

# Macaulay: Father of modern Indian education system



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Macaulay has seamlessly been criticized for having destroyed India's indigenous education system, imposed English and introduced a filtering system. Several slam what is called the Macaulay education system, linking the 190-year-old colonial education system with Macaulay. Yet at the other end of the spectrum there are people who praise Macaulay.

The main trigger for the criticism of Macaulay is the 'Minute on Indian Education' that he prepared in February, 1835. The Roja Muthiah Research Library published a Tamil translation of the

report in 2022, which has helped bust some myths. Macaulay lived in India for just four years (1834-38).

Why is he castigated now? In order to understand the background of the criticism, it is imperative to have a re-look at history.

### **Before Macaulay**

Education had been available only to the upper castes/ classes before the advent of the British in India. That too, education was imparted only in Sanskrit and Arabic. Science was not taught. The British, who captured power in India, helped open Sanskrit and Arabic colleges in order to maintain the status quo. A few parliamentarians in England, who were reformists, created a situation wherein the British government had to spend Rs.1 lakh for developing education and literature in India. The General Teaching Council was set up in Bengal to advise the Governor-General on methods of spending the funds for education. However, all these developments had not brought about any change in the British government's education policy.

### **Vidyalaya college**

During this time, a zeal developed among the people to get educated through English medium. As there was no help from the government to fulfill the people's aspiration, some Indians, led by Raja Ram Mohan Rai, mobilized Rs. 1,13,179 and set up a Vidyalaya college. This was the first college in Asia which taught science through English. Taking a cue from the development,

some more Indians and Christian Missionaries established many English medium educational institutions in the country.

The General Teaching Council too raised voices, demanding establishment of English medium educational institutions. But people such as Wilson and Princi who dominated the council, opposed the demand. Then Bentinck became the Governor-General; Wilson returned to Britain and Trevelyan, who supported English medium education, became a member of the council. The support for English medium education had since been swelling.

### **Advent of Macaulay**

Macaulay arrived in India to take charge as Law Commissioner in 1834. He also became a member of the council in his capacity as Law Commissioner.

Because of the raging dispute between two sections in the council over education through Sanskrit/Arabic and through English, the chief of the council Henry Shakespeare quit, giving way to Macaulay. Thus Macaulay donned the mantle of the chief of the council.

Macaulay prepared a report recommending halting aid for Sanskrit/Arabic education and putting in place a system for teaching science through English. He submitted his report to Bentinck on Feb. 2, 1835. However, he recommended continuing help for the Delhi Madrasa College and the Varanasi Sanskrit College. Later, Macaulay permitted enrolment of non-upper

caste students also for learning Sanskrit in Azamgarh and Farrukhabad schools. But the Sanskrit and Arabic books printed at the cost of Rs.60,000 were not sold while 8,000 books published in English by the School Book Society sold like hot cakes, raking in 20 per cent profit. Hence, Macaulay ordered to stop publication of Sanskrit and Arabic books.

He said, “With the funds available with us, we cannot impart education to lakhs of students. So, let us select a few and teach them through English. They, in turn, shall teach modern science through Indian languages to others.”

Accepting the recommendation made by Macaulay as the chief of the General Teaching Council, Bentinck announced in 1835 that henceforth English medium education would be imparted at the expenditure of Rs.one lakh. But he did not accept the recommendation to close down the Sanskrit and Arabic schools. As long as Macaulay lived in India, he wrote over 30 education reports and functioned efficiently, says Prof. Parimala Rao, Indian education historian.

Macaulay, who first took note of Bihar’s educational backwardness, started a school to teach English and indigenous language. He continued to launch similar schools at eight places in three years. Insisting on no religious preaching in educational institutions, he stopped aid to those institutions charged with resorting to religious conversions. Opposing the trend of one teacher for 124 students, he enforced the system of appointing one teacher for 30 students. There are some memoirs that point out that he had dismissed an European teacher for having beaten an Indian student and getting a poor student a seat in a school which had earlier denied admission to the boy.

He was very firm in his view that government schools were common to all. However, there was a difference of opinion in the General Teaching Council over which language should be the medium of instruction. There was a consensus, though, among the members on the idea that only the upper caste people should be educated. Nonetheless, Macaulay stood firm in his opinion that education should be provided without any religious and communal bias.

### **Tribute from reformer leader**

On June 6, 1878, Surendra Nath, freedom fighter and reformist, spoke at the 35th memorial meeting held for David Hare, friend of Raja Ram Mohan Rai. He said, “Macaulay’s father Zachary Macaulay had helped in liberation of the blacks. But the son Thomas Macaulay went one better, retrieving India through education from the clutches of suffocating conservatism.” This was an appropriate tribute to Macaulay’s excellent work.

Macaulay had, in a short span of time, retrieved education confined to Sanskrit and Arabic and available only to the upper castes, and made it common to all regardless of caste, religion, creed etc. But, education is still beyond the reach of the people at the lowest rung of the society in the independent India. For that, instead of putting the rulers in the dock, how is it right to keep blaming the upper castes alone?

**Translated by V. Mariappan.**