Macaulay's Minute on Indian Education

His idea of “a learned native” was of a native “familiar with the poetry of Milton, the metaphysics of Locke, and the physics of Newton”, i.e. Indian only in external features, but for all intellectual and practical purposes steeped in western, nay English philosophy, science and literature.

In the 18th century, Indian masses received religious education pertaining to Christianity through Christian missionaries. However, when the East India Company came to India they did not allow the missionaries to propagate religious education to the common people in India. They felt that the education from the missionaries would encourage religious sentiments among the people in India that could affect the business policy and the diplomatic role of East India Company.

It was through the Charter Act of 1813 that a state system of education was officially introduced in the Indian history. This clause of the Charter Act of 1813 compelled the East India Company to accept responsibility for the education of the Indian people. As a result, from 1813 to 1857, the company opened many schools and colleges under their control, which laid the foundation of the English system of education in India.

In this clause, Governor-General-in-Council directed that a sum of one lakh of rupees, each year shall be set apart for the revival and improvement of literature and encouragement of the learned natives of India, and for the introduction and promotion of knowledge of the science among the inhabitants of the British territories in India. For the first time official money was allotted to expand the education of the Indians.

Macaulay's Minute
Lord Macaulay landed in India on June 10, 1834 and was immediately appointed as president of General Committee of Public Instruction. Macaulay arrived in Madras on June 10, 1834, and proceeded to Ootacamund, Nilgiris, where the Governor General of India William Bentinck was camping for the summer. Macaulay wrote of his initial experience as follows: “To be on land after three months at sea is of itself a great change. But to be in such a land! The dark faces, with white turbans, and flowing robes: the trees not our trees: the very smell of atmosphere that of a hothouse, and the architecture as strange as the vegetation” (Trevelyan 1876: 334). There was a salute of fifteen guns when he set his foot on the beach! Lord Macaulay wrote a minute on 2ndFebruary 1835, where he made the decision regarding the controversy. Macaulay always devoted his best to the job on hand. In his youth, Macaulay exhibited “vehemence, over-confidence, the inability to recognize that there are two sides to a question or two people in a dialogue,” just as other young men displayed (Trevelyan 1876; 112). While these traits were tempered in his later years, Macaulay was always a man of his own ideas. And he was greatly influenced in his ideals, ideas, and ideologies by the great achievements of Western civilization, sciences, philosophy, and theology. His nephew-biographer writes, “His speeches and essays teem with expressions of a far deeper than official interest in India and her people; and his minutes remain on record, to prove that he did not affect the sentiment for a literary or oratorical purpose” (Trevelyan 1876: 235).

In 1835, the arguments Orientalists were put before Lord Macaulay, who rejected the arguments of the Orientalists through a very forceful minute wherein he supported the education of the classes and made a vigorous plea for spreading Western learning through the medium of English.
On March 7, 1835, Lord William Bentinck also accepted Macaulay’s recommendations and sanctioned it officially. In 1837 English was made the court language and a Government Resolution of 1844 threw high posts open to Indians. These measures resulted in a rapid growth of English education. The missionaries also established a number of English schools and colleges.

Macaulay wrote in his minute “we must at present do our best to form a class of persons Indian in blood and colour and English in taste, opinions in morals and in intellect,”

Macaulay’s arguments in favour of English: Macaulay rejected the claims of Arabic and Sanskrit as against English, because he considered that English was better than either of them. His arguments in favour of English were

1. It is the key to modern knowledge and is therefore more useful than Arabic or Sanskrit.

2. It stand pre eminent even among the language of the west in India, English is the language sponsored by the ruling class. It is likely to become the language of commerce throughout the seas of the east.

3. It would bring about renaissance in India, just as Greek or Latin’s did in England or just as the languages of western Europe in civilized Russia.

4. The natives are desirous of being taught English and are not eager to learn Sanskrit or Arabic.

5. It is possible to make the natives of this country good English scholars, and to that end our efforts ought to be directed.

6. It was impossible to educate the body of people but it was possible through English education to bring about "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour and English in taste, opinions in morals and in intellect", and that education was to filter down from them to the masses.

Macaulay concluded his Minute with a characteristically dramatic flourish, threatening to resign from his position as President of the GCPI if his proposals were rejected. He knew that this was an empty threat, and, as he anticipated, Bentinck immediately gave his ‘entire concurrence’ to the Minute.

Bentinck appears to have been anxious to settle the education controversy before his departure from India. As noted above, he gave the Minute his immediate assent, and to effect its speedy implementation, he deliberately prevented any discussion of Macaulay’s scheme in the GCPI. Seed (1952) claims that Bentinck purposely withheld action on the education question until the very end of his term in office because he feared that the radical nature of the policy would arouse the opposition of the Court of Directors in London, upon whose blessing all policies ultimately depended. Seed further argues that the timing of Bentinck’s decision was shaped by his experience in Madras in 1807, when he was dismissed from the Governorship for his alleged insensitivity to Indian religions and customs. By introducing the controversial new policy on the eve of his departure, Bentinck perhaps calculated that he would succeed in avoiding a similar humiliation.
Bentinck’s underlying caution is evident in his Resolution of 7 March 1835 giving effect to the new policy. In accordance with Macaulay’s proposals, the Resolution stated that ‘the great object of the British Government ought to be the promotion of European literature and science among the natives of India, and that all the funds appropriated for the purpose of education would best be employed on English education alone’. However, in a significant departure from the Minute, Bentinck disavowed any intention ‘to abolish any College or School of Native learning, while the Native Population shall appear to be inclined to avail themselves of the advantages which it affords’. Although the Resolution stipulated that no further stipends be awarded for Oriental studies, it was careful to direct that native scholars already in receipt of government grants would continue to enjoy their allowances. Bentinck’s concessions on these points seem to have been prompted by pressure from influential groups in Calcutta’s Muslim and Hindu communities, who, upon hearing news of Macaulay’s scheme, submitted petitions to the government protesting against the new policy. The Governor-General’s softening stance towards Oriental studies a matter of weeks after expressing his ‘entire concurrence’ with the Minute would therefore appear to bear out Rosselli’s contention that ‘Bentinck let Macaulay fire the rhetorical big guns while ensuring that vested interests suffered little actual damage’.