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**Negotiating Colonial Modernity: Educational Transformation in Nineteenth Century Punjab**

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**Abstract**

*This article examines the educational transformation of nineteenth-century Punjab within the broader framework of colonial modernity and British educational reform in India. It explores how colonial educational policies, intellectual debates, and indigenous participation collectively shaped the emergence of modern educational institutions in the region. The study analyzes the evolution of modern education under British rule through key initiatives such as the Educational Minute of Thomas Babington Macaulay (1835), the Declaration of 1844, and Wood's Dispatch of 1854, alongside missionary and enlightenment influences that promoted Western learning and administrative modernization.*

*The article further investigates indigenous responses to colonial education, highlighting the support of Indian intellectuals and reformers for modern educational institutions and university development. Special attention is devoted to educational developments in Punjab, including the demand for Punjab University, the response of the colonial administration, and the intellectual contest between Anglicists and Orientalists. In this context, the contribution of Gottlieb Wilhelm Leitner is examined for his advocacy of an educational model that sought to preserve Oriental learning while engaging with modern educational reforms.*

*By analyzing the intersections of colonial policy, intellectual discourse, and indigenous agency, the study argues that educational modernization in Punjab was not merely a colonial project but also a negotiated process shaped by local aspirations and reformist initiatives. The article contributes to the historiography of colonial education in South Asia by offering a nuanced understanding of how educational modernity evolved in nineteenth-century Punjab.*

**Keywords:** Colonial modernity, educational philanthropy, orientalist, Punjab, Dyal Singh,

**Introduction**

Educational philanthropy emerged as a significant force in the socio-intellectual transformation of colonial Punjab during the nineteenth century. The introduction of Western education under British colonial rule generated new debates about modernity, enlightenment, and social progress in India. Colonial educational policies, missionary enterprises, and the establishment of modern institutions created opportunities for the spread of secular and scientific learning. At the same time, these developments encouraged indigenous elites to participate actively in educational reform and institution building. Education increasingly became a means of intellectual awakening, social mobility, and cultural regeneration within Indian society.

In colonial Punjab, indigenous philanthropists and reform-minded elites played a crucial role in supporting modern education and bridging the gap between colonial initiatives and local social realities. Influenced by liberal thought, enlightenment ideals, and the changing political environment, many Indian intellectuals viewed education as an instrument for societal progress and communal harmony. Their contributions extended beyond financial patronage to include the establishment of schools, colleges, libraries,

newspapers, and cultural organizations that promoted intellectual development and public discourse.

Among these reformers, Dyal Singh Majithia occupies a prominent position as a pioneering advocate of educational philanthropy in Punjab. Through his support for modern education, journalism, and public institutions, he sought to cultivate rational inquiry, intellectual freedom, and social reform. His educational vision reflected a synthesis of Western modernity and indigenous aspirations, making him one of the foremost architects of educational and cultural awakening in colonial Punjab. This study examines the role of educational philanthropy and indigenous elites in shaping the intellectual and institutional foundations of modern education in nineteenth-century Punjab.

### **Colonial Educational Transformation and Indigenous Response in 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was an era of *industrialization* in many countries, especially Europe. During this time frame, England was fabricating its economic system according to the needs of industrial benefits. The British Government was forming its policies to meet the needs of monetary benefits, and the same mindset was being followed by the government that were prevailing the colonial territories. The East India Company was shaping up its policies based on economic benefits from trade and was focusing on the governing rules and regulations. Later on, during the Industrial Revolution, the government drafted novel frameworks and policies to work on the education system in the colonial territories. As a result, the Charter Act<sup>1</sup> of 1813 was introduced, which rolled out new educational policies in India.<sup>2</sup> Whereas, the first Charter Act of 1793 focused on the trade rules of the company primarily and the administrative rules for the company.<sup>3</sup>

After the introduction of the Charter Act of 1833 missionary institutions in the country were to be regulated under the government and three bishops were to be appointed in India.<sup>4</sup> Educational funds were doubled ten times from 10 thousand to 100 thousand.<sup>5</sup> But this amount was not used until Hastings, the Governor General of India, appointed a head of the “General Committee of Public Instructions,” Lord Macaulay.<sup>6</sup> These moves of the British Government indicated their keen interest in the novel idea of educating the masses in India.

