

---

**English Education and A Spark in the Dark Society of the 19<sup>th</sup>  
Century Colonial Bengal**

**Dr.Chitta Sen Paramanik<sup>1</sup>**

**<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor  
Department of History  
P.R. Thakur Government College  
North-24 Pargana, West Bengal, India  
Email:chittasenparamanik@gamil.com**

---

**Abstract:** Colonial Bengal witnessed a vigorous intellectual awakening in the nineteenth century. The British introduced English education with the purpose of expansion and sustenance of the British Empire. But it produced something else as well and it created several elements such as intelligentsias, western ideas, orientalism, missionaries, 'Babu' culture, etc. for the Indians resulting in the growth and development of new intellectual awakening. It became a spark in the dark society of 19<sup>th</sup>-century colonial Bengal at first and then the societies of the other parts of India.

**Keywords:** Christian Missionaries, English Education, Intellectual Awakening etc.

---

**Date of Submission: 18-02-2024**

**Date of Acceptance: 25-02-2024**

.....

**Introduction**

The rise and growth of the 'Intellectual Awakening' was a spark in the society of 19<sup>th</sup>-century colonial Bengal. With the growth of the British Empire in India, the colonial power realized the very need of establishing an efficient and authoritative administration for pursuing its interests. For this reason, it attempted to introduce a new system of law and justice and thereby established a modern bureaucracy and an effective army and police. The British also established a well-defined communication and transportation system and introduced English education through which several elements emerged that led to the rise and growth of the intellectual awakening in Bengal. This awakening was a sign of great socio-cultural and political changes. It was also a significant move toward the Indian anti-colonial

# English Education and A Spark in the Dark Society of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Colonial Bengal

---

movement. So, this paper endeavours to explore such elements that played a significant role in the rise and growth of the 'Intellectual Awakening' in nineteenth-century Bengal.

## Objectives of the Study

1. To point out how English education had created the Bengali intelligentsias who played the most important role of pioneers, leaders, and organizers of the intellectual awakening in nineteenth-century Bengal.
2. To explore and analysis the elements that played a significant role in the rise and growth of this intellectual awakening in nineteenth-century Bengal.

## Analysis and Interpretation

### Introduction of English education

British East India Company, the champion among European traders, by the middle of the eighteenth century, through the battles of Plassey (1757) and Buxar (1764) in Bengal began to capture the political power of India and soon succeeded and established its deep influence on the economic, social, political and cultural life of the people of India. The Christian missionaries took the initiative for teaching English and the introduction of western education with the intention of preaching their religion. English education was introduced in India in the eighteenth century through the charity schools run in Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay to educate the European and Anglo-Indian children receiving support from the Company in various ways. But the company did not take any responsibility for the education of the indigenous population until 1813. The real beginning of English education in India was dated to the Charter Act of 1813, which provided the allocation of one hundred thousand rupees per year for the education of natives of India. But this decision was pending till the issue of the famous Macaulay's Minutes, the blueprint for the introduction of English education in India, on 2 February 1835. Lord William Bentinck endorsed Macaulay's Minutes in an executive order dated 7 March 1835 and thereby western education through the medium of English came to be introduced in India with the intention of expansion and sustenance of the British Empire. Gauri Viswanathan indeed argues that the introduction of "English Studies" into India had nothing noble but intended to serve the imperial civilizing mission of strengthening the British cultural "hegemony".<sup>1</sup> Thomas Macaulay, the architect of colonial Britain's Education Policy in India, articulated the purpose of English education, in his famous minute of 1835 on Indian education, in such a way as "to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and intellect"<sup>2</sup>. But it produced something else as well and it created several opportunities for the Indians resulting in a new intellectual

# English Education and A Spark in the Dark Society of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Colonial Bengal

---

awakening in Bengal at first and then the other parts of India. It is suggested that because the seeds of British paramountcy were sown in Bengal, the impact of the British rule in India too was first felt in Bengal, and that is why perhaps its culture was first and foremost radically transformed through interaction with the West.

