplied the key to the metamorphosis of the affiliating university: they supplied also the constitutional formula for a new and more ambitious type of teaching university. The Government of India, planning for Dacca, had taken the view that both as regards internal government and external control, the existing practice of the affiliating university afford a broadly suitable precedent for the teaching university. But the Commission²⁴, striving to put a new interpretation on the teaching university, judge it fundamentally inappropriate”.

The members were more concerned in resolving the competing claims of the unitary and federal structure of the University of Calcutta and concluded that it was inapplicable to apply doctrinaire theories of the so called ‘Unitary University’ to the complex conditions of Calcutta.²⁵

The members of Commission strongly felt that,

“Another group of correspondents propose . . . , that the beginning already made by the University in the provision of post-graduate courses should be extended; and that the courses for the degree of B.A. and B.Sc. with Honours should be separated from the Pass courses and undertaken directly by the University. It is added by the advocates of this scheme that in order to cope with its new functions, the University should absorb Presidency College, the whole property and income of which should be transferred by Government. The other colleges should be left to do Pass- teaching only. The supporters of this plan are content to assign to them a humble function, for which they might be sufficiently manned with teachers mainly second-rate.”²⁶

The Commission also gave suggestions on the administrative and academic roles of the university. It recommended a new variety of university, “a university of colleges, superficially resembling Oxford and Cambridge, and more closely, the reconstructed University of London,”²⁷ thereby teaching could be made predominant.

The Commission also recommended many elements to improve the women education and women teacher training, professional and technical education and how to better organize the existing schools and colleges. There was some devolution in political arena taking place still the Commission reserved important powers and responsibilities for the central governments.²⁸

University of Delhi

The University of Delhi, Agra, Madras and Nagpur were mostly supported by the British Government. Most of the financial requirements to develop and maintain these universities were taken care of by the British government of India. It was very much expected after the shifting of Imperial capital from Calcutta to Delhi that Delhi would be requiring a university of its own as now the city of Delhi was not only the headquarters of the imperial power but also population wise also densely populated city and as per the census of 1920 its population was nearly half a million. The University of Delhi was set up in 1922 by an Act of the Imperial Legislature as the city was under the direct administrative control of the British Government of India. The University of Delhi was also an affiliating university in its nature and existing colleges such as St. Stephen’s College (set up by Cambridge Mission in 1882)²⁹ and Hindu College (set up in 1899)³⁰ were affiliated to it. Apart from affiliating colleges it also opened some teaching centres in economics, law and some branches of science. But to further develop and maintain itself the University of Delhi required large sum from the government. To expand the University of Delhi, the government handed over the old Viceregal estate with all its buildings to the University. The British Government of India proposed in 1922 to bring all existing colleges of Delhi together into a Federal University and locate them in the same area.³¹

Initially the government had agreed to allot 200 acres of land to for the purpose of establishing a university consisting of two colleges and a university building but due to the outbreak of World War I

the whole plan was cancelled. In 1918 the plan was somewhat revived after the ending of World War I. H. Butler reiterated his plan in favour of establishing a university and college in Delhi and for the purpose he constituted a committee and members were Sharp, the Chief Commissioner of Delhi, the Chief Engineer (Keeling) and the Principal of St Stephen's (Rudra). Setting up of any new university has to follow the Calcutta University Report's recommendations which was published in 1917 so the idea of establishing a government college in Delhi was dropped as the government also faced resistance from Hindu College (1899) and Ramjas College (1917) as the government had the plan to merge Hindu College with government College and turned the College into a hostel and the fourth college was Lady Hardinge Medical College (1916) was affiliated to Panjab University. St Stephen's also was not very comfortable with idea of opening a government college in Delhi as it might create a competition with it. Given this the Education Department abandoned the idea of setting up of a government college and requested for a unitary teaching university.³² The plan of setting up a university in Delhi had two parts – Provisional and permanent. According to this plan the existing colleges with their hostels would continue to be in their present location where they were located in the city. Ramjas College would be an Intermediate College and St Stephen's and Hindu College would as far as possible have common classes for graduate teaching and few more professors would be appointed to teach honours classes and the overall estimated cost for this plan came to 75,000 rupees.

The permanent plan was that the colleges would be upgraded to intermediate colleges and college authorities would build hostels on the Raisina site and the government would set up a university building with all facilities such laboratories, lecture halls and support financially the central teaching. The estimated cost for this plan came around 34 lakh rupees recurring with non-recurring 2 lakh rupees in beginning, with this increasing to 4 lakh rupees. The main obstacle was lack of fund as the British government was never interested in spending substantial amount in educating Indians. The Education Department started preparing the plan of establishing a unitary university in Delhi but face financial issues from time to time and finally Lord Reading's Council deliberated upon the financial issues and ordered that, "the plan should be placed before the standing Finance Committee. Finally, the Delhi University Bill was placed in the imperial Legislative Assembly on 16th January 1922 by the Education Secretary, Sharp. As per the scheme Delhi university would be under the control of the Government of India and the Governor-General was to become the Chancellor and a Vice-Chancellor was to be appointed by the Chancellor. The council of States finally passed the Bill on 28th February 1922 and the Viceroy gave his approval on 5th March 1922."³³ In 1922 only, the university became functional with two teaching staff of arts and science, a law teaching staff was appointed in 1924.

The conception of Delhi University was envisioned to be a unitary, residential and teaching university of the nature recommended by the Calcutta University Commission Report. But in the face of resistance from the existing colleges of Delhi the plan had to be modified. The university as it progressed, was neither residential nor unitary. It was like any other Indian university, mainly an affiliating and

examining body. Due to financial scarcity that the university had to face for many years after the establishment and thereafter it did not make significant progress³⁴ and it's only after 1947 when it was recognised as a central university that it started receiving ample funds.

The evolution of universities in India witnessed a very complex circumstances as India was ruled by the British during the period under consideration. The setting up and functioning of Indian universities were strongly influenced and mostly based on British model of university system but in 1920s India not only witnessed political changes but also saw some changes in education. The rapid population growth led to increasing demand for university education at the same time it also put pressure on the universities as the funds was always scare so it universities were facing difficulties in maintain themselves. The Hartog Committee was constituted in 1929 to assess the prevailing structure of learning in India but it had little to add what already been recommended by the Sadler Commission. After the World War II Central Advisory Board of Education (John Sargent) put forward a thorough report on the educational progress of India in 1944. The commission suggested that most of Indian universities did not meet the requirements of a national system of education, and the criteria for admission must be reviewed, intermediate course should be stopped and the length of University degree course should be of three years. The university education did see some progress during the period as in 1920 there were only nine universities in India by 1947 it increased to nineteen. The beginning of World War II led to increasing demand for proficient persons and accordingly the British Government was forced to allot more fund for the growth of university education especially in those branches that were connected directly or indirectly with war efforts and this whole situation led to the establishment of University Grants Committee, predecessor of University Grant Commission in 1946.³⁵

Thus, it can be said that due to a very different circumstances as India was ruled by the British during the period that the university education was started and shaped by the British government. Gradually the university educated people played a central role in the national movement. It also gave an understanding to educated Indians how education could open better opportunities of livelihood.

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