



Research Article

## A Study of the Educational Reforms introduced by the British in the Indian Education System

Abdul Rahaman

Research Scholar, Department of Education, Glocal University, Saharanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India

Corresponding Author: \* Abdul Rahaman

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21032385>

### Abstract

India is a country that has had a legacy of rich education since time immemorial. The different communities practised education based on their own cultural traditions. The Gurukul system was used for this purpose by the Hindus, while the Muslims and Buddhists used the systems of Makhtabs, Madrasas and Buddhist Viharas for providing education. Apart from the religious aspects, the other two components imparted through these educational institutions were morals and culture, and the education was mainly based on ethical and cultural aspects. There were many other prestigious institutes like Taxila, Nalanda and Vikram Shila known across the globe for their excellence in academics. After coming to India, the British noticed that despite all the richness in culture and the quality of the education institutes in the country, there were many social evils prevalent in society. They used education to solve the problems of society and introduced many social, educational and political reforms. The British did not just rule; they reformed the way Indians thought, learned, wrote and communicated. The main focus of the research paper is the examination of reforms in the Indian educational system brought about by the British, with special emphasis on their effects. The study is done through the analysis of historical reports from different books and research papers. An analysis of these varied sources brings to light the fact that, despite the self-interest of the British administration in implementing these reforms, they encouraged Indians to think scientifically and made them more inclined towards the English language. New universities, colleges, and schools were established, but at the same time, the indigenous languages and culture were neglected.

### Manuscript Information

- ISSN No: 2583-7397
- Received: 18-05-2026
- Accepted: 26-06-2026
- Published: 29-06-2026
- IJCRM:5(3); 2026: 1268-1271
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- Plagiarism Checked: Yes
- Peer Review Process: Yes

### How to Cite this Article

Rahaman A. A Study of the Educational Reforms introduced By the British in the Indian Education System. Int J Contemp Res Multidiscip. 2026;5(3):1268-1271.

### Access this Article Online



[www.multiarticlesjournal.com](http://www.multiarticlesjournal.com)

**KEYWORDS:** British education policy, Indian education system, educational reforms

## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is quite obvious that the British were well aware of the importance of education in changing anything in any country. They came to India for trade and governance without caring much about the then educational system prevailing there. But soon enough, they understood that in order to survive in the long run and govern the country and its citizens, it was imperative for them to change their point of view and this could happen through total renovation of the then prevalent education system in the country. With this idea in mind, they set out to reform the traditional education system of India according to their way of thinking. To this end, they took various steps including Charter Act (1813), Macaulay's Minute (1835), Wood's Despatch (1854), Hunter Commission (1882), Indian Universities Commission (1902), Sadler Commission (1917), and Hartog Committee (1929).

The Minute of Macaulay (1835) and the Despatch of Wood (1854) have been important in the transformation of the traditional education system and formation of the British education system in India; whereas Macaulay's minute focused on the importance of the English language in education, Wood's despatch formed the basis of the modern education system. Therefore, the despatch of Wood came to be regarded as the 'Magna Carta' of the Indian education system. This research paper aims at describing the changes made by the British in the Indian education system and their analysis of the impact of these changes on Indian society.

## 2. OBJECTIVES

1. The primary purpose of this research paper is to conduct an analytical study of the reforms introduced by the British.
2. To examine the impact of the British-introduced reforms on the Indian education system.
3. To study the underlying intentions behind the reforms introduced by the British.

## 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research paper is based on historical facts and a descriptive study. To write this research paper an in-depth study conducted of books written by both Indian and foreign authors. Additionally, reports from various education commissions also examined. Other secondary sources—such as research papers by scholars, journal articles, theses, and government documents were also taken into account. All the documents provide an interesting and effective account of the reforms introduced by British rule. Some documents describe its positive aspects, while others highlight the negative aspects and even question the underlying intentions.

### Some major reforms introduced by the British in the Indian education system:

#### 1. Charter Act of 1813

The Charter Act of 1813 is an act passed by the British Parliament wherein the British defined their agenda for the next 20 years. Till then, the British had been concentrating mainly on the commerce sector and paying little heed to education. But after the passing of this act, they began to concentrate on the

education sector and started taking responsibilities regarding it. This act became highly successful in making educational reforms although it included many other areas such as business as well. Through this act, the British government allocated one lakh rupees per annum for education purposes. Although it was not a huge amount, it was the start of giving importance to education in this region. The passing of the Charter Act allowed free access of Christian missionaries into India to spread their religion. Apart from spreading their religion, they opened many schools and colleges, thus helping to develop English language and western culture and science-based attitude.

