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Teacher Education Under Colonial Rule: Key Developments in Pre-Independence India

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Abstract

India maintains one of the most extensive teacher education systems in the world. The history of teacher education in India can broadly be divided into two phases: the pre-independence phase, encompassing ancient educational traditions (Vedic, Buddhist, Islamic, and British colonial), and the post-independence phase, spanning from 1947 to the present. The evolution of teacher education has continuously attracted scholarly interest due to its complex historical roots, shaped by external colonizers, indigenous reformers, and influential educationists. This article examines the principal landmarks in the history of teacher preparation during the British colonial era and aims to offer a clearer and more comprehensive understanding of how teacher education developed in India.

Keywords: Teacher education, British colonial education, pre-independence India

1. Introduction

Dr. P. N. Prabhu observed that ancient Indian education functioned without external interference from the state, government, or political factions. It was the monarch's responsibility to ensure that learned scholars could pursue their scholarship and carry out the duty of knowledge transmission freely. [Balwariaa and Gupta \(2014\)](#) further noted, citing R. P. Singh (1970), that while certain Brahmin families practised teaching as an inherited vocation, there is no credible evidence that formal teacher training, as understood in the modern sense, existed in ancient India.

2. The Buddhist Education Tradition

The Buddhist educational system emerged around the 5th century BCE under the guidance of Lord Buddha and became one of the most influential pedagogical traditions of the medieval period. During this era, the Brahmin clergy had effectively denied the general populace access to education. The rise of Buddhism restored that right, granting people the freedom to pursue learning and practice their faith independently. This educational tradition was organized around monastic institutions. [Balwariaa and Gupta \(2014\)](#)

3. The Islamic Educational Tradition

The central aim of Islamic education was to cultivate devout and morally upright individuals by nurturing the inner potential of learners, sharpening their intellectual faculties, and equipping them with everything necessary for both moral and material advancement. Education was perceived as preparation for an ideal and virtuous life, and teachers who guided students toward this ideal commanded great respect within society. [Balwariaa and Gupta \(2014\)](#)

4. Teacher Education Under British Colonial Rule

The earliest formal institution for teacher preparation in colonial India was established by Danish Missionaries under the leadership of Ziegenbalg and his colleagues at Tranquebar in 1716. Subsequently, William Carey founded a normal training school focused on primary and elementary teacher instruction at Serampur, West Bengal, in 1802.

Lord Macaulay's arrival in India in June 1834 as a legal member of the Governor-General's Council marked a significant turning point. His 'Minutes on Indian Education' advocated for English as the exclusive medium of instruction, defined 'literature' to mean English literature, excluding Sanskrit, Arabic, or Persian, and proposed the development of a legal code in English. His underlying intent was to reshape Indian cultural identity. To assess the actual state of education, a survey was commissioned covering Madras, Bombay, and Bengal. The survey revealed that while each village possessed a primary school, corporal punishment was widespread, teachers were poorly educated and underpaid, and the overall standard of schooling was inadequate. [Balwariaa and Gupta \(2014\)](#)

5. Wood's Despatch (1854): The First Major Milestone

Wood's Despatch of 1854 is widely regarded as the first defining milestone in Indian educational history. It put forward a comprehensive set of proposals for the advancement of education across the subcontinent, most notably recommending the establishment of teacher training schools in every province. It identified the pressing need for training institutions for teachers in engineering, medicine, and law; advocated for improved salary scales for qualified teachers; and emphasized the provision of scholarships for teachers undergoing training. These recommendations collectively gave new impetus to the professional preparation of educators and laid the structural foundation of India's modern education system.

6. Indian Education Commission (1882) and the University Commission (1892)

Recognized as the second major milestone in Indian educational history, the Indian Education Commission of 1882 offered wide-ranging recommendations. In the sphere of secondary teacher training, the first dedicated institution, the Government Normal School in Madras, was founded in 1886. The Indian University Commission of 1892 subsequently sought to reorganize and reinforce the existing educational architecture, calling for the establishment of normal schools for secondary teacher preparation throughout the country. It also recommended that prospective secondary school teachers be required to pass an examination in the principles and practice of teaching before being eligible for employment. Lord Curzon's appointment as Governor-General in 1889 coincided with a rising tide of nationalist sentiment across India.

