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## English Education and the Making of the Indian Intellectual Elite: A Study of Rammohan Roy and Colonial Educational Policy

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### **Abstract:**

*Introduction of English education in colonial India was a watershed in the intellectual, social and political milieu of the subcontinent. Raja Rammohan Roy was one of the earliest Indians to argue for Western education. He was a key figure in the promotion of modern scientific education and rational enquiry through the English language. This article discusses the link between Rammohan Roy's educational vision and the colonial education policies which led to the Anglicist victory of 1835. The study is based on contemporary writings, official reports on education and secondary scholarship to examine his advocacy of the introduction of western sciences, philosophy and literature. The article also addresses the implications of significant policy initiatives, particularly the educational controversies between the Orientalists and the Anglicists and the issuance of Thomas Babington Macaulay's Minute on Education. It demonstrates how English education helped to produce a new Indian intellectual elite which was to play a central role in the growth of public debate, social reform movements, political awareness and early nationalism. The article locates Rammohan Roy in the larger context of colonial educational policy and underscores the complex interaction between indigenous reform movements and colonial initiatives.*

**Keywords:** English Education, Raja Rammohan Roy, Colonial Education Policy, Indian Intellectual Elite, Bengal Renaissance, Modern India

### **Introduction:**

The advent of the British rule in India brought about extensive changes in the educational scene of the country. The rise of an English-educated intellectual elite in nineteenth-century India is one of the most important developments in the history of colonial India. The advent of English education revolutionised the educational system and redefined the Indian society, politics, religion and intellectual life. Traditional systems of learning continued to function but the introduction of Western education opened new avenues for intellectual engagement and social mobility. Raja Rammohan Roy (1772–1833) was one of the earliest proponents of modern education. He felt that Western scientific

knowledge and rational inquiry provided useful instruments for the rejuvenation of Indian society and hence advocated the introduction of English education in India. Sankar Ghose has rightly pointed out that Rammohan Roy thought that the Indians should have English education in order to learn modern science and philosophy and to get over the limitations of traditional scholastic learning.<sup>i</sup> This intellectual elite was further developed in Hindu College, the educational policies of Thomas Babington Macaulay, and the activities of reformers like Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, Keshab Chandra Sen, and Swami Vivekananda etc. The development of a new class of educated Indians provided the basis for social reform movements, political consciousness and ultimately Indian nationalism. Raja Rammohun Roy occupies a central place in this process as he was one of the first Indian thinkers to recognise the importance of Western knowledge and scientific education. The article deals with Rammohan Roy's contribution to the promotion of English education and discusses how colonial educational policies led to the emergence of a modern Indian intellectual elite. It also examines the larger implications of educational reforms for the growth of social reform movements, political consciousness and Indian nationalism.

#### **Rammohan Roy and the Educational Debate:**

Rammohan Roy helped in modern education with the confidence that scientific and rational knowledge was the basis for progress of India. In his famous letter to Lord Amherst in 1823, Roy condemned the British government for patronising traditional Sanskrit education and advocated the promotion of modern scientific learning. He argued that the existing educational system could not impart practical knowledge essential for social advancement<sup>ii</sup>. Roy thought that mathematics, natural philosophy, chemistry, and anatomy would be more useful than mere devotion to classical learning. His advocacy was a turning point in the educational history of colonial India and presaged subsequent developments in British educational policy. In the early nineteenth century the Orientalists and the Anglicists seriously debated about the future course of education in India. The Orientalists were in favour of promotion of traditional learning through Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic while Anglicists were in favour of dissemination of western knowledge through English. Rammohan Roy was a strong proponent of the Anglicist position. He maintained that the present system was based upon metaphysical and theological studies that contributed little to the practical good of society. His advocacy was not because he disowned Indian culture but because he wanted to enrich Indian society with modern knowledge. For Rammohan, English was a medium through which Indians could gain access to the latest developments of science, philosophy and political thoughts. This made him one of the most influential proponents of educational modernisation in colonial India.

#### **Colonial Educational Policy and the Triumph of Anglicism:**

“The joint activities of David Hare and Rammohan Roy resulted in the foundation of the Hindu College in 1817”<sup>iii</sup>. This foundation of Hindu College at Calcutta was important stage in the making

