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Fort William College And The Making Of The Colonial Civil Servants

Neha Naz

Research Scholar, Department of History, Aligarh Muslim University

Abstract:

The term civil service in India first emerged during the administration of the East India Company. The Civil Servants were initially engaged in trade; however, as the Company commenced its territorial acquisitions, it progressively evolved from a commercial entity into an administrative government, thereby transforming its 'civil servants' from mere traders into competent administrators. This paper examines the establishment of Fort William College in 1800 and its role in transforming the East India Company's civil servants from commercial agents into administrators of a territorial empire. Founded under Richard Wellesley, the College reflected the Company's transition from trade to governance, as its officials assumed judicial, revenue, and diplomatic responsibilities across diverse Indian societies. Wellesley envisioned a structured programme of education that would equip civil servants with linguistic competence, legal knowledge, and moral discipline suited to their expanded authority

Keywords: East India Company; British civil servants; Fort William College; Colonial Civil Servant; language studies; colonial administration;

Introduction

The curriculum combined instruction in Oriental and vernacular languages with the study of Hindu and Muslim law, English jurisprudence, political economy, history, geography, and the sciences. Beyond classroom teaching, the College became a centre of linguistic research and print production, contributing to the codification and standardisation of Indian languages. Ultimately, Fort William College functioned as a key institutional mechanism in the professionalisation of the colonial civil service and the consolidation of British administrative power in India.

“In their heyday, they were the most powerful officials in the empire, if not the world”.

- Clive Dewey¹

The above statement highlights the pivotal role of civil servants in the operation of the British Empire under the East India Company's rule in India. The term “civil service”, which is now utilised to refer to the collective group of individuals engaged in non-combatant roles associated with the governance of a State, was initially employed to identify the personnel of the East India Company who were involved in commercial activities. Employees of the Company were categorised as its servants, with

those responsible for managing its international trade referred to as civil servants to differentiate them from those whose responsibilities pertained to naval or military functions. As the nature of the Company evolved, with its trading endeavours initially augmented by territorial control and ultimately supplanted by governmental responsibilities, its civil servants transformed merchants into administrators.ⁱⁱ The creation of a Civil Service in the modern sense of the term may be said to have been the work of both Warren Hastings and Lord Cornwallis. The former laid the foundations on which the latter built up a superstructure.ⁱⁱⁱ

Under the auspices of the royal charter and legislative enactments, the Company was endowed with certain authorities, including the authority to recruit and organise military forces for defence. Consequently, the operations of the Company can be categorised into two distinct classes: civil and military. It is this classification that contributes to the proliferation of the term “Civil Service,” in contrast to the term military.^{iv}

The earliest structured Civil Service within British India was known as the ‘Covenanted Civil Service’. This particular Service evolved from the personnel comprising Writers, Factors, Junior Merchants, and Senior Merchants, who the East India Company employed at a time when its operations in India were solely commercial in nature. Initially, the Civil Servants of the Company were designated as writers, and upon the completion of a five-year tenure, they became eligible for advancement to the role of Factors. Subsequently, Factors could achieve promotion to Junior Merchants after a service period of three years, and Junior Merchants could ascend to Senior Merchants after another three years of Service. The principle of seniority governed the criteria for advancement from one grade to another. Writers were appointed by the Court of Directors, typically upon their own request, often at the age of 16. It was subsequently mandated in 1714 that any application for a Writer’s position had to be endorsed by one or more members of the Court of Directors. This, in essence, marked the inception of a patronage system that favoured the appointment of acquaintances and relatives of the Directors over more qualified candidates.^v

In its early years, the East India Company initially preferred to appoint experienced merchants familiar with Eastern trade, particularly from the Levant. However, due to a limited supply of such men, it increasingly sent out inexperienced young recruits. Senior officials often complained that these “raw youths” lacked practical utility and urged the Company to appoint trained merchants instead.

By the 1660s, clerical ability became a key requirement. In 1665, the Surat factors requested young men of modest background who could write well. In response, the Company regularly began dispatching factors and writers, while the recruitment of apprentices, which started in 1661, remained irregular and ended by 1694. Many of these recruits were educated at Christ’s Hospital, which provided commercial training suited to Company service.^{vi}

The training of early recruits to the Indian Civil Service evolved from rudimentary commercial preparation to a structured system of institutional education and probation. Initially trained only in bookkeeping and basic mercantile practice, Company servants were later subjected to formal linguistic and administrative instruction, first at Fort William College in India and subsequently at East India College in England. With the introduction of open competition in 1853, recruitment shifted toward academic merit, followed by probationary training in law, political economy, Indian history, and regional languages.