Since 1813, we can trace different initiatives by the government for the education of the local Indians. With the status of law Officer, from the Governor General’s Executive Council, Thomas Babington Macaulay came to India. His visit aimed to iron out the dispute over the medium of education between the Orientalists and Anglicans. The introduction of educational policies stirred two schools of thought. First, being orientalist, those who believed in the modern trends and education to be imparted in the English medium. Second, Anglicize favored modern education and the English language as a mode of learning.<sup>7</sup>

On March 7<sup>th</sup>, 1835, Macaulay introduced a minute replacing English as an official language. He strengthened his point by advocating English as a distinguished language and being the language that could bring innovative minds out of the common masses.<sup>8</sup> Here we observe a transition in British disposition from Persian to English language as a medium of instruction.

The education system gradually evolved to produce official staff and the locally educated class in India. So, the colonial government unveiled numerous actions to evolve education and shift the educational system in India. In the upcoming years, the British government deployed the governors who had the capacity to work on the education in India. George Eden, who later got the title of “1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Auckland” served as the Governor (1836-42) of India.<sup>9</sup> He is considered one of the educationist governors of India, as are Bentick, Dalhousie, and Curzon.<sup>10</sup> In his educational minute presented on 24

November 1839, Auckland analyzed William Adam's Report and ordered the new English schools and colleges on the district level to educate but chose the medium of vernacular languages.<sup>11</sup> Whereas, a new arena for education was opened on behalf of Auckland by introducing the scholarship program for the students learning at schools and colleges.<sup>12</sup>

Another positive change in India, under the British government can be marked during Lord Hardinge's era. He attempted to promote the English language in 1844 by suggesting high-level tests for the Indians so that he could promote the English language. Whereas, the Court of Directors did not allow this decree.<sup>13</sup> 19<sup>th</sup> century India was under the dark shadows of social wrongs where unlawful activities like sati, female infanticide, child marriage, caste system, unequal educational chances based on caste and creed differences, and other superstitions like human sacrifices, etc were common practices.<sup>14</sup> William Adam in his survey to India noted the plight of young girls and their education. He believed that girls in India were not given the right to education on the whole because of the superstitions that educated girls become widows right after marriage. Believing this they were not allowed to get an education but some well-off families arranged private tutors for their girls but there were a few.<sup>15</sup> In India there was a sheer need for educational reforms and the plight of Indian society attracted the attention of Christian missionaries to India. The very first revolutionary missionary considered to be prominent was the Baptist Missionary William Carey, who landed on the Indian shores in 1793 with a mission to educate the "Pagans" of the east.<sup>16</sup> Later on, many other missionary schools started working, and for the promotion of the bible, many printing presses were started in India to preach the Gospel. During the time frame of twenty years, 1833- 1853, Christian missionaries chose English as a medium of teaching. This decision caused a drastic change in the history of Indian education. As the policies of the English were promoting the English language, so did the missionary ventures. A bulk of Indians started taking admission in the missionary schools and colleges, not for the sake of religious education but to learn the modern trends and to have an idea of the Bible and the English language.<sup>17</sup> So, missionary schools played a vital role for promoting the modern English language for the people who wanted to join the government seats in the offices.

The educational policies for India were majorly formed under Lord Bentick and Lord Macaulay for the English language to be a medium of instruction and for academic purposes. This step was initiated to introduce Indians to modern expertise in in health sector and administration.<sup>18</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a shift in educational policy-making took place. A transition from the East India Company to the British Crown made some efforts to alter the educational paradigm, 1858- 1919.<sup>19</sup> A drastic change in the academic field was witnessed after Wood's Dispatch policy. This policy proposed that the English language be opted as a medium at the college and university levels. Whereas for the secondary level, indigenous was to be followed. Sir Charles Wood, being the president of the Board of Control to the British East India Company, tried softening the blow of Macaulay's repressive policies in 1854. Consequently, the English language became an administrative language.<sup>20</sup> It is also considered the "Magna Carta of English education in India."<sup>21</sup> As a result, three Higher education institutions in India were established at Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras. The British Government took serious notes in establishing educational institutions five years after the annexation of Punjab. Scholars of different programs, whether from secondary or college levels, had to appear under the umbrella of Calcutta University.

