

From Indigenous Learning to Colonial Education: The Educational Transformation of Malabar from 1792-1858

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Abstract

British colonial expansion in the first half of the 18th century in India was a great turning point of India's history. Being a commercial enterprise the immediate aim of the company in this period was to make it a profitable concern and to exploit the East Indies for the benefit of its shareholders. After the colonial acquisition of India, the East India Company's earliest attempt was directed at the introduction of a modern administrative system in India to maximize returns. Despite gaining administrative control of Malabar in 1792, the British neglected the education of the people of Malabar for several decades. Malabar became part of the British administration at the end of the 18th century. However, the western educational activities started here only very late. The indigenous system continued to exist among the different castes of Hindus, Muslims and Christians. The credit for having laid the foundations of western education in Malabar area goes to the 'Basal German Evangelical Mission'. British Indian education was conceived in India as an act of securing and consolidating colonial power.

Key Words:

Education, Malabar, British, administration, indigenous, missionaries, Hindus, Muslims, Christians, English East India Company, Basel Mission, Ezhuthupallis, patasala, Ezuthachan, Vedapatasalas, Western education.

Despite the presence of many indigenous educational institutions, modern education reached Malabar only in the first half of 19th century with the arrival of missionaries. During this period, the Madras government under English East India Company neglected education in Malabar. There was no clear and precise educational policy in their territories under the early colonial rule. It was only in the first half of 20th century that the effects of Macaulay's Minutes of 1835 and the establishment of Madras University in 1857 began to be felt in Malabar society.¹

Despite gaining administrative control of Malabar in 1792, the British neglected the education of the people of Malabar for several decades. The British administration did not play any significant role in the educational development of Malabar in the 19th century. In 1814, 1817, and 1818 missionaries established schools in different parts of Madras and demanded grant from government.² First English school in Malabar region started at Kallayi in Kozhikode at 1848 by Basel Evangelical Mission.³

Malabar became part of the British administration at the end of the 18th century. However, the western educational activities started here only very late. The indigenous system continued to exist among the different castes of Hindus, Muslims and Christians. The growth of western education was slower in Malabar than in the other two regions. Besides, even the development of education, which began after 1835, was strictly based on the infiltration that gave more emphasis to higher levels of school education and collegiate education than primary education. The credit for having laid the foundations of western education in Malabar area goes to the 'Basel German Evangelical Mission'. Basel Mission in Malabar, founded by Herman Gundert, actively engaged in educational activities in the middle of the 19th century.⁴ The Christian mission gave great emphasis on education. It was compulsory that every child of the Basel Mission was to undergo elementary education.⁵ Among the colleges started in this region, the earliest ones were Zamorin's Guruvayurappan College (Calicut), Victoria College (Palakkad) and Brennen College (Thalassery). In Malabar, the government's attention to the cause of promotion of Malayalam education began only in 1921.

This period had coincided with the Moplah rebellion and with the period of transfer of partial control of central education department to Indians under the provisions of the Government of India Act of 1919. In Malabar, serious attention was given to the development of primary education supported by grants from the Madras government. The educational disparities that existed between Malabar and the other two regions of Kerala have narrowed down quite rapidly during the past quarter of a century because of the deliberate policy of special educational encouragement given to the former region. The Company's court of directors had no interest in public education. They believed in the 'downward filtration' theory of providing education to the highest strata of the society and then trickling down to the lower strata.⁶ In 1836 the government formed a local board of education, which later became the university board. Lord

Elphinston during his tenure as Governor of Madras, recommended the establishment of four colleges at Trichinapally, Masuli town, Bellary and Kozhikode. Finally, in 1848 the government started an educational council to look after the educational affairs of Madras province. Charles Wood's educational policy of 1854 was a turning point in the history of education in India. The government of India decided to start new government schools and provide financial assistance to private educational institutions in accordance with Charles Wood's recommendations. A decision was taken to implement it in the Madras province as well. The government also decided to start local schools in the hinterlands in the belief that it would be possible to educate the rural people in their mother tongue. Thus, the first Anglo - vernacular school in Malabar was started in 1855 at Kozhikode.⁷

Similarly, the first government grant was given to a private Anglo – Vernacular school in 1856. The first *pradeshikavidyalaya* in Malabar was started in Malappuram in 1856. The purpose of this school was giving education to the Muslims of Malabar. In 1857, government established five more taluk vernacular schools in Malabar.⁸ Sir Thomas Munroe ordered an educational survey in 1822. The same report was submitted to the court of directors. According to the Government reports the total number of vernacular schools in Madras province was 12,498 and the number of pupils in it was 12,594, 1931. On the basis of this report Thomas Munroe put forward a proposal to establish about 15 schools in each district with one school in each Taluk. In 1826 three Tahsildari schools were established in Malabar.⁹ They were in the towns of Tellicherry, Calicut and Palghat. Probably the first middle school in Malabar was the English school which was established at Nettur by Basel Mission.¹⁰