Placement was closely tied to linguistic qualification. On arrival in India, recruits were stationed in Presidency towns until they passed examinations in the vernaculars of their assigned provinces. Successful candidates were then appointed to district-level posts as assistants, collectors, magistrates, or judicial officers. Over time, probationary examinations and merit-based seniority further systematised advancement, transforming the Service from a patronage-driven body into a disciplined bureaucratic cadre central to imperial governance.^{vii}

For quite a long time, one might assert that until the epoch of Lord Wellesley, the underlying cause for the absence of a structured educational and training framework for the employees of the Company primarily resides in the Company, which operates as an exclusively commercial entity. Consequently, the responsibilities of their employees did not necessitate the acquisition of an education that could be deemed liberal. Furthermore, these individuals were dispatched at a young age, which precluded them from obtaining such an education. Subsequently, however, when the Company transitioned into a territorial sovereign, the employees encountered highly demanding and consequential responsibilities upon their arrival in India, for which they were entirely unprepared.

It was the Marquis of Wellesley who initially illuminated this issue and devised a comprehensive educational scheme for the covenant employees^{viii}

During the 17th and 18th centuries, as we have already seen, the only educational qualification which the Company demanded of its civil servants was a knowledge of commercial accounts. Lord Wellesley, realising that administrators must possess higher attainments than merchants, founded his college at Fort William to provide them. However, the director cut down his curriculum to consist only of Oriental languages. Yet within a few years, they themselves had founded a college in England, which provided general as well as specialised education, and lasted till 1857.^{ix}

In his minutes in council at Fort William dated 18th August, 1800, Marquis Wellesley expresses the reason for the establishment of the college in Bengal. He writes the duties of the European Civil Servants of the East India Company are become of greater magnitude and importance, the denominations of Writer, Factor and Merchant, by which the several classes of the Civil Service are still distinguished, are now utterly inapplicable to the nature and extent of the duties discharged, and of the occupations pursued by the Civil Servants of the Company.

To dispense. Justice to millions of people of various languages, manners, usages, and religions; to administer a vast and complicated system of revenue throughout districts, equal in extent to some of The most considerable kingdoms in Europe, to maintain civil order in one of the most populous and litigious regions of the world, are now the duties of the larger proportion of the civil servants of the Company.

The civil servants of the English East-India Company, therefore, can no longer be considered as the agents of a commercial concern; they are, in fact, the ministers and officers of a powerful sovereign; they must now be viewed in that capacity with a reference, not to their nominal, but to their real occupations^x

Wellesley founded Fort William College in 1800, requiring all newly arrived Civil Servants, regardless of rank, to undergo three years of study. The institution, commemoratively dated 4 May 1800, the anniversary of the fall of Seringapatam, assembled a distinguished faculty of Orientalists, including David Brown, Claudius Buchanan, H. T. Colebrooke, Francis Gladwin, Charles Stewart, and William Carey. The College initially served probationers destined for Bengal, Madras, and Bombay, though after 1804 it was restricted to Bengal.

Between 1801 and 1805, the college not only had evolved into an institution where fifty or more civil servants were being intellectually exposed to India in classrooms but had become the centre of a costly program of literary patronage and linguistic research. More than a hundred original works in oriental languages were published by presses financed mainly by the college. By 1805, the college had become a veritable laboratory where Europeans and Asians worked out new transliteration schemes, regularised spoken languages into precise grammatical forms, and compiled dictionaries in languages relatively unknown in Europe^{xi}

In one of the Correspondence related to the Hindustanee Dictionary payment and subscription at Fort William College, it is written as:

“Sir, I am directed by the council of the college to transmit to you the enclosed Copy of a letter received from the Editor of this Hindoostance- Dictionary of which Come hundred Copies were subscribed for by Government on the 5th of February soy together with a bill for Licca Rupees 4500 drawn by the Superintendent of the Hindoostance press, for one hundred Copies of the Second Volume of that Dictionary which have been received into the library of the college.”

