

Forging Hybrid Cultural Identity: Transformation of Curriculum in Colonial Malabar

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The study explores the impact of British colonial education in Malabar, Kerala. It investigates how the imposition of foreign values disrupted traditional practices, leading to hybrid identities among the educated elite. The emergence of a new middle class with British education created intermediaries in the colonial administration. English education influenced Malayalam literature, blending Western and native themes. Economic disparities persisted, as skilled positions remained reserved for Europeans. Postcolonial challenges involve reconciling hybrid identities and preserving cultural heritage amidst modernity. Understanding the legacy of colonial education is vital for comprehending the intricate relationship between education, culture and power dynamics in post colonial societies.

Key words: Colonialism-hybrid identity-cultural conquest-curriculum change-language dominance-Literature-Missionary activity.

Introduction

Colonialism is a system of rules which assumes the right of one people to impose their 'will' upon another. It inevitably leads to a situation of dominance and dependency and it systematically subordinates those governed by it to the imported culture in social, economic and political life. Colonialism is not merely political and

economic conquest; but cultural conquest. Education, as one of the determining factors of culture, played significant role in the politics of both the colonizer and the colonized. Cultural conquest seemed less coercive and assumed more receptivity among the colonized. Education facilitated this process with less expenditure and minimum resistance from the side of the natives. It was purely intentional and one of the most successful weapons by which the British subjugated the people of India. Replacing the existing native education with British system of education had the effect of destroying the cultural identity of being Indian. The British, in the opinion of Gauri Viswanathan, was producing an image of ideal Englishman through education. (Viswanathan. 86)

A native in the colonial education system confronts the condition of hybridity. It is formed out of the identities created out of multiple cultural forms, practices, beliefs and power dynamics. Colonial education creates a condition that makes it difficult to differentiate between the new, enforced ideas of the colonizers and the former native practices. Many of the practices which bound the society as it was were tuned to become obsolete due to the incursion of the western values through education. Matrilineal system, joint families, polyandry, rituals related to one own family tradition and native language were looked at with scorn. “The process annihilates a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is farthest removed from them.” (Thiong. 19) Not only does colonial education eventually create a desire to disassociate with native heritage, but it affects the individual and his/her sense of self-confidence. It is held that colonial education leaves a sense of inferiority and disempowerment on the collective psyche of a colonized people. It is opined that in order to eliminate the harmful, lasting effects of colonial education, postcolonial nations must connect their own experiences of colonialism with other nations’ histories.

Malabar region confronted colonialism in the sphere of education with the beginning of missionary activities. The traditional caste based native education system was disrupted. A new education system came into being replacing the traditional system of learning. A new educational structure is evolved under colonialism in the place of indigenous system of education. This should support the hybrid identity created out of the native encounter with the colonizers. "One of the main social activities of the missionaries in North Malabar was the founding of schools for the poor and the children of the oppressed castes like Cherumas, Pulayas and Ezhavas, and also encouraged the education of girls." (Ramachandran. 103) Religion was the prime concern of the missionaries. They knew well that education would prepare the ground work for their main goal that is conversion to Christianity. Moreover, modern education had given them an opportunity to get access to the native society. Modern education would definitely change the traditional values and imitate western culture.

The British colonial education system in Malabar, Kerala, encompassed several pivotal aspects that influenced society, culture, and individual identities. They focused on three important aspects: the ideological base of colonial education, agencies and social groups who participated in the process of knowledge dissemination and the formation of a new middle class group for different functions of colonial government in Malabar. It clearly understands that the British had a clear agenda while introducing a new knowledge system through the language of English. The British introduced education with a clear agenda: to foster European morality, establish a workforce for economic ventures, and create intermediaries between the government and the masses. This education policy was closely tied to British political and economic interests. By imposing English and undermining local languages, the British aimed at linguistic dominance and ideological control. The education system was skewed to favor the elite and middle class, while skilled positions were mostly reserved for Europeans. The colonial powers actively reshaped the linguistic makeup of the region and implemented educational systems that were clearly geared to suit their own needs: who would act as interpreters between the Government and the mass. The British were mainly interested in