## Growth of Bengali Intelligentsias

The British rule and the introduction of English education and its direct and indirect consequences made the field fertile in India for the growth of middle-class intellectuals. The establishment of British rule in India resulted in the opening up of opportunities for taking new kinds of jobs and professions for the Indians. Most of these people, from the new social class which emerged as a result of changes in the British social policy and the introduction of the new economic system of the British, began to live in the newly founded presidency towns like Madras (Chennai), Bombay (Mumbai) and Calcutta (Kolkata), which were also important centres of trade and commerce. These were the first towns in India, where British modernity was transported from the Empire, ideas of European Enlightenment seeped in, colonial society emerged, reformist movements started and overall, the beginning of an anti-colonial movement was observed. A new class of clerks, managers, lawyers, doctors, teachers, engineers, journalists, etc. emerged as the intelligentsia and professional group under British colonial rule. This group was designated as the intelligentsia in India, whose social position was due to education and training, rather than heredity. What may be of interest to note is that they came from relatively privileged classes, mainly Hindu upper-caste, and “from families which were financially comfortable, but not rich enough to not have to earn a living. This was one factor that distinguished them from the richest strata of Indian society, such as the large hereditary landlords or the remnants of an indigenous aristocracy. It also clearly put them well above the vast majority of India’s poor”.<sup>3</sup> The Bengali middle-class urban intellectuals who constituted the major part of the group of English-educated middle-class Indians played the most important role of pioneers, leaders, and organizers of this intellectual awakening. From the mid-nineteenth century, they became gradually enlightened with a new intellectual awakening and took a decisive role in generating national consciousness and building the modern Indian nation.

## Western Ideas

The most important contributory factor that shaped the growth of this new awakening was the western ideas that were shifted to India through the introduction of English education. S. Natarajan, an Indian historian, observed that English education was one of the main channels through which modern ideas were transferred.<sup>4</sup> Through the study of English literature and European history, English-educated Indians imbibed western ideas such as individual rights,

# English Education and A Spark in the Dark Society of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Colonial Bengal

---

national patriotism, the doctrine of reason and humanism of the European Renaissance, and also the verses of Milton, Wordsworth, Blake, Shelley, and others. Apart from this, they absorbed the idea of the struggle of the people against authorities and for the rule of law in England, glorified in the literature and historical writings of nineteenth-century England, and also identified with the passionate and sustaining verses of Lord Byron for the independence of Greece and Shelley for Ireland respectably. Consequently, educated Indians could stand up with a mental awakening. R.C. Majumdar writes that: “English education opened the flood-gates of the Western ideas which almost overwhelmed them at the beginning. Fifty years of English education brought greater changes in the minds of the educated Hindus of Bengal than the previous thousand years.”<sup>5</sup>

It also created a climate for the “opening up of Indian mind to the wider world situation” which helped them to come into contact with western values. It must be mentioned that this empire with its economic and administrative infrastructure and education system planted an idea - to think of India as one state - in the minds of educated Indians.

## Christian Missionaries

An important force that shaped this new awakening was the criticism of the Christian missionaries on Hindu religion, culture, and society. From 1576<sup>6</sup> the missionary work began in Bengal but because of the hostile attitude of the British East India Company towards missionary activities, there was hardly any expansion of their activities till 1813 when the Charter Act was introduced. As this Act removed the restrictions on missionary activities and opened the doors to the missionaries, they started to come to India in great numbers. They constituted an overt challenge to Hinduism by criticizing Hindu religion and society bitterly and by viewing Hindu culture as backward and profane. They engaged in spreading Christian values and also attempted conversion<sup>7</sup>. At the same time, they attacked the very foundations of Hindu religious culture by denouncing the worship, rituals, beliefs, and customs of the Hindus. Furthermore, their target was also casteism and the ill-treatment of women in Hindu society.

## Orientalism

What was more important among the influences that worked for creating this new awakening during the nineteenth century, especially on religio-cultural matters, was the work of British Orientalists whose painstaking efforts brought into view a very vivid picture of India's golden past. Although recently, the term ‘Orientalism’ has become problematic and contested in some scholarly circles, ever since the publication of Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism* (which carries in itself several meanings) but ‘Orientalism’ is used here in the sense of the systematic study of the history, languages, literature, and cultures of the Orient, which was taken as the administrative policy of the East India Company from 1773 to 1832.

## English Education and A Spark in the Dark Society of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Colonial Bengal

---

This policy was taken by the company's Government under Warren Hastings with the inspiration of the post-Enlightenment idea that "traditional Oriental learning could be combined with the rationalism of the West" and the fundamental principle that "the conquered people were to be ruled by their own laws - British rule had to legitimize itself in an Indian idiom"<sup>8</sup> to train a class of British administrators in Indian languages and culture. David Kopf has marked 1772, the year when Warren Hastings came to Bengal as Governor, as the beginning of the era of British Orientalism. Hastings believed that to rule India effectively as well as to flourish the colonizing state it would be a necessary prerequisite that the Englishmen would acquire the knowledge about the culture and history of Indian people and he should "think and act like an Asian"<sup>9</sup>. Therefore, there was an urge to make attempts to produce knowledge about Indian culture and tradition through the Sanskrit languages in which Hindu scriptures and literature of ancient India were composed, a process which was for Gauri Viswanathan "reverse acculturation"<sup>10</sup>. Toward this urge, Hastings "assembled a small band of Englishmen recently landed in India to acquire knowledge of it, in whom he furthered a love for Indian literature and an interest in the Indian past". Thus, this group of Englishmen-administrators-scholars generally became the first British Orientalists who devoted themselves to their research work for bringing India's glorious past to the limelight. Sir William Jones, a brilliant scholar of the eighteenth century, arrived at Kolkata in 1783 as a judge in the Supreme Court and would become the most eminent of the British Orientalists. He founded the Asiatic Society in 1784, which came to be known as the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1839, which would become "the hub for much of the Indological studies pursued by the Orientalists"<sup>11</sup>. It played an important role in discovering unknown facts of ancient Indian history and became a landmark in the history of Indian culture. When Sir Jones studied the classical Sanskrit language and linked it with the European language family, he expressed that "the Sanskrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure, more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity both in roots of verbs and in form of grammar"<sup>12</sup>.

