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## Changes in the Indian Education Scenario: Hundred years as Illustrated by Twain and Theroux

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The present study takes up evaluation of education system from the British era, the incongruity of which is still practiced in India without any glitch, creating *babus* of a different kind. This seems a perpetual process where the brunt of execution by the British is still faced by India.

Mark Twain visited India in 1896 and devoted almost a complete volume of his four volume travelogue to India. His experience and criticism in Chapter 25 of *Following the Equator* vol. II, centers on the surge of English education in India during the colonial times. After about hundred years of its implementation, Paul Theroux narrates his experiences in the chapter 'Night Train to Bangalore' from his book, *Ghost Train to the Eastern Star*, of a similar fate in a different avatar. The two graphics by Twain and Theroux are fitting chronicles of firsthand experience, that will illustrate the impact further in this study.

But before that, sneaking into the initial stages of modern Indian education system would be significant before screening consequences from the two illustrative books. To begin with in 1814, the intent of East India Company was to spread Protestant religion on the authority of bringing in Western education in India. The principle they followed was to destroy its literature and culture in order to keep a nation a slave. The opinions of a few educated Indians were not strong enough, to

wield its influence on their education policies. During the period 1813-1853, after the British took over administration from the East India Company, policy matters suffered controversies, experiments and indifference.

Lord Macaulay was the Law Member of Council of Governor General and Chairman of Public Instruction Committee. In his report of 1835 he refuted Orient literary education and supported English as a medium of instruction to teach Western literature and science to Indians. This policy came into being in 1853. Macaulay's Minute for advocating English as a medium of instruction was primarily meant to curb the impasse between the Anglicist-Classicalist Controversy, and to arrive at a non controversial decision. One of the reasons for his ideology was that he considered Indian vernaculars as "poor and rude" and inefficient to impart Western knowledge. Hence English as a medium of instruction. (Naik, Nurullah 84)

The other important reason was that its initiation was anticipated to create subordinate government officials to assist in administration and to remove incognizance. It was also felt to be useful by the Christian clerics to spread their religion and to secure imperialism. Leaders like Raja Ram Mohan Roy also supported this education policy because they felt it will provide way to Western knowledge and sciences. To most Indians this was like a panacea for many of

their ills as it paved a way for government jobs with sufficient income and good status.

An almost immediate constructive sway was apparent. It opened the doors of worldwide knowledge of culture and views. It created independent attitude towards economic principles and theories and advanced science. Activities of translations of Indian works into English and vice versa encompassed India. Social reforms like removal of untouchability, sati system, widow marriage etc. were also attempted. This process gained momentum providing intellectual creativity and opened up new vistas.

Certain obvious downside inadequacies nevertheless, remained consistent. Refrain from native ideology and incompatible adoption of Western culture caused a blind drift which degraded life and thwarted progressive attitude. A wide space surfaced between the Indian masses and Indian English educated society.

There was this phenomenal explosion of Western education with the widespread opening of schools and institutions of higher learning with English language as a medium of instruction throughout the country. However, it became burdensome for most indigenous speakers of Indian languages, creating disparity among the masses. Patriotism was losing grounds as the education system created distraction from the fight for freedom and adoption of *Swadesi*. With the ever widening use of English, came the attraction for English life and culture. This became beguiling for those Indians to adapt to the English way of life, who were either fortunate enough or/and

could afford to receive Western education either in India or abroad. Little did they realize the belittling effect of the process! The so called limited prestigious posts of the government were quickly occupied with no other option left even for the highly qualified left outs than to accept the lower cadre and to inadvertently join the cavalcade of being prepared as clerks.