The British Indian education conceived in India as an act of securing and consolidating colonial power. By the introduction of the British Model modern education, they sidelined indigenous education, which was marked by diversity. The major social function which colonial education fulfilled was to differentiate the superior culture derived its forms from the orientalist narrative of the essential difference between a superior West and an inferior East. The introduction of Western ideas and values through English education had created influences in the intellectual, cultural and ideological spheres were deeper than those changes introduced in the political and administrative spheres. The western system of education became a reality in Kerala with the joint effort of the British government, Christian missionaries, native states,

individuals and social organizations.¹¹ Though Kerala had developed indigenous education before the arrival of British, there were no formal educational institutions other than village school known as 'Ezhuthupallis', or 'patasala' and an 'Ezuthachan' or 'Asan', as single teacher to teach all the children belonging to different age groups in same class.¹²

Educational system in the pre-colonial Kerala centered on the Brahmanic- sanskrit traditions, was the monopoly of the Namboothiri's and it was within the reach of only the privileged sections of the society.¹³ Brahmins being placed as ritual authority and temple managers, education was concentrated on the study of Vedic and other religious and puranic texts.¹⁴ There were temple centered institutions called Salais for Vedic cum material learning accessible only to the Namboodiri's. ¹⁵ Apart from this, *Vedapatasalas* and *Sabhamutts* organized at the household level meant for the education of Brahmins.¹⁶

It has been thus concluded that the functions of literacy among Brahmins were to conserve custom, to organize and sanction the feudal Kingdom, religious and philosophical exchange of ideas and to provide artistic entertainment to the ruling caste.¹⁷ The local ruling class *Naduvzhis* and other savarna temple castes also got almost the same type of education.¹⁸ The traditional *patasalas* were run by individual initiative with no aid from the state.¹⁹ The Nayers who constituted the lesser mobility, village headmen, Military retainers and clerks took education nearby *Ezhuthupalli*. Apart from the elementary education, the Nayar caste mainly concentrated on vocational learning such as martial arts, wrestling, accounting and medicine. Performing arts were also formed part of vocational education. An important feature of this education was that, unlike Brahmins, Nayar caste learning was mostly in Malayalam. The retelling of Sanskrit text into Malayalam and the availability of many Sciences related to different vocations such as astrology, hora, vastu etc. in Malayalam language.²⁰

The lower castes learned in *kutipallikutams* which was modelled after *Ezhuthupallis*. The hereditary teachers of these schools hailed from the caste of *Kutipatters* and *Kalarippanikkars*, both claimed descent from the so-called degraded sections of Tamil Brahmins.²¹ Other communities like Christians had not developed their own education system. They pursued the same type of education in traditional institution such as *Ezhuttupallis* and *Kudippallikutams*. The fact that first Mappila Muslims developed their own educational system; boys had their

education in *Othupallis*, one teacher schools.²² Mappila education provided religious knowledge through Arabic medium.²³ Though female education was not very popular, women of the upper caste, particularly Nair's got some traditional type of education. Indigenous education has been based on rote learning; and even in the second half of the nineteenth century, books and papers were not used in most of these schools.²⁴ Children wrote on sand, rice grains or when they better at writing, on palm leaves

Since the majority population of the society didn't get education because of the caste-based norms, there was a total exclusion of depressed castes from all traditional educational institutions and this educational backwardness increased the degradation of these castes. Education was a monopoly of the upper castes and it was restricted to lower castes in order to protect their interests. By denying education to the lower class, they could easily suppress them and exploit their services for the benefit of upper castes. They also believed that education of lower castes would disturb the caste structure in which they enjoyed supremacy. Malabar region confronted colonialism in the sphere of education with the beginning of missionary activities. The traditional system of learning was disrupted and dislodged in the colonial period and supplanted by a new system of education. The Christian missionaries did the spade work in the field of modern education and later by the state. In 1813, the British Parliament permitted European missionaries to enter the country under the new system of licensing.²⁵ This eventually threw the entire subcontinent open to missionary activity. It was during the British hegemony that the Christian values directly opposed the caste-ridden society of Kerala. The Basel Evangelical Mission assumed the leading role in the spread of English education with the establishment of Schools at Tellicherry (1817) and at Barnasseri near Kannur, Chalat, Chowwa and Mulil.²⁶