The Britishers, being the new masters, were working on the administrative structure of India in the initial phase and were not in favor of implanting their educational system in India. However, destiny had some other plans for this approach. As the administration

in India developed on different levels over time education for the Indians became important in the eyes of the Britishers, who needed the locals to run their administrative framework to implement their orders. Because the orders from Britain could not be counterfeited in India because of the cultural, ethnic, and other circumstances.<sup>22</sup>

Indians with the progressive approach wanted to fit into the new setup by joining the offices and supporting the British government against *Satti*, child marriage, and social evils. To inculcate this mindset in the common masses, the intellectuals in Bengal insisted on educational institutes that could quench their thirst. Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) articulated these circumstances and combated the indigenous education system. He believed that *Sanskrit* and the other Indigenous languages should be exchanged with the English language and modern knowledge. His letters to British Governor General Lord Amherst, against starting a Sanskrit college in Calcutta,<sup>23</sup> give ground to the Anglicists in favor of English education. This stance has lately been supported by Lord Macaulay to strengthen his point of view on the promotion of education that locals also desired for English education.<sup>24</sup>

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891)<sup>25</sup> was another activist who played a vital role in boosting modern education in India. He did not have a political instinct but worked for the betterment of the common masses.<sup>26</sup> He believed that education must be accessible to all for social advancement. In his view, scientific education was the key to success, so he promoted mathematics and scientific education for both males and females.<sup>27</sup> He was an Indian in spirit but was in favor of Western education. As a student, he was one of the signatories at Sanskrit College supporting English as a subject.<sup>28</sup>

These are some of the instances that throw light on the educational development and the acceptance of Western education on the part of Indians. As a result, the Council of Education planned to kick off a university in India on October 25, 1885, but the idea was not entertained claiming that it was too early to contemplate a university in India.<sup>29</sup>

Hay Cameron, the late 4<sup>th</sup> member of the Council of India and president of the Indian Law and Education Council in Bengal, attracted the British Government's attention to the need for a university in Calcutta.<sup>30</sup> He elucidated the grounds for hindering the Indian youth from acquiring the modern education. On 30<sup>th</sup> November 1853, he entered a petition pointing out the reasons that did not allow Indians to get higher education.

- Firstly, the unavailability of a British Indian University is the major cause of hindering the emerging generation from higher education.
- Secondly, the English teachers already teaching in India do not possess any Government representation that gains them a good reputation.
- Thirdly, the British government does not oversee young students for educational opportunities in England without any biases. Hay underscored the importance of the necessity of educational universities for higher education in India.<sup>31</sup> However, this Parliamentary session did not reach a decision on the formation of a university.<sup>32</sup>

This effort by Hay Camero, though, was not as fruitful for the time being; however, it proved to be a milestone in the formation of the university in India and suggested the basis of the need for a university on a governing body's behalf. During the turmoil period of the 1857 British Government, the subject of the Indian university again came under discussion. Bengal was the land where the dawn of English rule took place in India, and later on, it prevailed throughout the country. This land witnessed the changing situations and the shifts in the rule. Finally, after a series of battles now the new masters saw the dawn of their rule in Bengal. The British Presidency was established in the region, and the new rules were implemented.<sup>33</sup> On 24 January 1857, Calcutta University was established in India under Act II of 1857. Following the pattern of Calcutta University, two more

universities were formed in Madras by Act XXII and in Bombay under Act XXVII to impart modern education in 1857.<sup>34</sup> These universities followed the pattern of London University and opted for liberal Western education.<sup>35</sup> The motive behind the establishment of the universities on the pattern of London University was to produce the intelligentsia who had a command over arts, law, engineering, medicine, and science.<sup>36</sup> Whereas teaching of religious subjects was not added to the course of the study, and indigenous languages were to be taught with a lens of impartiality.<sup>37</sup> Under the given circumstances, a university was an absolute requirement in Punjab. So, the government introduced University College Lahore, which only offered diplomas. Later, this name was altered with a minor modification and called “Punjab University College”. Dyal Singh was one of the seventy nominees of the Senate for the establishment of the Punjab University.<sup>38</sup>