At this very juncture comes in the picture of the entire scenario. Twain's comments on a letter sent to him by an acquaintance, written by a young Indian railway clerk in smooth flowing English, "and yet not exactly English". "Something subtly foreign", "tropically ornate and sentimental and rhetorical":

[. . .] Upon inquiry [. . .] the country was full of such fellows of his like. They had been educated away to the snow- summits of learning – and the market for all this elaborate cultivation was minutely out of proportion to the vastness of the product. This market consisted of some thousands of small clerical posts under the government – the supply of material for it was multitudinous. (Twain 242)

Twain decries, putting side by side a similar system existing for long in America, "[. . .] richly oversupplying the market for highly educated service; and thereby doing a damage to the scholar, and through him to the country" (Twain 242). The discontent of "over-education" is also interestingly quoted by Twain, from the preface of a little book published by Messrs. Thacker, Spink & Co. of Calcutta. It says that the education has made these "boys a little less clownish in their manners, and more intelligent when

spoken to by strangers”. Conversely such a village boy is reluctant to plow the land and the town boy, to work in his father’s workshop; because for them the only suitable place is that of a “[. . .] writership in some office, and especially in a government office. [. . .] and more than once parents have openly expressed their regret that they ever allowed their sons to be inveigled to school” (quoted by Twain 243). The book, *Indo-Anglian Literature*, well stocked with “babu”, “clerky” and “booky English”, impresses Twain with the funny yet surprisingly correct English used by native Indians, as it would have been used by the best of native English speakers. Here he merely wants to show some of “the quaint imperfect attempts” at the use of a tongue which is not one’s own. Moreover, through some of the “wailing and supplicating letters” coming from the “applicant’s unmarketable education” he wishes to sympathize not alone for imploring help for poverty but also admires their faith and unselfishness to the kinship bond. They are mostly humble, funny, confused and even groveling, with “still a pathos about them [. . .] that checks the rising laugh and reproaches it” (Twain 244). “Through ages of debasing oppression suffered at the hands their native rulers, they come legitimately by the attitude and language of fawning and flattery, and one must remember this in mitigation when passing judgment upon the native character “(Twain 244).

Sampling a long letter in flowery Eastern style Twain goes on:

I hope your honor will condescend to hear the tale of this poor creature. I shall overflow with gratitude at this

mark of your royal condescension. The birdlike happiness has flown away from my nestlike heart and has not hitherto returned from the period whence the rose of my father’s life suffered the autumnal breath of death, in plain English he passed through the gates of Grave, and from that hour the phantom of delight has never danced before me. (Twain 245)

Twain extols the good English mastered by these youngsters but has his reservations labeling it as “school” and “book” English, sampling how a native boy would shine had he the choice of concentrating on only one rather than “loaded down with an overfreightage of other studies”. So he really does not reach the actual point of progress as “[. . .] – his “education” consists of learning *things*, not the meaning of them; he is fed upon the husks, not the corn” (Twain 256-246). He reads an essay by a schoolboy on how he spends his day and is not able to cipher it. He infers that much of the boy’s time must have been taken by the study of history, at which too he is all messed up. Among several examples of insane answers of different subjects in school examinations in Calcutta, and in Brooklyn, quoted from literature answers by him, in a chapter, English as She is Taught from the book *Selected Short Stories*, few are sited here:

“Beowulf wrote the Scriptures/ Ben Johnson survived Shakespeare in some respects/Chaucer was the father of English pottery.” (Twain 251)

All that Twain wants to focus at is notwithstanding whether it is America or India, with English the situation remained

the same. After examining when a pupil is found to be ignorant, he is thrust upon with various subjects, where it is believed he would properly display the classification of the whole system. The result of this kind of pushing into education was no progress, no development, only a waste of time.

The already established convent/missionary schools/colleges during the Raj got further impetus after independence, which was now no more a Right of only the elite. The upper middle and middle-class and after a few decades, every other person, had easy access and so preferred sending their wards to English medium schools/colleges. Thus we had trained mediocre *babus* giving way to *babu* culture, which were found anywhere and everywhere in all government departments and other places all over the country in no time.

The overflow of medical, technical and management institutes, business schools and institutes catering also to other lucrative professions for the aspiring young, with English as the medium of instruction, started creating more and more mediocre in various fields.

Paul Theroux states, that the ever growing and uncontrolled population of India is the nation's major problem. Here everyone wants to give their children an education with English as the medium. The output of the educated mushroomed as against government jobs, which were limited. Unemployment thus added to this problem. The last few decades has seen multinationals come to the rescue of the aspirants. Today a young graduate even with a specialized degree of engineering or management is

ready to work as the so called software engineer or at a call centre at a minimum salary, which is far cheaper for the MNCs if they employ someone from UK or USA. New mediocre *babus* of different kinds are thus being produced everyday in multiples.