instilling notions of European morality in their colonial subjects and at forming an easily available and cheap labour resource for their economic endeavours. The colonial processes worked to undermine the language traditions that served as the roots of education for indigenous communities of the region. Because languages embody cultural knowledge and are integral to community identities, shifting to colonial language, British used English language as a powerful form of ontological and epistemological domination over the people of the region. This shows that language policy was always tied in some way to Britain's political and economic interests in the region. The exposition to western culture through learning English had reflected on Malayalam literature. The poets were particularly impressed by the English romantic poetry. Love and liberty formed the ideology of the literati of Malayalam as a consequence of their exposition to English literature. Love is sanctified and considered as the means and goal of mankind against caste system and inhuman evils. The novel *Indulekha* (1889), written by Chandu Menon in Malayalam was an outcome of the exposition of people to western literature and culture. "He sought to combine romantic love with realistic social details and brought a new social realism in Malayalam literature." (standocu.33) The colonial curriculum (which the missionaries also followed with some modifications) implied a total break in the prevailing concept of what was worth learning. "It was too violent a break to be successfully plastered over by the availability of printed texts and the application of new pedagogies." (Kumar. 66)

The introduction of modern education was not uniform among the various sections of Malabar society. In the formative phase of the British rule, some of the communities like Mappilas and aboriginal groups of hilly areas and the depressed class were neglected. The government was fully aware of the mass illiteracy of Mappila population and saw the need for making them literate and there by prevent the occurrence of Mappila outbreaks in the first half of the nineteenth century. Due to the religious taboos, children of Muslim community were generally sent to Arabic schools attached to Mosques, instead of western type of educational institutions. Hence, "the British forced to take some initial steps to improve the educational status of the

Mappilas. British administration tried to implement Hunter's suggestions of providing grants in aid to Muslim schools in the region." (Lakshmi. 111) Further, steps were taken on this direction by giving training to Muslim religious instructors and also starting schools in Mappila areas in later period. But much progress was not achieved, due to the aversion of Mappila population towards the western education.

After initial apathy British came in the forefront of educational activities and tried to spread western education, but only a tiny fraction of population came into direct contact with the colonial practices in the region. Though the policy had helped to increase literacy rates and popularize village schools in the place of *Ezhuthupallis*, the policy did not help to increase educational facilities at the secondary or higher levels or provide professional type of education.

The British educational plan disturbed the indigenous system of "self-help" prevalent for centuries, and which suited the genius of the people. Mathematics became an important part of leisure time activity of the students and others which includes lot of puzzles and riddles and used it in every day life. The poets wrote poems in sometime adhering to the number rules. The formulas in the form of *Karikas* (verses) indicate linguistic and mathematical intelligence of the then Kerala society. But after the colonial education, there was a drastic change in the mathematics education. The colonial education made Pedagogical shifts from traditional mathematics education and it invited certain criticisms from the general public. S. Subrahmanya Aiyer wrote in an article titled '*Manakkanakku*' opined that "the excess use of slates and modern teaching aids adversely affected the computational ability of the people of Kerala. He mentions that the people educated in traditional way were very excellent in their perceptual speed and in computation, even with big numbers." (Aiyer)

There was a drastic change occurred in the methods of teaching in colonial period. Pre-colonial education was mainly based on the mental ability and through it the students can retain the subjects taught. The teachers inflicted severe punishments to students without considering the features of child behaviour and instinctual tendencies.

They believed that strict discipline was an important requirement to attain of the ultimate aim of education- self-realization or self-actualization. Many of the students, in their later years, recalled what they had learnt in the past more creatively and divergently. Colonial education supplanted such old methods and practices by introducing new teaching methods and strategies by using printed text books and teaching manuals. The classical Sanskrit and Mathematics lost their earlier importance in colonial curriculum. For example, when Gundert became the school inspector, he discouraged learning of *Sriamodantha* or *Amarakosa* as a pre requisite to Sanskrit studies.