of an Indian intellectual elite. The institution was established with the aid of David Hare, Rammohun Roy and other reform-minded men and it became a centre for the dissemination of Western knowledge. They read English literature, philosophy, science and political thought, and acquired the intellectual weapons that subverted received assumptions. The college trained a generation of Indians who would become influential writers, journalists, reformers and political leaders. The rise of English education was institutionalised through the educational policies of Thomas Babington Macaulay. The debate on education policy culminated in Thomas Babington Macaulay's famous Minute on Education in 1835. Macaulay insisted that the medium of instruction should be English and that Western literature and science were superior to traditional Oriental learning. The later acceptance of Macaulay's recommendations was a definite change in the policy of colonial education. While Macaulay and Rammohan Roy were very different, they both believed in an educational vision in which English was the vehicle of modern knowledge. Macaulay envisaged the formation of a class of Indians who would be "Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect"<sup>iv</sup>. This policy was based on colonial assumptions of cultural superiority, but it unintentionally created a group of educated Indians who would later challenge colonial rule itself. Sophia Dobson Collet has stressed that Rammohun Roy was of great intellectual importance since Roy believed that Western education was a means of moral and intellectual rejuvenation of Indian society<sup>v</sup>. Collet further argues that Roy tried to reconcile the rational spirit of Europe with the ethical and spiritual traditions of India, laying the foundations of modern Indian thought<sup>vi</sup>. This fusion of Eastern and Western ideas became a hallmark of the nineteenth-century Indian intelligentsia. The educational policy initiated by Macaulay was further consolidated by Wood's Despatch of 1854, often described as the "Magna Carta of English Education in India." The Despatch recommended the establishment of universities at Calcutta, Bombay and Madras, the creation of education departments in each province, the expansion of vernacular primary education, and the promotion of teacher training. While English remained the medium of higher education, the Despatch recognised the importance of vernacular languages at the elementary level. These measures contributed significantly to the institutionalisation of modern education and facilitated the growth of an English-educated Indian intelligentsia.<sup>vii</sup>

### **The Emergence of the Indian Intellectual Elite:**

The greatest achievement of English education was the arrival of a new educated Indian class. This intellectual elite occupied posts in government service, law, journalism, education and the professions. More importantly, it became the chief vehicle of modern political and social ideas. Graduates of institutions such as Hindu College, Calcutta University, were instrumental in spreading ideas of liberalism, constitutionalism, democracy and individual rights. One of the teachers associated with Hindu College was Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, who inspired critical thinking and intellectual independence among the students. Ghose observes that Derozio's students became leading lights of

Bengal's intellectual and cultural life, helping to form the modern public sphere<sup>viii</sup>. European intellectual traditions also provoked discussions of social customs, religious practices, and political institutions. The educated Indians began to question the practices of sati, caste discrimination and inequality between the sexes. English education thus became a part of the larger reformist agenda of the nineteenth century. Francis Bradley-Birt writes that Derozio encouraged his pupils to think independently and to be critical<sup>ix</sup>. Through the Young Bengal movement, Derozio inspired students to challenge social customs, religious orthodoxy and intellectual stagnation. His influence was a major factor in the growth among educated Indians of a rational and questioning spirit. The Young Bengal movement, though limited socially, showed the transformative power of English education in creating a new intellectual outlook.

The rise of the Indian intellectual elite was thus not merely an educational phenomenon. It was part of a larger process of change in Indian society under colonial rule. Educated Indians became journalists, teachers, lawyers, civil servants and political activists. They founded newspapers, literary societies, debating clubs, and reform organisations that encouraged public debate and social change. By doing so, they created a lively intellectual culture that challenged both traditional orthodoxy and colonial authority.

In conclusion, English education was instrumental in the making of the Indian intellectual elite in the nineteenth century. The intellectual milieu of colonial India was changed by Raja Rammohun Roy's advocacy of modern scientific education, the establishment of Hindu College, the intellectual radicalism of Derozio, the educational policy of Macaulay, contributions of reformers like Keshab Chandra Sen and Swami Vivekananda. English education was established in the context of colonial rule, but its consequences went beyond colonial designs. It created a generation of educated Indians who became agents of social reform, cultural renewal and political awakening. The rise of this intellectual elite laid the foundations for modern Indian nationalism and determined the course of India's intellectual history.

### **English Education and the Bengal Renaissance:**

The rise of the Indian intellectual elite became an integral part of the Bengal Renaissance. The movement comprised religious reform, literary innovation, social criticism, and cultural renewal. For those associated with the Brahma Samaj, however, like Debendranath Tagore and Keshab Chandra Sen, the intellectual atmosphere created by English education was a boon. Western education brought to India ideas of rationalism, humanism, secularism and scientific investigation. These ideas inspired educated Indians to re-interpret their cultural traditions. At the same time, they participated in modern intellectual currents. Ghose claims that the English education allowed Indians to adopt the positive aspects of Western civilisation without having to give up their native cultural identities. Thus, the Bengal Renaissance was not merely a process of Westernisation, but a creative interaction of

indigenous traditions and modern ideas.