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, the Cherumas, Pulayas and Ezhavas, also encouraged the education of girls.²⁷ Missionaries were fully aware of the fact that educational work was a necessary pre-requisite to their religious work. The main motive of the missionaries was to get access to the indigenous society through modern education and to propagate new cultural values, which would help them in conversion of people to Christianity. In the beginning, the English East India Company as the direct rulers of Malabar

had no educational policy or programme of their own. The Company did not take the responsibility to impart mass education and even neglected the town centers like Tellicherry, Cannanore, Calicut and Palghat. The earliest efforts to spread modern education in Malabar had been a part of district administration and vernacular schools were established with the avowed object of training young men to state service as writes and accountant.²⁸

In the light of East India Company's Charter Act of 1813, on 15 September 1826, three Tahsildari Schools were established in the towns of Tellicherry, Calicut and Palghat.²⁹ The teachers attached to these Tahsildari schools were selected by Tahsildars and Munsifs. By 1829 Company had decided to make the English language of communication throughout the country. The District Collector played an important role in the instruction of English education through Collector Schools and Tahsildari Schools.³⁰ In 1835 it was resolved to abolish the Tahsil and Collector schools and entrust the affairs of education to a new Board to be designed by the Committee of Native Education.³¹ There were frequent changes in the policy and personnel in the field of education in Madras Presidency from 1836 to 1854. In 1836, the Board of Public Instruction was reconstituted into a Committee of Native Education which was replaced in 1841 by the University Board. English medium Provincial Schools were established in chief towns of Madras Presidency that included Cumbaconum, Bellary, Rajamudry and Calicut.³² This shows that government took more responsibilities in education during the second half of 19th century, still mass education was neglected.

The Wood's Despatch of 1854 has suggested the constitution of a separate department of education, the institution of universities at Presidency towns. Along with Bombay and Calcutta, the southern region of the country was exposed to higher education with the establishment of the Madras University. Subsequently, the middle-class people from Malabar were attracted to Madras to take higher education. On the basis of the recommendations of the University Board, Calicut provincial school was started on 1 November 1854.³³ It provided education up to the standard of the first arts of the Madras University. The course of study included instruction in the English language, Geography, Elementary English, Indian arithmetic, Euclid, Algebra, Trigonometry etc.³⁴

Following the Woods Despatch, as a part of the decision of opening government schools and aiding private schools in different parts of the country, the provincial government of Madras decided to open a few vernacular schools in Malabar. A Government Anglo Vernacular School was established at Calicut in 1855.³⁵ The Government introduced a scheme of bringing schools under the inspection and control of the government through the system of grant-in-aid. Grant in Aid rules was published to encourage private agencies in the field of education in 1855. Herman Gundert was appointed as the first inspector of schools of Malabar in 1857.³⁶ As per the Madras Provincial Report of 1871, the education status of Malabar was, Primary School 145 (only in private sector), Middle School 38 (35 in private sector), High School total 3 (Private Sector, 2) and one colleges in Govt Sector.³⁷ The progress in the field of education, especially in the higher education sector was very slow. This shows that British government was not interested in the progress of mass education or not willing to take the responsibility of mass education in Malabar. Further, the middle schools and high schools in the government sector were not sufficient to meet the growing educational needs of the society.

The Basel German Evangelical Mission led by Dr. Herman Gundert (who incidentally edited the first dictionary in Malayalam) was the mission force in the Malabar region. The various educational ventures that came about, both in English education as well as Vernacular education, are the composite efforts of the monarchs of the princely states, the Christian missionaries and the British Residents. With the charter act of 1813 being passed, the British started showing some interest in education.³⁸ With the introduction of Charles Wood's educational policy of 1854, the colonial government began regularly funding private institutions. Catholics and Christian Missionary groups have been the biggest contributors to the education in Malabar. St. Joseph's boys' school in Calicut was probably the first missionary educational institution in Malabar. Father Gabriel Gonsalves founded this school in 1793.³⁹ It clearly proves that the British had a clear agenda while introducing a new knowledge system through the language of English. Colonial educational policies have had a far-reaching negative and positive effect on traditional educational practices and social system are as follows. Firstly, 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. British used English language as a powerful form of ontological and epistemological domination over the people of the region.’⁴⁰

In the initial 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 beginning 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 formative 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.’⁴¹ ‘It is fact that Malabar was a neglected part of Madras presidency where the British had spent very little resources beyond the requirement of law and order.’⁴² ‘Further, their educational policy was not in favour of structural transformation of the society through industrial development and popular education.’⁴³ However, there was no doubt that new education boarded the horizon of knowledge. “British rule was largely responsible for the introduction and diffusion of a western style of education in Malabar, which penetrated into and transformed all the communities. Caste-wise, the Nambudiri Brahmins were late in receiving the benefits of modern education; whereas the Nair’s and other intermediary castes took the lead. Among the depressed classes, the *Tiyas* took the lead in education.⁴⁴ But the condition of the depressed classes like *Pulayas*, *Parayas* and *Nayadies* was pitiable.”