The East India Company in India was not originally interested in promoting any system of education. But as its empire in India expanded, the need arose for officers in the lower rungs of the administration. One of the main items of expenditure was the high salary of English officers and one obvious way of economizing was to employ Indian subordinates. Employment of Indians required their being able to read, write and speak english. Colonial powers perceived a political advantage in educating the natives. The British, for instance, hoped that english education would close the gulf between Indians and English.

The colonial education system brought about a new structure aligned with the expansion of colonial administration and the need for a skilled workforce. There were two-phase school education model: one leading to an Elementary School Leaving Certificate (ESLC) and the other to a Secondary Leaving Certificate (SSLC). The student receives Secondary leaving Certificate and he is eligible to apply for higher posts. Modernization of princely states, expansion of colonial administration, starting of commercial and industrial units and expansion of police and military sectors have opened new opportunities for those who completed their courses. The employment opportunities thus encouraged the expansion and advancement of higher education. But, there were meager opportunities in Malabar for higher education because very few higher education institutions were in operation before independence. Most of the students ended their education at secondary level. SSLC certificate holders were eligible to apply for FA (First Examination in Arts) course in the institution. They were the

matriculates of Madras University. FA course was for two years. Those who joined first year of FA are known as Junior FA and those who are in second years were known as senior FA. Admission for the students in the FA batch was in the year 1866 and they appeared for examination conducted by Madras University in the year 1868. Higher education aspirants joined BA course after FA and the first batch of BA course in the university college appeared for the exam in 1870. Social Sciences and physical education were the subjects offered for FA. English language was taught as the first language and Malayalam as the second language. At the secondary level education, Malayalam was treated as the first language and English as Second language. Disciplines offered for study are broadly divided into Humanities and Sciences. Science included mathematics, chemistry, and Life Sciences. History, economics, civics and logics were come under social sciences. FA course was taught till 1905. It was renamed as Intermediate course by the Indian University Act enacted by the Government of India. However, the content of the course remained the same. Like FA course, Intermediate course was also designed for two years- Junior Intermediate and Senior Intermediate. It continued in Kerala for half a century.

The under graduate programme had started in the nineteenth century itself in Malabar under the Madras University. The course is known as Bachelor of Arts (BA) and Bachelor of Science (B.Sc.). It was designed as a two years course as the time of its introduction.

The colonial education introduced a new curriculum and printed text books in the schools and colleges. Before the coming of colonial powers the Keralites used palm leaves known as *Ola*. Nieuhoff, a naval officer under Dutch East India Company who was in Kerala during the second half of the 17th century, has given a description of the preparation of palm leaves for the writing purpose. According to him Malkam (Malayanma) is the language of Malabar. They do not have any kind of papers to write but palm leaves. (Nieuhoff.39) Scriptures and other hymns and ancient histories were written on these leaves. These leaves are of equal size with approximately half feet length and two inch width. They were put one by another in sequential order. These leaves were loosely tied together

with a small string through the whole on the upper left side. This is further protected with wooden sheets on both ends. All sheets of the same topic together called as a *Grandham*. Nieuhoff further remarks that in calligraphy skill, people of Kerala were far excellent of the entire European communities. Even while writing they could hold up their head and talk to anyone. (Mateer. 87) Colonial education replaced traditional methods with printed texts, leading to changes in teaching methodologies.

The subjects taught in pre colonial Kerala was entirely different from the colonial period. Bartalomeo¹¹ wrote that the main subjects taught by the teacher during pre colonial period were: the principles of writing and accounts, Sanskrit Grammar which contains the declensions and conjugations, the second part of Sanskrit grammar which contains the syntax or the book of *vyakarana* and finally the *Amarakosa*, the Sanskrit dictionary. Students read and recited the text given aloud. Bartholomeo writes that the chief branches taught by Guru are: 1. the principle of writing and accounts, 2. the sacred grammar which contains the declensions and conjugations; in Malabar it is called Sidharuba: but in Bengal Sarasvada, or art of speaking with elegance: 3., the second part of the grammar, which contains the syntax, or the book of Vyakarana: 4, the Amarakosha, or Brahmanic dictionary. (Bartalomeo. 252-57) The British adopted 'ethical' and 'moral' education with a view to propagate Christian ideologies in an indirect way. Their study books consisted of Aesop's Fables, Goldsmith's History of England and The Selection from the Beauties of History (Mukharjee. 106). At first they were ephemerals and not of high standard. This, it seems, would constitute the first use of Western literary texts for education in India.

