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Beginning of formal school and its impact on indigenous system of knowledge in Colonial India during 1880's-1940's

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Abstract

Despite several attempts by the Government we see that inequality in education still persists. The historical process by which formal education started in India under the Colonial system can provide an answer to the modern day inequalities in education. In this paper an attempt is made to raise two questions. First is why British needed to teach poor and second is what kind of education was planned for them and why. As a consequence of this second point, I argue that poor remained poor due to the lost legitimacy of their form of knowledge thanks to the coming of formal school system. How this happened is the subject of enquiry I have tried to deal here.

Keywords: Education, Poor, Colonial State, School, Labour

Introduction

When we talk about education of the poor we think of different strategies being deployed to give them access to education. We can also point out the power relation which work in such a way that elite receives education in different way and manner. In short education of poor can be dealt by looking at various aspects:

1. Policy adopted to provide them with the facility to get education.
2. The difference in the school and courses made for them.
3. Classroom practices and actual teaching in school. (what should be taught and how much)
4. The impact on education with various agents like state, society, and economy.
5. The relation of education with the various ideologies like liberalism, democracy, nationalism socialism and globalisation.

However keeping aside this question I am trying to look at this question from British perspective we see the question that needs to be addressed is how British themselves looked at education of the poor and how poor saw education. Though for looking at what was British attitude towards providing education for poor we have records but for the perspective of poor we have to look at other kind of sources. The question of how poor should be provided education and what kind of education has to be seen in colonial context. This is already established in the works of Krishna Kumar that education was a way of socialisation in particular way so to create legitimacy for British rule.

He says "the way the nature of company's work was changing, the coercion had to be replaced by socialisation" and education played a moral role ^[1]. From this line of thought it can be argued that British needed to create legitimacy of their rule through providing education. However, the strength of British rule also lies in creating the legitimacy of their form of knowledge through education in schools. For this, they did not support indigenous education ^[2] In this way the attempt to educate poor can also be seen as a necessary condition to reach out to the masses and get legitimacy or acceptance of their rule by incorporating those people under the head education who were until now exercising their autonomy in terms of learning. For example the knowledge of making shoes or making cloth was in the hands of people who were able to learn those skills through apprenticeship. The end of this kind of knowledge was also the consequence of the decline of handicraft industry.

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This can be the starting point to look at the education of those poor who eventually became working class under new industries. They saw challenge on two fronts. First, the kind of indigenous industries which were their source of income were no longer there which could come at their rescue. Second, with the growth of industry a particular kind of labour force needed who must have had some different kind of skills related with technique. So we see that relation between education and industry is very important as most of the sociologist has argued. For example Bowles and Gintis say “the structure of the educational experience is admirably suited to nurturing attitudes and behaviour consonant with participation in the labor force. Particularly dramatic is the statistically verifiable congruence between the personality traits conducive to proper work performance on the job and those which are rewarded with high grades in the classroom”.

However this is a valid argument to look at how and why different kind of education has to be given to different kind of job. So the question arises what kind of job poor fitted to. Till 1880's we don't see any rise in the native industries.

Without the development of Industry there was no need of special kind of workforce and hence may be no pressure or policies to teach those people who were not needed in any field. Till then if education was to be given it can be a way to make British rule admirable and justifiable. However in 1880's we see an attempt to introduce practical flavour to elementary education through which the regular curriculum was modified to give some aspects of science. It is believed that there is a real need in India for some corresponding course which shall fit boys for Industrial or commercial pursuits. Report of the Indian Education commission therefore recommends that in the upper classes of high schools there be two divisions, one leading to the Entrance examination of the Universities, the other of a more practical character intended to fit youths for commercial or non-literary pursuits “We see only a small percentage of the population went to schools beyond the elementary level and those who continued were aimed at college entrance which a literary programme altogether.”

It was suggested that special schools in the various departments of Arts should be established; that a technical branch to teach and improve a local industry should be attached in some places to middle and high schools; and that the whole body of technical institutions should be systematised and placed under central colleges to be affiliated to the university^[3].