### **Educational Modernity and the Intellectual Debates in Punjab**

Pioneering innovative educational policies caused the dawn of a new era. The English language was considered of the elite, and a progressive mindset followed the new masters. Some orientalists, like Leitner, firmly advocated the idea of native language as a mode of educational discourse. He had a strong inclination towards the base of Punjab University in the native and local languages.<sup>39</sup> The imperial masters tagged the English educational system as ‘modern education’.<sup>40</sup> The advanced policies had given hope to the ancient residents for a significant modification, and liberal educationists favored the new education in Punjab. These institutions were providing education in modern languages. Likewise, Punjab also needed modern educational institutions based on the contemporary educational system. On the contrary, in

Punjab, education was being imparted through *madrassas*, *pathshalas*, and conventional schools in the local languages. Indigenous education was given in Arabic, Persian, Gurmukhi, and Sanskrit. To maintain revenue records in Punjab, the British needed locals for the official work at the basic level. So, they initiated government schools in Punjab, and the very first school started functioning in 1851.<sup>41</sup>

Wood’s Dispatch provided a basis for establishing new colleges and higher educational institutions in different parts of the country. Meanwhile, Punjab also attracted the attention of the British, and the response from the people of the Punjab towards Calcutta University was astonishing. Students from North Punjab showed their great interest in the pioneering universities of India. They went to the affiliated colleges for the examinations and developed an essence of modern education in their minds. On the contrary, students were facing financial problems in meeting the criteria for the fees for the affiliated college.<sup>42</sup> And the first Government College of Punjab was started in Lahore in 1864.<sup>43</sup> These new colleges and institutes were affiliated with Calcutta University. So, there was a dire need for a university in Punjab.

Dyal Singh, being a part of this metamorphic time frame, had absorbed the modern trends in his personality and philosophy of life. He had a trailblazing approach towards the advocacy of modern education, and his initiatives at the short age of fifty manifested this disposition in the later years of his life. To realize this perspective, we need to look into the evolution process the region was going through.

Sardar Dyal Singh, whose spectrum towards education was broader due to his personal experiences and for the betterment of the people of Punjab, demanded a university in North Punjab that could cultivate the minds of the youth. Moreover, Dyal Singh’s visits to Calcutta and his active participation in the Indian Association drew his attention to the opportunities for higher education in Punjab.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, collaboration with elites was the common practice by the British to gain influence on the local level, and meeting

the demands of the elites was sometimes crucial for the British to enforce their rule. So, as a token of their interest in Punjab, the Government planned to kick off an independent institute in Punjab that was to be not just an examining body but to teach modern and indigenous education for the people of Punjab.<sup>45</sup>

The circumstances of 1857 and the loyalty of the people of Punjab caused an atmosphere of confidence in the eyes of the imperial government. Thereupon, a 'University College' was set up in 1870 in Lahore.<sup>46</sup> Dr. Leitner (1840-1899)<sup>47</sup>, a philologist led the campaign on the requirement for a University in Punjab. On-demand from the local *Chiefs and Zamindars* government took the matter seriously, and Mr. D. F MacLeod, second Lieutenant Governor, stepped forward to start the University College in Punjab in 1869.<sup>48</sup> Whereas, minimal resistance was also observed by Calcutta University; however, the Vice Chancellor, Mr. Seton Karr,

considered that the university in upper India was indispensable. Finally, under Order number 9 and on the proposal of the Government of the Punjab Indian Government on 10<sup>th</sup> June 1869 approved the university for Punjab. However, the institute was on a probation period and was to be given the status of a university on the fulfillment of the required number of students and the quality of education.<sup>49</sup> Dyal Singh as an educational philanthropist tried to bridge the gap between conventional and contemporary education. He instilled the idea of learning the language of the new rulers of India. English language according to him was crucial to meet the needs of the common masses. He considered modern education as a cornerstone for the individual's self-enlightenment. To infuse love for knowledge and education in the hearts of *Punjabis*, he initiated educational institutions in Punjab. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Punjab endured educational transformations through the lens of foreign overlords. Missionary institutions were proliferating education through preaching their religion. The areas that got more attention for tertiary education were Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay. Early universities of India were established in these cities.<sup>50</sup>