In Madras presidency the text prescribed for F.A. included following subjects. The English language, candidates must appear for examination in English language. Optional languages consist Sanskrit (in Devanagiri character only) Greek, Latin, Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Tamil, Telugu, Canarese, Malayalam, Oriya, French, German and student is supposed to choose one among them. Other papers include- (1) Logic. (2) Mathematics - Algebra, Geometry and Plane Trigonometry. (3) Elements of human physiology. (4) History and

Geography (a) the History of England from AD 1485 (b) The History of Greece to its conquest by Rome (c) The History of Rome to the fall of western Empire.

“For B.A. degree examination originally a candidate had to pass in (1) English, (2) optional language, (3) History, (4) Elementary Mathematics, (5) Philosophy and (6) one out of these alternative subjects (a) Mixed Mathematics (b) Logic and Mental Sciences or (c) Physics, Inorganic Chemistry, Philosophy and Physical Geography for B.A Degree Examination.” (Sathianathan. 80) It did not allow much specialization.

F.A. was an extension of the Matriculation. The substitution of the intermediate in the place of the F. A. course in 1909 appeared as a part of the educational changes which arose in the wake of the University Act of 1904. The key to the entire scheme of educational re-organisation was formed to encourage specialisation in the field of higher education. The subjects rescribed for the matriculation were English, second language Mathematics, History and Geography. Physics and Chemistry were introduced in 1872 and a combined question paper on both subjects was set for the examination. Arithmetic was removed from the subjects of F.A, and a new subject, Logic was added. Basics of Physics and Chemistry and nearly the whole of Arithmetic were prescribed for Matriculation Course. English and History was added to it. The first examination under this revised curriculum was held in December 1884 in the case of the matriculation and F.A. Examination, and in January 1887 in the case of B.A. (Sathianathan. 198) The colonial curriculum was based on the motives of colonial needs. It didn't provide a chance to understand the Indian culture and heritage. Vijay Agnew¹⁶ holds her English education in India and said that the colonial education had effectively cut off from Indian culture. She commented in her autobiography thus:

“I was a product of what we'd now call a “colonial education”. It all but ignored discussion of the various regional cultures, social organizations and religions, such as Hinduism and Islam. I attended, like other children from

privilege families, what we called in India a convent school, in my case a school run by Irish Catholic Missionaries. The curriculum in the school didn't include anything on India. We studied European history and English literature along with the other school subjects such as mathematics and biology. I remember we read Shakespeare, Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy, but we were not assigned any readings by Indian authors, and none of the books we read had Indian themes. I memorized the gospel of Mathew, Mark, Luke and John, but nothing of the Ramayana or the Mahabharata, the classic Hindu religious epics.....I had heard the stories from the epics at home, but had read few Indian authors, not even Tagore or Narayan. Although I spoke several Indian languages, I could read and write only a little Hindi.” (Mukharjee. 46-47)

Conclusion

The British colonial education system in Malabar fundamentally transformed cultural identity, social structures and knowledge systems. It imposed foreign values, suppressed native languages and led to hybrid identities that negotiated between British and native influences. The legacy of colonial education underscores the complex interplay between education, culture and power dynamics. Understanding this history is essential for post colonial societies as they strive to preserve their cultural heritage while navigating the challenges of modernity.

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- He was hailed from Hos, Austria and was in India between 1776-1789. Original name of Bartolomeo was John Phillip Wesdin. His work *Voyages to the East Indies* (first published in Rome, 1796) contains certain important facts about the indigenous education in Kerala.
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- Vijay Agnew is a social scientist and Director of the centre for Feminist Research at York University, Toronto. After studying history and law at the University of Bombay in India, she did graduate work at the University of Waterloo and Toronto, Canada.
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