Other prominent Orientalists in Hastings' tenure from 1773 to 1783 were the Sanskritist M.T. Colebrook (1765-1837), John Borthwick Gilchrist (1759 – 1841), Horace Hayman Wilson (1786– 1860), William Carey (1761–1834), Nathaniel Brassey Halhed (1751 –1830) and others. Jones was followed by H.T. Colebrook whose primary research was devoted to the Vedic Age. He made known to the world the monotheistic tradition of Vedas and depicted the Vedic period as a golden age. He argued that Hinduism deteriorated in later times due to the misunderstanding of numerous texts by modern Hindus. Another prominent Orientalist in India was H.H. Willson who devoted himself to the translation and analysis of *Puranas*. He undertook a project to demythologize the Hindu past and attempted to give historical sustenance to its legendary heroes like Sankara and Kalidasa. It was he who first revealed the systematic history of Hindu medicine and coded Hindu laws. In addition, there were many Orientalists generally known as Indologists who devoted themselves to revealing the glory of

# English Education and A Spark in the Dark Society of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Colonial Bengal

---

ancient India. However, the discoveries of Orientalists, combined together, provided sufficient evidence to prove that there was a golden past to India's culture. This glorious picture of ancient Indian culture that gave the educated Indians a sense of confidence to remove their inferiority inspired them with their rich heritage. Consequently, their minds were effectively stirred up.

## Conclusion

Thus, the introduction of English-education supplied opportunities to grow the English educated Bengali middle-class urban intellectuals. It provided such elements that affected their minds very radically; and created a strong stir among them. So, they became gradually enlightened with a new intellectual awakening and played the most important role of pioneers, leaders, and organizers of it. From the mid-nineteenth century, they also took a decisive role in generating national consciousness and building the modern Indian nation. This new intellectual awakening came to mind in Bengal at first and then the other parts of India. This phenomenon has been described as the renaissance in European style for its important significance from the socio-cultural perspective of India. As this phenomenon first started in Bengal, it has been referred to as the 'Bengal Renaissance' even if the idea has been widely debated among scholars. This awakening marked the beginning of great socio-cultural and political changes and an important move toward the freedom movement of India. So This awakening was a spark in the dark society of the 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial Bengal.

## Notes & References

---

<sup>1</sup> Cited in Dasgupta, Subrata, *The Bengal Renaissance: Identity and Creativity from Rammohun Roy to Rabindranath Tagore*, Delhi:Permanent Black2007, p.87.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Ghosh, S.C., *The History of Education in Modern India, 1757-1986*, , Hyderabad:Orient Longman, 1995, p.33.

<sup>3</sup> Joshi, Sanjay, *The Middle Class in Colonial India*, New Delhi:Oxford University Press, 2010, p.91.

<sup>4</sup> Natarajan, S., *A Century of Social Reform in India*, Bombay:Asia Publishing House, 1959, p. 5

<sup>5</sup> Majumdar, R.C., *British Paramountcy and Indian Renaissance part II*, Bombay:Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan,1965, p. 89.

<sup>6</sup> The Jesuit Fathers Antonio Vaz and Pedro Dias were the first to come to Bengal in 1576.

<sup>7</sup> One instance of this purpose was the Lex Loci act which was passed in 1850.

<sup>8</sup> Bandyopadhyay, Sekhar, *From Plassey to Partition: A History of Modern India*, New Delhi:Orient Longman, 2004, p.68.

<sup>9</sup> Kopf, David, *British Orientalism and Bengal Renaissance*, Berkeley:University of California Press, 1969, p.18.

<sup>10</sup> Bandyopadhyay, Sekhar, op. cit., p.68.

<sup>11</sup> Mukherjee, S.N., *Sir William Jones: A study in Eighteen Century British Attitudes in India*, cited in Dasgupta Subrata, op.cit.,p.23.

<sup>12</sup> Cited in Nath, Rakhil Chandra, *The Hindu Movement 1886-1911*, Calcutta: Minerva Associates Publications Pvt., 1982, pp.46-47.