The College Council beg leave to recommend that payment be ordered of the said Bill, and that the Copies of the second volume be disposed of as those of the first volume were, Viz

40 for the use of Hertford College, 25 for Saint George, 25 for Bombay, 10 to remain in the college of Fort William. The College Council further beg leave to recommend subscription for one hundred Copies of the proposed Supplement at the price stated of 6 Rs per 100 quarto pages^{xiii}

The above document exhibits the institutional role of Fort William College in sponsoring, financing and distributing important linguistic works for administrative and educational purposes

While explaining the importance of civil servants in his Minute to the Council, Richard Wellesley emphasised that the Civil Servants of the East India Company could no longer be seen merely as employees of a trading company. According to him, their role had changed completely because the Company had become a powerful ruling authority in India. Therefore, these civil servants should be regarded not as commercial agents, but as ministers and officers serving a sovereign power. In reality, they were performing duties similar to those carried out by high officials of a state. Wellesley pointed out that they were required to act as magistrates, judges, ambassadors, and even governors of provinces. These were serious and responsible positions that involved complex administrative, judicial, and diplomatic responsibilities. He further explained that their work was especially difficult because they had to function in a foreign land, under challenging conditions such as an unfamiliar climate, a different language, distinct legal systems, and unique social customs and traditions of the Indian people. Because of these challenges, Wellesley argued that their education, discipline, habits, character, and moral conduct needed to be carefully shaped and regulated. Their personal qualities and training had to match the dignity and importance of their public offices. In short, he believed that civil servants must be properly educated and morally prepared so that their abilities and character would be suitable for the heavy responsibilities they carried as representatives of British authority in India.^{xiii}

Lord Wellesley ordered the establishment of a college that would match renowned English universities such as the University of Cambridge and the University of Oxford in both its scale and the wide range of intellectual opportunities it provided. He intended the institution to be large, comprehensive, and academically rich, offering diverse avenues for the cultivation and advancement of knowledge^{xiv}

It was proposed that professorial positions should be created at the earliest feasible opportunity, and that a structured and continuous programme of lectures should begin without delay. This reflects the intention to organise the institution on a formal academic basis, ensuring systematic instruction under appointed scholars rather than informal or irregular teaching arrangements^{xv}

In addition to the classical languages of Arabic, Persian, and Sanskrit, the curriculum was to include instruction in six Indian vernacular languages. This demonstrates an intention to extend linguistic training beyond traditional scholarly languages to those commonly spoken in different regions of India, thereby equipping students with practical communicative skills necessary for administrative purposes^{xvi}

The proposed curriculum included the study of Muslim and Hindu legal systems alongside English law and general principles of jurisprudence, as well as the regulations enacted by the Governor-General-in-Council. In addition to legal training, a course in political economy was envisioned, comparable to the one that Thomas Robert Malthus would later deliver at East India College,

Haileybury. Instruction was also to be provided in world geography and mathematics, ensuring a foundation in scientific and spatial knowledge.

Furthermore, the curriculum was designed to include modern European languages together with classical languages such as Latin and Greek, along with the study of English literary classics. Wellesley also recognised the importance of historical knowledge, proposing courses in both ancient and modern European history. In collaboration with the Asiatic Society of Bengal, he organised a specialised course titled *History and Antiquities of Hindustan and the Deccan*, thereby integrating the systematic study of Indian history and culture into the academic programme.^{xvii}

In addition to the subjects already outlined, the curriculum also incorporated scientific disciplines such as natural history, botany, chemistry, and astronomy. The inclusion of these sciences reflects an effort to provide a comprehensive and modern education, ensuring that students are exposed not only to languages and law but also to the systematic study of the natural world and scientific inquiry.

However, despite its important role in promoting Indian language studies, the College was originally established with a more practical and administrative purpose. Its main objective was not simply to promote education or scholarship, but to help create a more efficient and capable civil service in India. Wellesley believed that British officials needed proper training in Indian laws, customs, and languages in order to govern effectively. Therefore, the College was designed as a training institution to prepare young civil servants for their responsibilities. The ultimate aim behind its foundation was to strengthen British administration by ensuring that Company officials were better educated, disciplined, and prepared for governance. Thus, the growth of an efficient civil service in India was the central purpose behind the establishment of the College.^{xviii}

Conclusion

The earliest civil servants of the English East India Company emerged in the seventeenth century, following the Company's establishment in 1600 under a royal charter. Initially, they were not administrators; instead, merchant servants were appointed to manage trade, maintain accounts, negotiate with local authorities and safeguard company interests. Initially, their training was largely informal and selected by the court of directors. These early civil servants were primarily British, though European influences, especially Dutch administrative practices, shaped their functioning. The transformation of the Indian Civil Service from a commercial body into a professional administrative institution reflects the broader shift of the East India Company from trade to governance. The establishment of Fort William College and later training at East India College institutionalised linguistic and administrative education, making knowledge of Indian languages and laws central to colonial rule.^{xix}

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