Religious and social reform movements further strengthened the development of modern Indian intellectual culture. Keshab Chandra Sen was one of the prominent leaders of Brahmo Samaj, who attempted to blend the ethical teachings of Christianity with the spiritual heritage of Hinduism. In his lectures, Sen stressed the need for moral education and for universal religious principles in shaping a modern society<sup>x</sup>. He believed in education as a force for character-building and social reform. Sen's thought was part of a larger development of a cosmopolitan intellectual culture that was not confined to narrow sectarian boundaries. The Brahmo Samaj's intellectual heritage was not confined to religious reform. It encouraged critical thinking, the involvement of educated Indians in public life and the sense of social responsibility. The movement offered a space for educated Indians to engage with modern ideas without breaking away from their own cultural traditions. As such, Brahmo Samaj played a vital role in forming the values of the rising intellectual elite.

British attitudes to India are important to understanding the significance of colonial educational policy. Western education was seen by many British administrators as a means of civilising Indian society and at the same time producing a loyal administrative class<sup>xi</sup>. Therefore, education had a dual purpose within the colonial system, an ideological and a practical purpose. Yet, the diffusion of English education yielded results over and above colonial expectations. Educated Indians appropriated Western ideas like liberty, equality, constitutionalism and nationalism and used them in the critique of colonial domination. Debate about national education also emerged with the rise of an English-educated elite. Lajpat Rai advocated that education should not be a mere imitation of the Western models, but should be suited to the Indian conditions and aspirations<sup>xii</sup>. He acknowledged the importance of modern knowledge, but pointed out the need to save national culture and identity. This debate mirrored the broader tensions of Westernisation and cultural nationalism that marked Indian intellectual life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

### **Education and the Growth of Nationalism:**

The most important result of English education was perhaps that it helped Indian nationalism to grow. During the nineteenth century, educated middle class developed that grew increasingly conscious of political developments in Europe and America. The ideas of liberty, equality, representative government and national self-determination to which the British were exposed encouraged demands for political reform within India. Ironically, the British system of education produced a generation of leaders who would challenge colonial rule. Educated Indians employed the language of liberalism and constitutionalism in criticising imperial policies and demanding greater political participation. "English education played a large-scale role in the development and promotion of a spirit of all-India nationalism"<sup>xiii</sup>. Ghose notes that English education promoted an all-India outlook and helped a great deal in developing a nationalist consciousness. The western education

created this intellectual atmosphere, and from this environment, leaders like Surendranath Banerjea, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and later Mahatma Gandhi emerged. Thus, a policy originally intended to strengthen colonial rule ultimately helped to nurture anti-colonial nationalism. Swami Vivekananda was another important stage in the development of modern Indian intellectual thought. Unlike earlier reformers who sought westernisation, Vivekananda sought to reinterpret Indian traditions in modern terms. He argued that education must aim at the development of character, self-confidence, and national strength<sup>xiv</sup>. To Vivekananda, real education was the realisation of the perfection already present in man. His educational philosophy combined spiritual values with practical needs and inspired a generation of educated Indians to take part in national reconstruction. Vivekananda also stressed the importance of uniting the civilisations of the East and the West. He praised Western science and organisation but maintained that India had a special spiritual heritage that could help enrich the modern world<sup>xv</sup>. Such a balanced view enabled educated Indians to be critical of modernity, but not to lose their cultural identity. His ideas had a deep impact on the intellectual and nationalist movements of the early twentieth century.

### **Conclusion:**

The advent of English education was one of the most revolutionary changes in nineteenth-century India. Raja Rammohan Roy's promotion of modern education decisively influenced the educational policies that transformed Indian intellectual life. Colonial authorities encouraged the teaching of English mainly for administrative purposes. The long-term impact was much more than they had intended. English education created a new Indian intellectual elite, which became the mainspring of social reform, religious revival, cultural modernisation and nationalist politics. It was these educated Indians, through their engagement with Western knowledge and indigenous traditions, who laid the foundations of modern India. The emergence of this intellectual elite is an indication of the way in which educational policies can have a profound influence on the social and political development of a society.

Jawaharlal Nehru, who understood the wider effect of English education on Indian society. In *The Discovery of India*, Nehru observed that English education created a new intelligentsia that became increasingly aware of political and social issues<sup>xvi</sup>. Educated Indians, exposed to Western political philosophy, started agitating for representative institutions, civil liberties and constitutional change. English education also made possible the exchange of ideas between linguistic and regional groups and thus helped in the development of an all-India consciousness. Similarly, F. W. Thomas states that the British educational expansion in India opened up new intellectual vistas and facilitated the dissemination of scientific knowledge<sup>xvii</sup>. Educational institutions became centres of intellectual exchange in which students were exposed to contemporary ideas about society, politics, economics and history. These institutions produced a generation of leaders who would go on to play prominent

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