

Charles Wood's Despatch 1854: A Re-Analysis

Key Words: *Wood's Despatch, Charles Wood, 1854, Lord Macaulay, Education System, English Education.*

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In the time of Dalhousie in 1854, a parliamentary committee appointed for the purpose of re-organizing educational system in India made its recommendations, on the basis of which an educational Despatch dated 19th July, 1854 presented its report.

It is known as Wood's despatch because it was written at the insistence of Charles Wood. The Despatch mentioned that the aim of the educational system and policy in India should be diffusion of arts, science and philosophy could be profited by them.

It was interested in establishing English as the medium of education, however it suggested that it should not be insisted upon only when a sufficient knowledge of English has been gained.

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India has had a long tradition of learning. However, with the downfall of the Mughal Empire, unstable political conditions, misery and anarchy followed. Education sank to the lowest level. When English people came to India, they found a network of educational institutions of all grades both of the Hindus and the Muslims in the country.

As the company was a commercial corporation, it had no direct interest in the education of the Indians in the beginning. The Directors of the company were very reluctant to spend company's funds on educational activities. The task of educating Indians was left in the hands of the Christian Missionaries backed by the Government.

The British authorities in the India first directed their attention towards Indian education in 1781, when Warren Hastings founded the Calcutta Madarsa at the request of a Muslim deputation. The Sanskrit college at Banaras was established next by Duncan, the British resident, with the assent of Lord Cornwallis in 1792 under the influence of religious enthusiasts in England. A clause was inserted in the East India Company's Act of 1813, providing not less than a lakh of rupees annually to the fund of education in the country. It was the first legislative enactment which recognized that education would be performed out of the public revenues. The funds were to be spent on the teaching of the Indian classical languages. Mass education was not touched; however some encouragement was given to the production of books in English.

Committees of Public Instruction were set up in Bengal in 1823 and Madras in 1826. Inside the Bengal Committee, a bitter struggle soon arose between the Orientalists, supporter of the policy of teaching through the medium of classical languages and the Anglicists who wished that education should be imparted through the medium of English. The majority opinion believed in educating the masses through their own languages. Thomas Munro in Madras, M. Elphinston in Bombay and later J. Thomason in the North-West Provinces, advocated the encouragements of vernacular teaching.

The struggle between the Orientalists and the Anglicists led to the famous Minute of 1835 of Macaulay, on the side of the Anglicists, Macaulay, refuting the plead of Orientalists affirmed that English should be the medium of education. Macaulay's

view about the vernaculars were that “the dialects commonly spoken among the natives of this part of India, contain neither literary nor scientific information and are moreover, so poor and rude that until they are enriched from some other quarter, it will not be easy to translate any valuable work into them”¹

This conflict between English and vernaculars also brought about the Minute of Lord Auckland in 1839, endorsing Macaulay’s Policy. The schools of oriental learning were maintained, but the translations into Sanskrit and Arabic were discontinued. Education of English was adopted and encouraged by the Government and developed side by side with the vernacular schools.

“This increasing interest in vernacular education was an inevitable consequence of the search for common ground by the Orientalists and Anglicists in the aftermath of Macaulay’s Minute... advocates from both parties broadly agreed on the desirability of enriching the Indian vernacular and employing them as instructional media.”²

The next great step in marked by the parliamentary enquiry into the contemporary educational system in India in 1853, which preceded the confirmation of the Company’s Charter. “For the first time the British Parliament investigated seriously and sympathetically the developed of Indian education”.³

The turning point however, came in the Dalhousie in 1854. A parliamentary committee appointed for the purpose of re-organizing educational system in India made its recommendations, on the basis of which an Educational Despatch dated 19th July, 1854 presented its report. It is also known as Wood’s Despatch because it was written at the insistence of Charles Wood, who was the then President of the Board of Control, although it is said that the Despatch was written by the famous thinker John Stuart Mill, a clerk of the company at that time. Sir Charles Wood was of the opinion that in India British had to deal with a race of people who were slow to change and bound up by religious prejudices. Therefore, British also required a change in their approach to deal with Indians for which he made the following recommendations in his Despatch which is popularly known as the ‘Wood’s Despatch of 1854:

Wood’s Despatch mentioned that the aim of the educational system and policy in India should be diffusion of arts, science and philosophy of Europe so that Indians could be profited by them. It said,

“It is one of our most sacred duties to be means of conferring upon the natives of India those vast moral and material blessing which flow from the general diffusion of useful knowledge and which India may, under Providence, derive from her connection (nic) with England.:⁴

Though these words certainly contain some kind of sympathy for the Indians, an air of superiority is also visible. However, in spite of this slight arrogance, a concern for the upliftment and progress of Indians is also apparent.

