

History Term Paper

Read Thomas Babington Macaulay's "Minute on Indian Education" written in 1835 and explain in your own words what you agree with and what you do not.

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Introduction to Human Sciences

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Macaulay's "Minute on Indian Education" is a controversial piece. It has long been a favourite target for all parties in the political spectrum in India, for its association with the Western idiom¹. But there is no doubt that the document has played a seminal role in shaping the history of the subcontinent - the very fact that this essay is in English is likely a direct outcome of that very document; and the cosmopolitan, global nature of the world today adds to the seeming inevitability of the introduction of the English Education Act that was a direct consequence of the minute. Yet to examine the work and all its results and biases in purely a contemporary lens would be fallacy, for future results notwithstanding the minute and its maker were very much products of the time - better understanding of the minute requires the perspective with which it was framed: and insofar as is possible this essay shall try to analyse it in view of the time that it was written in.

The Orientalist tradition of Hasting's governance had by the 1830s largely given way to a Utilitarian opinion on all things Indian - and with it among both Anglicists and Orientalists there had risen a prevailing perspective of Indians as 'savages' and Indian culture as an inferior one that needed to be raised to the level of that of the West². As such by the time Macaulay wrote his minute the English Parliament and the East India Company were more utilitarian, more evangelical, and more Imperialist, and all were important factors that went into the decisions made.

The Minute itself³ was the culmination of several years of debate and discussion and summarized and countered several arguments made by other parties. Macaulay responded to arguments favouring the existing system and presented his case for English education from a utilitarian, evangelist, and imperialist stand. Racial overtones were explicitly present throughout, but given the social situation as described earlier, they were neither unexpected nor out of order for the average Anglicist of the era.

¹ "A minute for Macaulay - The Hindu." 24 Aug. 2017, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/a-minute-for-macaulay/article19547458.ece>. Accessed 15 Feb. 2019.

² "The Background of Macaulay's Minute - Jstor." <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1842459>. Accessed 15 Feb. 2019.

³ "Minute on Education (1835) by Thomas Babington Macaulay." http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealc/pritchett/00generalinks/macaulay/txt_minute_education_1835.html. Accessed 15 Feb. 2019.

Macaulay started his minute with a response, one I largely agree with. The Committee of Public Instruction had till date justified their patronage of Sanskrit and Arabic studies by referring to the Charter Act of 1813, and Macaulay set out to demonstrate why their interpretation was faulty, establishing that no new legislative act would be necessary to put in place an educational system with English as the primary medium of instruction. And he's right. The provisions made by the Charter put no restrictions on the language of education, so any arguments otherwise are moot.

He then tackled "*another argument, which, if we admit it to be valid, is decisive against all change*". That public faith was pledged to the existing system, and altering the funds to other means than already extant would be "downright spoliation". He disagreed. He brought forth a two part argument, claiming first that a new and improved system should replace an older, less efficient one; and secondly calling the teachings of the Orientalists to be "useless" and thus an example of a system subject to the first part of his argument. While the first seems perfectly reasonable in line with contemporary expectations, countering the second is trickier. While it could refer to Indian languages in general, in context, he was responding specifically to the Orientalists, who were employing Arabic and Sanskrit as their medium of instruction - neither enjoying widespread use, both 'elite' languages, and while very useful for historic reasons and the orientalist research interests in the subcontinent, as far as the East India Company were concerned, rather useless. So in a perspective, he wasn't wrong.

The 'inferiority' of vernacular languages, Sanskrit, and Arabic was, to Macaulay's mind, hard fact. Their lack of literary and scientific information presented themselves to him as proof of their "rudeness". We know this fact today to be entirely untrue; Arabic, Tamil, and Sanskrit had well known and renowned resources in science and literature from centuries before the Renaissance. In stating "*... all the historical information which has been collected from all the books written in the Sanscrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgments used at preparatory schools in England*" Macaulay is entirely erroneous. But what's interesting is his claim that this was a point shared by Orientalists as well. Given the significant role they had in uncovering much of India's cultural history⁴ it seems unlikely they would share such an obviously biased view. In Cutt's⁵ opinion it was because the Orientalists had also by the time subscribed to the idea of Imperial superiority, but given the continued discoveries and contributions to Indian history made by them it should seem reasonable to assume that the Orientalist group Macaulay and Cutt refer to were not representative of the entire Orientalist community.

The segue on Orientalist discovery allows us to tackle another claim by Macaulay. In an example by analogy he sought to claim that introduction of English would do to Indian languages what the rediscovery of Greek and Latin had done for the European Renaissance. He wished to claim that the study of Sanskrit was to the progress of the Indian

⁴ "How British Orientalists Were Responsible for Rediscovering Indian" 11 Mar. 2018, <https://thewire.in/history/how-british-orientalists-were-responsible-for-rediscovery-of-indian-history>. Accessed 15 Feb. 2019.

⁵ "The Background of Macaulay's Minute - Jstor." <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1842459>. Accessed 15 Feb. 2019.

people what the study of Anglo-Saxon would have been to pre-Renaissance England; a net growth of none. One can instantly disagree on at least three grounds. First, the assumption made (again) that the languages were inherently 'poor'. Secondly, that Arabic and Sanskrit writings (as increasingly discovered by Orientalists) existed with sufficient span of literary value, much as Greek and Latin for the Europeans. Finally, in the growth of vernacular literature as a direct consequence of the Orientalist discoveries of Ancient Indian literature: while English education definitely played a factor in the "Bengali Renaissance" (for instance), that it was only a part serves to doubtlessly disprove Macaulay's point.

A lot of rhetoric surrounds the man's views on vernacular. Further arguments in the sector can often be refuted by a scant observation of his disregard for Indian knowledge, customs, and society, such as his claim that that students were being paid to study Arabic and Sanskrit was proof of their (languages') uselessness. His disregard for a centuries' old educative tradition was rooted in his own capitalist beliefs: *'Nothing is more certain than that it never can in any part of the world be necessary to pay men for doing what they think pleasant or profitable'*. Likewise, his refusal to "secure the cooperation of the natives" when discussing the language of education because of his claim that if they listened to them (with regards to Sanskrit and Arabic education), then they would be "forcing on them the mock learning which they nauseate."

Macaulay's mention of "mock learning" belies another, final point in his crusade for English Education - evangelism. Due to efforts of Grant and other prominent persons in the British Parliament⁶, by 1830 the evangelical lobby in the British Parliament was very powerful. Their beliefs aligned with those of Imperialism; the Indian hindrance to progress, they said, lay as much in the religion as in the language. They wished to dedicate the funds allocated for the education of the Indian people to an English learning with Christianity as a focus; and to this extent Macaulay mentions in his minute that the argument for Sanskrit/Arabic Education as the languages of the sacred texts is "hardly reconcilable with reason, with morality". His words belie him, where on the one hand he claims neutrality, his repeated statements on "false religions, false sciences" gives him away.

Thomas Macaulay was a man of his time. His views, many untenable in our day and age, were advocated by not only other Anglicists but several Indians (including Phule and Rao) too, a fact that he presented in his favour in his *Minute*. In concluding perhaps his most famous document, while discussing administrative efficiency, he made his famous proposal: *"We must ... form a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals, and intellect."* And regardless of whether or not we agree with his statements as a whole the fact remains that he succeeded in what he set out to achieve; we are all, in a way, Macaulay's children.

⁶ "The Background of Macaulay's Minute - Jstor." <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1842459>. Accessed 15 Feb. 2019.