7. Government of India Resolution (1904)

A significant forward step in teacher preparation was taken in 1904 with the enactment of the Government of India Resolution. At this time, a growing number of social reformers were calling for a distinctly national form of education, one that could preserve India's cultural heritage, civilizational identity, literary traditions, and linguistic diversity. The following guiding principles were established to reform teacher training at this stage (Balwariaa and Gupta (2014)):

1. Competent and experienced individuals were to be recruited to build a well-trained teaching workforce.
2. Greater priority was to be given to equipping training colleges for secondary-level educators.
3. Practical schools were to be attached to each training college to bridge the gap between instructional theory and classroom practice.
4. A one-year program leading to a university degree or diploma was to be introduced for graduates, incorporating both theoretical and practical components; a two-year program was to be available for others.
5. Training colleges were to maintain ongoing links with schools to ensure that newly qualified teachers continued to apply the pedagogical methods acquired during their training.

8. Calcutta University Commission (1917) and the Hartog Committee (1929)

The Calcutta University Commission of 1917, more commonly known as the Sadler Commission, presented its report in 1919. It underscored the pivotal role of universities in preparing secondary school teachers professionally and in advancing educational research. Notably, it recommended that teacher education programs cultivate not only subject specialists but also competent administrators capable of managing educational institutions. Acting on the Sadler Commission's recommendations, education faculties were established in thirteen of eighteen universities. Lady Irwin College was set up in New Delhi; Andhra University introduced the B.Ed. degree in 1932; and Bombay University launched a postgraduate M.Ed. program in 1936.

The Hartog Committee of 1929 extended the work begun by the Sadler Commission and put forward further important recommendations. It called for conferences and refresher courses for practicing teachers to elevate professional standards. In response, in-service training programs were organized, education departments were created in several universities, and research-level degrees in education were introduced. Teacher training institutions simultaneously began to upgrade their laboratories and libraries, leading to a gradual and broad improvement in the overall quality of teacher preparation.

9. Gandhi's Basic Education Movement (1937)

In 1937, Mahatma Gandhi convened the Wardha Educational Conference, at which he introduced his vision of 'Basic Education', a system centered on craft-based, productive learning closely integrated with everyday life situations and aimed at holistic child development. Gandhi emphasized the need to make teacher training more applied and functional, shifting the focus from abstract theory toward education grounded in the real needs of learners and their communities. This philosophy gave rise to a new model of teacher preparation for basic schools. In 1938, a Basic Training College was established at Allahabad and the Vidyamandir Training School was inaugurated at Wardha.

10. Abbott-Wood Report (1937) and the Sargent Report (1944)

The Abbott-Wood Report of 1937 contributed important recommendations to the discourse on teacher education, notably advocating that normal schools concern themselves with the social dimensions of education in addition to technical teaching methods. It also called for the provision of refresher courses to enable serving teachers to broaden their professional experience.

The Sargent Report of 1944 provided a candid statistical picture of teacher training in India. As of 1906, only 29% of high school teachers, 37% of middle school teachers, and 25% of primary school teachers had received formal training. By 1947, approximately 61.5% of secondary and primary teachers had been trained, a marked improvement attributable in part to the Sargent Report's emphasis on teacher training programs and its calls for regularly organized refresher courses for both trained and untrained educators. The Report also recommended salary increments to attract more capable individuals to the teaching profession. By 1947, India had approximately 649 training colleges, of which only 42 were at the secondary level with a combined intake capacity of around 3,000 students. Out of a total of 88,000 secondary teachers, only 51% had undergone formal training. As [P. L. Rawat \(1970\)](#) correctly observed, the growth in teacher training facilities during this period, while notable, remained insufficient relative to the country's rapidly expanding educational needs.

11 Conclusion

The history of teacher education in colonial India reveals a trajectory of progressive, if uneven, quantitative and qualitative expansion. Each commission, resolution, and policy report examined in this article consistently underscored the centrality of teacher quality, both at the level of the classroom teacher and the teacher educator. From the earliest missionary training schools of the 18th century to Gandhi's craft-centred Basic Education movement, efforts to professionalize teaching were persistent, though the challenge of making teacher preparation simultaneously effective, practical, and contextually relevant remained a constant concern up to and beyond independence in 1947.

12. References

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