

## INDIGENOUS EDUCATION IN NINETEENTH CENTURY NORTH INDIA

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### ABSTRACT

At the dawn of the colonial era, India had a widespread culture of learning comprising both elementary institutions called *pathshalas*, and higher learning centres called *tols* (Sanskrit) and *madradas* (Arabic). This paper aims to give a brief account of indigenous schools that flourished in India during the nineteenth century, with a specific focus on Bihar. In doing so, information pertaining to Sanskrit astronomy education is highlighted on the basis on the extensive surveys carried out by British administrators in North India. In the same context, the evolution of colonial educational policy and the corresponding decline of indigenous educational institutions in the course of the nineteenth century are studied.

**KEYWORDS:** Colonialism, History, Education, Indigenous Education, Sanskrit, Astronomy, India, Bihar

### INTRODUCTION

The historiography on education in colonial India has largely focused on the diffusion of English education throughout the subcontinent and the corresponding nationalist responses that emerged during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As a result, indigenous ways and means of learning have relatively received scant attention. This paper seeks to fill this gap by drawing from colonial surveys that contain extensive information on the state of indigenous learning in North India, particularly in the province of Bihar. Several qualitative features of indigenous education, with a particular focus on astronomy are reviewed below. Moreover, the colonial impact on traditional learning, in general, is studied. This paper primarily argues that even though indigenous institutions continued to exist throughout the nineteenth century, they were deeply neglected, initially by colonial officials and later by Indians themselves.

### INDIGENOUS EDUCATION IN EARLY COLONIAL BIHAR

#### Statistical Overview

The total number of scholars in the Sanskrit higher learning institutions of Bihar, as mentioned in the reports of William Adam (DiBona 1983) and Francis Buchanan (1811-12), may be classified as follows: 437 (South Bihar), 214 (Tirhoot) and 300 (Patna City and Zila Behar). Out of these, the number of astronomy scholars was 13, 53 and 31 respectively. This implies that the percentage of astronomy scholars to the total student population was (approx.) 3%, 25%, and 10% respectively. Besides teaching in school buildings, many *Pandits* instructed their pupils in outhouses, temples or other informal arrangements. Consequently, these surveys did not focus on 'schools', but they enumerated the total number of *Pandits* as 27, 56 and 56. Further, the numbers and names of over 15 different textbooks (the most prominent being *Mahurta Chintamani*, *Siddhanta Shiromani*, *Surya Siddhantam* and *Sighra Bodha*) that were taught across these districts have been mentioned in these reports. Interestingly, both Adam and Buchanan failed to distinguish between astronomy and

astrology, probably because the two are very closely intertwined in Indian epistemology unlike modern western astronomy that has little to do with the framing of calendars (DiBona: 242). Although containing information in several aspects of indigenous learning, these sources have their own limitations. For example, they hardly provide any information on the training or background of subject specific *gurus*.

### Qualitative Overview

- **Fee Payment**

Teachers received their fees in various ways. Buchanan observed that the ‘profit of the teachers is as usual very small. They have all endowments; but none of these are considerable’ (Buchanan: 292-298). Adam remarked that out of 27 teachers in South Bihar, ‘seven give their instructions gratuitously’. The rest received a portion of their fees in cash and the remainder in the form of miscellaneous endowments such as uncooked food (DiBona: 235).

Similarly, in the district of Tirhoot, out of 56 teachers: 6 were independent of patronage (either assisted by family or through farming). 30 teachers received in the form of presents, a total of Rs. 1165/- per annum. The rest received different amounts of endowment each, ranging from Rs. 4 to Rs. 535/- per annum (DiBona: 238). Adam saw this lack of financial support as a deterrent to the quality of instruction imparted. However, according to James R. Hagen, ‘knowledge (in traditional society) was not saleable on contract, but was (considered) a free gift’ (Hagen 1981: 259).

- **Subjects Taught**

Adam observed that Grammar, Lexicology, Literature, Law, Logic, Vedanta, Mythology and Astronomy are taught in the district of Tirhoot. In addition to the above, Rhetoric, Mimansa, Sankhya, Medicine and Tantras are taught in South Bihar. Buchanan reported that Grammar, Law and Metaphysics are the most common subjects taught in the districts of Patna City and Zila Behar. While Logic, Medicine, Astronomy and Tantras are also taught, ‘no great progress has been made in Astrology (*Jyotish*)’ (Buchanan: 298-301).

- **Access to Education**

It has been widely claimed that religious and educational matters in India have always been under the exclusive hold of the Brahmins (Frykenberg 1999: 104). However, it is hard to reconcile such opinions with the vast evidence that emerged not only from Bihar, but also other parts of North India (Leitner 1882: 80-93). In the context of elementary education, Adam found that Brahmins are heavily outnumbered by other castes, especially the Kayasthas (writer caste). In South Bihar, ‘vernacular instruction is almost wholly in the hands of the Kayastha ... there are no Brahman teachers.’ (DiBona: 215). In the domain of Sanskrit learning, however, Brahmins play a more dominant role, albeit in certain specialized areas. ‘Sanskrit learning is to a certain extent open to all classes of native society whom inclination, leisure, and the possession of adequate means may attract to its study, and beyond that limit it is confined to Brahmins.’ (DiBona: 240). The above analysis suggests that it is difficult to draw a monolithic picture, much less stereotype Indian social structures, especially in reference to education.