“For although British influence has already been..... applied withsuccess to uproot demoralizing practices and even crimes..... which for ages had prevailed among the natives of India..... the good results of those efforts must... possess the further sanction of a general sympathy in the native mind which the advance of education alone can secure.”⁵

Wood’s Despatch had a very low opinion about Indian learning and knowledge. It remarked that, “The systems of science and philosophy which from the learning of East abound with grave error, and eastern literatures is at best very deficient as regards all modern discovery and improvements..... An acquaintance with the works contained in them is valuable for historical and antiquarian purposes.”⁶

The Despatch of course, recognized the value of Oriental learning and knowledge, however, it stressed on English as the only approved medium of instruction. The Despatch took it for granted that English was necessary owing to the lack of translation of European works in vernacular languages and the learned languages of the East. The knowledge of English would also be essential to those Indians who want to attain higher education.

This Despatch apprehended that as at that point of time among the immediate vicinity areas of the presidency towns, a trend of preferring English knowing people to the non-English natives in government as well as in private jobs was being set up rapidly, it could in upcoming times establish the hegemony of English in Indian society. The Despatch expressed its concern towards the future of Indian Languages. “We do not deny the value of many respect of the mere faculty of speaking and writing English, but we fear a tendency has been created in these districts unduly to neglect the study of the vernacular language.”⁷

This foreboding of the Despatch proved right to a great extent. Even these days, a tendency of

considering the English speaking people relatively more superior to those of non – English speaking masses is perceptible. The Despatch noted it clearly that though it promoted and encouraged the study of English, “it is neither our aim nor desire to substitute the English language for the vernacular dialects of the country. We have always been most sensible of the importance of the use of the languages which alone are understood by the great mass of the population.”⁸

The Despatch was interested in establishing English as the medium of education in India. However, it believed that the Indians could make more progress comparatively through their mother tongue than through English. “European knowledge which is to be communicated to the great mass of the people – who cannot be expected to overcome the difficulties of a foreign language can only be conveyed to them through one or other of these vernacular languages.”⁹

The Despatch proclaimed that “the English language should be taught where there is a demand for it”¹⁰ but such an instruction should be combined with a careful attention to the study of the vernacular languages also. It insisted that English should be the languages of persons who had already acquired a sufficient knowledge of English, while “the vernacular languages must be employed to teach the far larger classes who are ignorant of or imperfectly acquainted with English.”¹¹

The Despatch advocated that keeping in view the importance of the vernacular languages even for the expansion of European knowledge, vernacular literatures should be enriched by translations of European books so that the Indian who may not read European learning directly could be benefited by it through translations. The Despatch emphasized for the combined knowledge of English as well as vernacular languages. “We look, therefore to the English language and to the vernacular language of India together as the media for the diffusion of European knowledge.”¹²

The Wood’s Despatch declared that English was the most perfect medium of instruction but it should not be insisted upon all stages. It should be used only when a sufficient knowledge of English has been gained. The Despatch gave importance to the existing vernacular languages because it was through the medium of vernacular languages that European knowledge could come down to the masses.

Wood’s Despatch, besides its recommendations for the inclusion of the vernaculars along with English prescribed the following measures: the constitution

in each Presidency of a separate department for the administration of education with an adequate system of inspection (i.e. Bengal, Bombay, Madras, Punjab and North Western provinces); expansion of mass education, the establishment of universities in the Presidency towns, that is, Bombay, Madras and Calcutta; the establishment of institutions for training teachers; the maintenance of the existing Government college and high school, and the increase in their number wherever necessary; and the introduction of a system of ‘grants-in-aid’. The Despatch also recommended system of scholarship to encourage the students, and advocate the promotion of female education and Muslim education, the opening of schools and colleges for imparting technical instruction and insisted on a policy of perfect religious neutrality. Wood’s Despatch was a comprehensive document, having been made after a deep investigation. Its significance can not be overrated.