During Paul Theroux's second visit in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, he finds the once "pensioners' paradise", the city of Bangalore, exploding and teeming with millions as the centre of India's high-tech industry; exemplifying the colonial repercussions India suffers, more strongly than ever before. The reasons quoted by one IT professional to Theroux, were that the city was loaded with educational institutions breeding lots of talented graduates, the climate remained moderate for most part of the year and lastly with a calm atmosphere it was safer here. Further, the government of Karnataka had introduced tax incentives in mid 1990's attracting foreign companies. No language dominated and English was widely spoken.

Now Bengaluru, the placid city had become construction site for flyovers, property, hotels, and new buildings. Moving around the International Tech Park with towering glass and steel high-rise and glittering signs of MNC's, Theroux realized that Indians working here were actually working for a fraction of what an American would earn. College students and housewives in the United States had once done the same as what jobs at Bangalore call centers were demanding. The American companies had "[. . .] discovered that Indian graduates with good degrees, fluent in English, well mannered, patient and persistent, would do the same jobs, full time, for very little

money. [. . .] Bangalore was perhaps the best known centre of cheap, trainable labour in the world” (Theroux 214). On visits to call centers he found most were university graduates earning much less than international standards. It was on these people that “Bangalore’s prosperity rests” because “[. . .] their need for work, their high educational attainments, their skills, their good character, their prudent austerity, their punctuality, their humble status and most of all their willingness to work for low pay” (Theroux 215). The IT escalation had risen so high and was so highly cost effective that Bangalore had less than 30% locals living in it as it had become a major cosmopolitan. Out of sheer curiosity when the author managed to venture in to hear Indians on phone at one such call centre, “in a new room with around hundred cubicles and workstations [. . .] on the phone [. . .] humming with their voices” he found for e.g. an Indian helping an American solve a problem with almost anything from a computer to filling up an insurance form (Theroux 216). Theroux was fascinated and also felt a bit annoyed by the way they mimicked Americans in dress, forced yet persuasive nasal accents and also having American first and last names.

Despite the stressful nature of job and the unsocial hours with high dropout rate, there was never a shortage of applicants. Very few achieved a high salary level, yet the low or average paid was “more than enough to tempt them to stay”. The author realized “the paradox” by new graduates looking for work, “that India’s poor were its wealth” (Theroux 218).

Theroux further affirms, “Since the time of East India Company, Indian labour had been exploited for its cheapness”, which continued during the British Raj “but unskilled labour and muscle power ceased to be of much use; the workers now were intelligent, educated, mostly young, a whole workforce of cultivated coolies” (Theroux 219). What Lord Mayo, the 4<sup>th</sup> British viceroy of India had said and Theroux quotes, “we are all British gentlemen engaged in the magnificent task of governing an inferior race”, (Theroux 219). is very real and has become more relevant today.

The purpose of the English to breed educated clerks had an instantaneous impact, no doubt. The struggle for independence with awareness and education to drive out the British influenced Indian masses, something that should have cautioned Indians against further exploitation. Unfortunately the colonial shackles have tightened. This is exactly what illustrations by both Twain and Theroux on the education system in India have shown. But this is not the only parameter on which the observations are centered in this study. By and large, both have shown the negative impact of that education system which is still breeding inferior, rather a mediocre *babu*.

The progress made by the impact of British education has helped India to face global challenges too, and this should be the optimistic and creative approach. Tearing off Lord Mayo’s humiliating tag of designating Indians as “inferior race”, India has commendably promoted and preserved its ethnic identity on the one hand and stands

head over heels with the times to become one of the fast developing nations on the other; to become “cultivated masters”. Courtesy its aspiring youth armed with global education in the fields of science and technology, medicine, business entrepreneurs; you name it, the Indian youth has it. Nevertheless, it is seasoned time for the Indian youth to reflect, contemplate, reconsider and continue striving for a

harmonious way out, now breaking the shackles of another colonial repercussion; which is corruption. It’s time for swift progress and for this there is a very significant need to focus our education system towards creating specific skills in various fields instead of stuffing every youth with all possible irrelevant knowledge found under the sun, as Twain aptly puts it, “unmarketable education” (Twain 244).

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