‘The chief hindrance in the way of their education is ignorance that did not allow them to evaluate themselves out of their position of serfs.’⁴⁵ Even though, the educational achievement of the depressed classes was marginal when compared to other sections of the Hindu Community, the spread of English education brought new ideas and institutions in the society. This was accelerated by the socio-economic changes that took place during the 19th century. Gradually, ‘the *Tiyas* and other oppressed castes also realized the relevance of modern education in their life. The British Government and the Christian Missionaries, who spread that

equality was their supreme priority, supported them.⁴⁶ Thus it is clear that the gradual growth of co-education contributed immensely to the growth of common public space.

The Basel German Evangelical Missionary Society was the first protestant Christian Mission in Malabar. The Basel Missionaries were the pioneers in every aspect of modern Malabar. The Mission introduced the modern system of education, published the first journal in Malayalam, established the tiles and textile factories, promoted trade and industrial technologies, enriched vernacular language and Literature, started schools, churches, hospitals and various types of charitable institutions in order to emancipate the people from their socio-religious problems and to build up a Christian versatile community in the deeper sense of global ecumenism in fact it was a new epoch in the history of Malabar. The Basel Mission has contributed much to educational work by opening schools and colleges both for Christians and non-Christians. These schools were opened for everybody irrespective of caste and creed and most regular scholars in each class were exempted from paying the school fee. In Malabar, the context was that the poor could not do their education and thus became the slaves to the landlords due to poverty and oppression. The caste structure in Malabar was one of the main obstacles which prevented the people from gaining education. The Basel Missionaries were the pioneers in founding boarding schools in Malabar.⁴⁷ The Basel Missionaries encouraged female education. Educational work of the Basel Mission in Malabar was always directed educating the masses through primary education.

“The beginnings of Western education in Kerala may be associated with the work of Christian missionaries. It was the Protestant missionaries who took the initiative in this regard. A Prussian missionary by name Ringletaube was active in Trivandrum-Nagercoil area during the period 1806-16.”⁴⁸ He set up schools where free instruction was given in reading, writing and arithmetic to all poor children, irrespective of caste or creed. But the most illustrious name connected with educational work in this area was that of Dr. Mead of the London Mission Society. From the time of his arrival in 1817 till his death in 1873 he devoted his whole time to educational work. He established several schools including industrial schools and also encouraged female education. The Christian missionaries were active in other parts of the state also. As early as 1813 the Syrian priests had set up a college or seminary in Kottayam for training priests. The C.M.S missionaries who worked among the Syrians introduced here

several branches of secular instruction. They also set up in Kottayam a Grammar School in 1821 and their wives set up a few Girls Schools in Kottayam and adjoining area to promote female education. Among the early C.M.S. missionaries of Kottayam, the names of Bailey, Baker and Fenn deserve special mention. English education began in the Malabar area with the establishment of a school each at Kallayi in Calicut in 1848 and at Tellicherry in 1856 by the Basel Evangelical Mission.

The fine example set by the Christian missionaries in different parts of the state gave the necessary incentive to the Government to enter the field of education. Malayalam primary schools were set up in all parts of the state and guardians of children between the ages of 5 and 10 were enjoined under law to send their children to school. Men with suitable qualifications were appointed as teachers and paid salaries from the state treasury. This was a clear recognition of the principle that the cost of education was a charge on state funds. “Dr. Gundert, the founder of the Basel Mission in Malabar, was also the Government Inspector of Schools for Malabar and South Canara. The Brennen School at Tellicherry started in 1862 under the auspices of the Basel Mission with an endowment of Rs. 12,000 by Mr. Brennen, the Master Attendant at Tellicherry, was later taken over by the Government and run as the Government Brennen College.”⁴⁹ The foundations of English education in Kerala were thus firmly laid. A chain of colleges and schools came to be set up, in due course.

Thus, western education hastened the social transformation of Malabar; the important contribution of colonial education is that, it offered education to all people of the society irrespective of caste distinctions. In earlier periods, caste decided one's education and only higher castes were enjoyed the fruit of education. The British Government gave employment mainly to the educated people; this attracted more people to good jobs. Here deserves special mention to the role of Christian missionaries and other private sectors in the spread of modern education. However, the colonial administration created a state sponsored western educational system to develop capitalist consumer habits. There is a shift to the age old to the modern society, which can be noticed in every sphere of life and society. But the traditional literature, art, architecture, music etc. are superior to any culture and it could not change by any colonial force. Although the government made many changes in education, there was no significant

progress in the field of education in Malabar. The British government did not pay much attention to the education of backward classes and women in Malabar.

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