Dyal Singh, being an aristocrat, advocated the cause of higher education and backed the struggle for a university in Punjab. Calcutta University was the role model for the intelligentsia of upper India. After locating hope for a university in Punjab, Dyal Singh fully engaged in the pursuit of the formation of a college. He was one of seventy-two senate members of the Punjab University College in Lahore.<sup>51</sup> Another challenge during the university's formation process was selecting the medium of education. The orientalist were in favor of the vernacular languages as a medium of instruction, whereas people with progressive ideas wished for the English language.<sup>52</sup> This tug of war went through a number of statements and arguments that had to decide the medium of instruction for the pioneering indigenous institution of Punjab. Dyal Singh, the leader of the movement as well as a prominent associate of the Senate of the university college, supported Western patterns and raised his voice against the Orientalist approach.<sup>53</sup>

Punjab, being a fusion of Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus, had a variety in its cultural range.<sup>54</sup> The people of Punjab had their emotional association with their religious scriptures and loved to learn the languages of their sacred books. Learning a language, except for their religious languages, was beyond their imagination.<sup>55</sup> Most of the Muslims used the Urdu language in Punjab and the other areas of India, whereas on the local level language of the common masses for daily use was *Punjabi*.<sup>56</sup> When the matter of the language selection at the time of the formation of Punjab University came up, there was a dispute on the selection of the medium of education. Government-based schools and missionaries in Punjab were imparting knowledge in the English language; on the contrary, under Wood's dispatch, local *madrassas and pathshalas* were focused on the indigenous languages. Leitner was directly determined on the implementation of Wood's

dispatch and ignored the requirements of the common masses.<sup>57</sup> Since the formation of Punjab University College, a tussle had taken place on the matter of medium for the institution as a university. Leitner believed that the people of Punjab should be given education in their vernacular and launched Anjuman e Punjab (1865) to protect the indigenous languages.<sup>58</sup> The motive behind this was to provide a platform to the people of Punjab for social services and protection of vernaculars for the University of Punjab.<sup>59</sup> Under the umbrella of the Anjuman, campaigns were held in different parts of Punjab. On 8<sup>th</sup> December 1869, a framework for the University College was proposed through a proclamation by the Punjab government, which appointed a senate and other machinery for the college. This body directed the institution to focus on English as a must, with proficiency in the oriental language. So, an emanation of English according to the governing body's rules was mandatory in the Punjab University College.<sup>60</sup> This notification by the government caused a rift between Anglicists and Orientalists in the upcoming years. Leitner, being a philologist in the oriental and Western languages, yearned for the vernaculars. He was of the view that making *Punjabis* proficient in the English language could cause chaos in the colonial territory. He did not support the idea of a university in Punjab on the western pattern that would enable *Punjabians* to ask for their rights. Furthermore, as a philologist, he considered that introducing new language on an official level would threaten the vernaculars.<sup>61</sup>

## Conclusion

The educational transformation of nineteenth-century Punjab emerged through a complex interaction between colonial policies, intellectual debates, and indigenous participation. British educational initiatives introduced modern systems of learning, secular curricula, and institutional frameworks that significantly altered the educational landscape of India. Measures such as the Educational Minute of Thomas Babington Macaulay, the Declaration of 1844, and Wood's Dispatch of 1854 established the foundations of modern education and encouraged the spread of Western knowledge and administrative efficiency across the subcontinent.

At the same time, educational modernization in Punjab was not solely a colonial enterprise. Indigenous intellectuals, reformers, and philanthropists actively engaged with these transformations and sought to adapt modern education to local social and cultural realities. The debates between Anglicists and Orientalists reflected competing visions regarding the nature and purpose of education, while the growing demand for higher education and universities demonstrated the increasing aspirations of Indian society for intellectual advancement and social mobility.

The establishment of educational institutions in Punjab, particularly the movement for Punjab University, represented a significant milestone in the region's intellectual history. In this regard, Gottlieb Wilhelm Leitner played an important role in advocating an educational approach that attempted to reconcile Oriental learning with modern educational reforms. The support of indigenous elites further strengthened the process of educational expansion and institutional development.

The study concludes that colonial modernity in Punjab was negotiated rather than passively accepted. Educational transformation evolved through cooperation, contestation, and adaptation between colonial authorities and indigenous actors. Modern education became an instrument of intellectual awakening, social reform, and cultural change that reshaped the social fabric of Punjab and laid the foundations for modern academic and public institutions in the region.

<sup>1</sup> Charter Acts were the legal frameworks for the company as a license that the East India Company had to follow to work in India by the British Parliament. There are four charter acts for the company by the parliament as a whole and each was revised after two decades.

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