- **Disposition of Teachers**

On the general temperament of *pandits*, Adam noted that ‘The humbleness and simplicity of their characters, their dwellings and their apparel forcibly contrast with the extent of their acquirements and the refinement of their feelings. I

saw men not only unpretending, but plain and simple in their manners' (DiBona: 77). On their primary responsibility, Hagen observes that: 'Although specialized, their (Pandits') common central function was to pass on to their students ... the orally transmitted texts, thereby continuing the unbroken chain of Guru-Shishya Parampara' (Hagen: 265).

## THE DECLINE OF INDIGENOUS EDUCATION (1854 – 1902)

From a scrutiny of these early colonial surveys, it is amply clear that 'in the early part of the nineteenth century, indigenous education held the field' (Nurullah and Naik 1951: xiii). However, as we shall see, this picture changed considerably by the end of the century.

### From Decentralization to a Uniform Colonial Mandate

By creating a central education department, the Wood's despatch (1854) became the first centralised official intervention in the sphere of education since the advent of colonial rule (Naik 1957: 22). In this context, Hagen comments that the British role 'expanded into a comprehensive pattern of westernized education with a bureaucratic establishment to implement it by 1854' (Hagen: 455). As a result, from a situation where education ... was not organised by any outside government authority, there was now a complete lack of autonomy for the local schools to take any independent decisions. This process was exacerbated by the simultaneous decline of the village community. Jha argues that the rise of 'caste consciousness' and 'factionalism' played a vital role in the decay of village schools. 'Due to the emergence of factions conflicting with one another for the promotion of sectional interests, losing sight of the interest ... of the village community, it became very difficult for village schools (traditional) to exist and work' (Jha 2011: 133).

### Westernization of the Content of Education

Following the appointment of Ballantyne as principal of the Benares Sanskrit College in 1845, the importance of traditional Sanskrit learning reduced in comparison to Western philosophy and science (Dalmia 1996: 328). The consequent establishment of an Anglo-Sanskrit department in the college roused the natives against this attempt to 'convert a genuine Indian *Pandit* into a Sanskrit scholar of the European type' (Dalmia: 330). Nevertheless, the subsequent universities established at Bombay, Calcutta and Madras as per the 1857 Act signalled a paradigm shift from the traditional Sanskrit *toles*. The Calcutta University Commission report criticized this development by observing that: '(As per) this type of university organization ... the university itself is not a unit of teaching but a mere unit of administration whose sole duty is to hold examinations and confer degrees ... The traditional idea of a university (is)... a place of learning where a corporation of scholars labour ... (But) Indian universities in their first form were ... corporations of administrators' (Nurullah and Naik: 275-276). Since the universities merely tested the teaching that was done in colleges, it is important to look at the development of collegiate education in India between 1854 and 1902. The number of newly established colleges rose from 27, in 1857, to 138, in the year 1901-02. (Nurullah and Naik: 294). But, the content of their curriculum, in both arts and professional institutes, had none of the Sanskrit texts or subjects that were part of traditional learning.

### Devaluation of *gurus* and the Relegation to Utilitarianism

The 'reforming measures' of the Education department were mainly aimed at 'improving the guru and on directing him as to how best he could run a pathshala properly' (Shahidullah: 1996: 133). 'The guru would now have to operate within clearly defined guidelines. He would have to conduct pathshalas not as he thought best but as wanted by the

government... Money payments were now exclusively levied for the schooling fees, in contrast to the previous practice of being paid partly in cash and partly in kind' (Shahidullah: 125-128). Hagen's remarks corroborate this observation: 'The gurus were told to hold regular school hours ... (and) students were asked to read and write silently instead of shouting at the top of their voices as formerly' (Hagen: 381). Moreover, education was divested of all literary, moral, religious and intellectual values. 'Little value was attached by the general population ... to any education which was not likely to lead to a government appointment' (Nurullah and Naik: 323). Despite this deep colonial impact on indigenous learning, it may be problematic to consider this 'destruction' as having permanently obliterated the traditional system. In 1882, the Indian Education Commission noted that indigenous schools have 'survived a severe competition and thus proved that they possess both vitality and popularity' (Nurullah and Naik: 349). However, it felt that if they are 'recognised and assisted', (they) may 'improve' their methods. Hagen argues that this 'innovation' in Indian education contrasts with the corresponding process in Japan, where 'the indigenous educational pattern was modernized from within, using indigenous values and strategies ... In Patna (however), the framework was introduced from without the society' (Hagen: 352). Notwithstanding the efforts to cope with the colonial encounter in the domain of education, it remains to be seen whether Sanskrit higher learning still survived, even though in a diminished form. A preliminary survey of records suggests an affirmative answer (Report of the Sanskrit Commission 1956-57: 27-67).

## CONCLUSIONS

'What we would now call informal education has survived to the present, and in some parts of India, today remains complementary to the formal system.' (Crook 1996: 9).

From the above survey of primary and secondary sources, it is evident that indigenous education in North India, particularly in Bihar, was severely 'crippled' with the advent of colonial rule. The biggest blow, perhaps, was that 'colonial education disrupted and largely displaced the cultural meaning of education (Hagen: 459). Further, as argued in this paper, a new model of higher learning was established during the nineteenth century, with complete indifference to the vast evidence of indigenous institutions. For many years, these two systems existed in parallel, even though the latter were not officially recognised. In view of these developments, it is not surprising to find leading South Asian scholars declare that Sanskrit knowledge systems vanished with the advent of colonialism (Pollock 2001). However, given the diversity of knowledge transmission - from adaptations to popular expositions - in Indian society, that have been traditionally used to 'keep the Sanskrit thought alive' (Kapoor2003: 16), the verdicts of 'Death of Sanskrit' may need to be subject to further verification. The story of resilience, it seems, deserves a more complicated narrative.

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