“Upto the time of its issue the efforts of the Government in the cause of education had been marked neither by consistency of direction, nor by any breadth of aim. The annual expenditure upon Public Instruction had been insignificant and uncertain and the control of its operations had not been deemed worthy the attention of any special department of the state. The education system elaborated in the Despatch was indeed, both in its character and scope, far in advance of anything existing at the time of its inception. It furnished in fact, a masterly and comprehensive outline, the filling up of which was necessarily to be work of many years.”¹³

However, the Despatch has also been criticized on many grounds. For example, the Indian Languages were regarded as inferior to English and were not considered sufficient rich for higher instruction. Such a policy led to the neglect of the vernaculars. An admiration of western culture, literature, science and history began to gain ground whereas Indian languages and literatures did not get the recognition, they deserved. S.N. Mukerji criticizes the Despatch saying; “...its fundamental defect was the wrong aim of education. The directors were emphatic in their adherence to the policy of 1835 when they stated, “our object is to extend European knowledge throughout all classes of the people.”¹⁴

Kamal K. Sridhar, also has a similar opinion about the utility of the Despatch. He comments in his book ‘English in Indian Bilingualism’: “Despite the clear role which Wood assigned to the “vernaculars”

the emphasis on English continued unabated. The vernaculars were taught only at the elementary level and could be omitted altogether if the pupil so desired.”¹⁵

Moreover, this Despatch put the education under the direct control of the Government which ended the traditional free teaching work in the country. The Despatch adopted the model of the London University for Indian Universities. It neglected the Indian University system. The persons educated on European lines and languages were to be given priority in services, therefore, old educational institutions began to lose their existence. The Despatch produced a mass of clerks and accountants but could not develop character and leadership qualities among the students.

This system of education destroyed the tradition of self-study and meditation. The main aim of the students became to pass the examination. They did not care to study the whole course and depended on the selected readings. So the whole study system became more examination oriented.

As the medium of instruction was English, so the students were bound to study English in order to understand other subjects also. Therefore, they had to spend a larger period of time for the studies. The whole process became too much complicated and the majority of the students could not gain the success that they might have gained through the media of Indian languages.

After considering the position of the Despatch in present scenario, one can opine that some of the sentiments expresses in it have grown outdated as well. For instance, the Despatch wrote about education “Suited to every station in life.”¹⁶ In fact, there can be no real education that makes distinction amount its receivers on any ground. “The idea jars upon a modern thinker who believes in equality of educational opportunity for all.”¹⁷

Further, it is a matter of regret that some of the most important recommendations of the Despatch were not carried out for a long time. The encouragement of Indian languages which it promised remained a cherished dream for a long time and the languages spoken and understood by the masses continued to languish. The plans of mass education visualized by the Despatch were not realized nor could high schools imparting education through the medium of the mother-tongue be established for several decades. Nirmala Gupta quotes Late M.R. Paranjpe while pointing out some of the demerits of

the Despatch:

“The Despatch does not ever refer to the ideal of universal literacy although the grants-in-aid system...while it may be admitted that employment in Government officers was not the object of English education as visualized in the Despatch, the authors did not aim at education for leadership, education for the industrial regeneration of India... whatever were its values in 1854, it would be ridiculous to describe the Despatch as an Educational Charter, in the year 1941.”¹⁸

However, one should not admit after so many criticism and deficiencies of the Despatch that is was totally an idealistic and not a practical document and that its recommendations were hollow. Its merits should also be kept in view. It provides us with a wide platform from which we can have a retrospective look at the past and as Nirmala Gupta observes while quoting the Late M.R. Paranjpe, “it enables us to find out how far we have achieved the educational objectives which the authors of the Despatch had in view, and to note the changes brought about in our educational objectives in the last hundred years.”¹⁹

This document enables us to form a correct opinion about the British policy of education in Indian perspective. Further, upto the time of Wood’s Despatch, the East India Company looked at the problem of mass education as an impossibility. They thought that the only means of reaching the masses was by educating the higher classes who were comparatively fewer in number and then letting the education filter down through them. The Despatch of 1854 first imposed upon the British Government the duty of creating a properly articulated system of education from the primary school to the university education.

The Despatch partially recognized the value of Indian culture, and at the same time showed the need for grafting European knowledge on it. It defined the comparative position of English and Indian languages in a better way than the previous educational policies of the British Government.

Nirmala Gupta quotes Dalhousie while appreciating the document that the Despatch contained “a scheme of education for all India, far wider and more comprehensive than the local or the supreme Government could have ever ventured to suggest.”²⁰

Thus, after weighting all the merits and demerits, pros and cons of Wood’s Despatch, one can summarize that though most of its recommendations

could not be put into practice, it was certainly a guiding star for the British educational policy makers. The British Government expressed its concern for the Indian masses in a sympathetic tone for the first time in this document only. Unlike the authoritative declaration of Macaulay for the imposition of English as the medium of instruction, Wood kept in view the realistic scenario, pertaining to the love of Indians to their mother-tongues and the impracticability of English to be taught as the sole medium of education. This Despatch was formed for eradication of the drawbacks of the prevalent education system. Though it could not completely abolish those faults, it surely endeavored to lead the Indian education system to a path ahead.

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