However the question remains what kind of education was suited to them. If we look at it carefully then we see that poor were to receive education in such a way that they will finally enter the labour market as a particular type of labour. Paul Willis in his work “learning to labour believes that schooling outcomes for working class cannot be seen as an instance of failure or victimhood. Instead he shows that working class kids more or less consciously reject the cultural and political implications buying into the curriculum and accepting school authority. “Their entrance into the factory to which lads gleefully escape after leaving school produces the class structure”.

So, he suggests that the counter school culture adopted by working class becomes the cause of their entry into factory. However the problem with this argument is that it paints a picture of school as “norm”, and poor exercise their

autonomy in rejecting this norm which becomes the reason for their entry into the labour market. However it appears that even the choice of rejecting school system also comes from labour market. This choice is forced upon them and the norm (necessity of school) is created in order to differentiate between different types of labour. In fact labour market in itself wants these half educated lads.

For example Hunter commission talks about the education of poor in this way:

Poor Classes

A poor law is unknown in India. The rules of caste enjoin the performance of those charitable duties by the performance of which the relief of the destitute is distributed over the area of the family and even of the whole caste. In every caste not excluding Brahmans cases of great poverty exist. But as the caste descends in the social scale, the instances of poverty increases, and the well to do are less able to render aid to the poorer members of their class. The best remedy is perhaps to relax the rule which requires that education, even in schools which are not entirely supported by but only aided by the state, should not be purely gratuitous. Hunter commission therefore recommends *that in all board schools, a certain proportion of pupils be admissible as free students on the ground of poverty; and in the case of special schools established for the benefit of the poorer classes, a general or larger exemption from payment of fees be allowed under proper authority for special reasons.* There may be schools which specially undertake the education of the poor, and which, under the operation of the above rule, will be unable to charge fees, and must thus depend upon charitable assistance and grants from the State. The grants which they may earn under the result system will be very small, and their case seems to deserve special encouragement. It therefore recommends *that assistance be given to schools and orphanages in which poor children are taught reading, writing, and counting, with or without manual work.*

The idea of giving admission to only certain pupil admission already excludes poor pupils who would not be used for labour market as there were no large numbers of industries in India till now. So it was necessary to only have some pupils educated initially for labour market and that too in a particular kind of education i.e., technical education. In fact, the idea of technical education and its need in India is a very complicated topic.

As we see India did not see industrialisation on a large scale as seen by other European countries. So, urge for technical education can also be seen as a way to change the entire structure of autonomous handicraft industries.

To sum up, I have tried to look at two perspective through which a change in the life of poor was sought through modern schooling system. First is the end of their autonomy in terms of learning because now this modern schooling system will have a value in terms of providing them subsistence. This question in turn is also related with the decline of handicraft industries as formally educated pupils were now the need of industries which were coming up. In this way entire process can be seen as intervention in people's life at a level where they themselves succumb to the formal educational system since they find their informal way of learning having no worth. This was obviously through schools but also through industries.

References

1. Similarly J. Farish in a minute issued in the Bombay Presidency says: “the natives must either be kept down by a sense of our power, or they must willingly submit from a conviction that we are wiser, more just, more humane, and more anxious to improve their condition than any other rulers they could possibly have.” Quoted in Gauri viswanathan, “masks of conquest”, 2.
2. In a report which looks at how far indigenous schools exist, the subjects taught in them and the extent to which they are recognised by the Government, it is reported that “indigenous schools in these provinces are neither aided nor inspected, nor are they formally recognised by the Government as forming a part of the educational system. Attempt has been made at various times and in various ways to induce their teachers to adopt the prescribed books, classification, and method of instruction, but all these endeavours have been unsuccessful.” Primary education in India, A progs, February, 1882, 31-71.
3. No 20- Extract from resolution, dated 7th September 1894, upon Mr. A. M. Nash’s Report on the progress of Education in India, 1887-88, 1891-92.