#### 2. Macaulay's Minute (1835)

The historic 'Minute' on education was given by Thomas Babington Macaulay in 1835. It became one of the greatest milestones of British rule in India and was a landmark document for the Indian education system. The document's most prominent characteristic was the promotion of English education, with the intention of bringing the Indian education system at par with the rest of the world. There is criticism among certain intellectuals against Macaulay for this step, who say that Macaulay had done it not because of any genuine motive for improving the education system of India, but simply out of personal interest. The shrewd administrator saw the Indian education system as inferior and thought that for its improvement, and thus for the development of Indians, interaction between Indian and foreign teachers and students was necessary. This will facilitate the transfer of educational thoughts and development of knowledge and skill through possibilities which would be realized through changing the Indian education system into English education system. Macaulay was of the opinion that modern subjects and sciences cannot be taught through regional languages. Hence, Macaulay felt the need for learning English as the medium of instructions for this purpose. As the British did not have the finances to impart English lessons to the whole nation, they chose only selected few people from the elite class who then propagated English to other people. Thus, the use of English language became popular among Indians and is now an integral part of the Indian education system. By learning English, the Indian population gained employment and also came to know about democratic ideas and liberty of people in the West. Thomas Babington Macaulay will always be remembered for his great contributions to the Indian education system. The Indians even today are benefitting through English and working for the well-being of mankind.

#### 3. Wood's Dispatch (1854)

In the year 1854, Sir Charles Wood presented a document regarding reforms in education to Governor-General Lord Dalhousie. This document is called "Wood's Despatch". This document is a historical one and has led to a drastic change in the Indian Education system and is thus regarded as "Magna Carta" of English education in India. Sir Charles Wood recommended that in primary education, teaching must be done in vernacular languages, but in secondary education, teaching must be done in both vernacular and English languages, whereas in the case of college education, only English will be

used as a means of teaching. This document was very helpful in encouraging the use of English language and female education in British India. One of the main purposes of this document was the creation of an English-speaking class which would help in the administration of the British affairs. The universities of Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras were founded in 1857 as per the recommendation of Wood's Despatch. Teacher training institutions were recommended by this document as well. Financial assistance should be provided to the affiliated private schools for promoting education according to Wood's Despatch.

#### 4. Establishment of Universities (1857)

The year 1857 is regarded as a golden period of higher education in India during the British era. During this year, the British created three distinguished universities which offered higher education in India; these universities were established according to the Wood's Despatch:

1. University of Calcutta - Founded on January 24, 1857 in Calcutta (Indian state West Bengal).
  2. University of Bombay - Founded on July 7, 1857 in Bombay (also known as Mumbai University, Indian state Maharashtra).
  3. University of Madras - Founded on September 5, 1857 in Madras (presently known as Chennai, Indian state Tamil Nadu).
- The establishment of these three universities brought many changes in the area of higher education in India. These universities were established after the pattern of University of London, and the medium of education was English, which helped improve the academic standards of students at an international level. The subjects covered included engineering, medicine, arts and science.

#### 5. Hunter Commission (1882)

The Hunter Commission was the first education commission in British India; it is also known as the Indian Education Commission. Hunter commission formed by Lord Ripon in 1882 under the chairmanship Sir William Hunter, after whom it was named. The commission was a significant initiative that brought about several important improvements to the Indian education system, particularly in primary and secondary education. Its primary objective was to review and evaluate the recommendations of the Wood's Despatch of 1854 and implement necessary changes. Although the Wood's Despatch had introduced various reforms, little tangible progress was observed in primary and secondary education; the Hunter Commission was established to address the remaining shortcomings. Some sources indicate that the commission's was restricted to primary and secondary education, with instructions not to interfere in university education.

#### The main recommendations of the Hunter Commission were as follows:

1. Greater emphasis should be placed on primary education.
2. Primary education should be imparted in the local language or mother tongue.
3. The management of primary education should be handed over to local bodies.

4. The Hunter Commission divided secondary education into two streams:
  - i. Literary education – intended for students wishing to pursue higher studies at the college or university level.
  - ii. Vocational education – intended for students aiming to secure employment.
5. The Hunter Commission emphasised women's education.
6. The commission suggested encouraging private institutions and recommended providing them with financial assistance.
7. Emphasis was placed on teacher training to ensure quality education.

#### 6. Indian Universities Commission (1902)

The Indian Universities Commission was set up by Lord Curzon in 1902 to study the state of higher education in India and to suggest changes for improvement. The commission was chaired by Sir Thomas Raleigh and is sometimes referred to as the Raleigh Commission. The commission noted that universities had become examination bodies rather than centres of teaching and research. The quality of education had deteriorated and affiliated colleges required supervision. In order to bring about improvement in the system, the commission suggested that there should be changes in the administration of the university, strict inspection of colleges, improved standards of teaching and increased emphasis on research work. The recommendations of the commission served as the basis of the Indian Universities Act of 1904. The purpose of the act was to improve the standard of higher education and the efficiency of the universities. However, these changes were opposed by many Indian leaders since they felt that the government was acquiring too much control over the universities. Thus, the Indian Universities Commission of 1902 played an important role in the development of higher education in India.

#### 7. Sadler Commission (1917-1919)

The Sadler Commission (1917-1919), also called the Calcutta University Commission, was established under the chairmanship of Michael Ernest Sadler by the British government to investigate and suggest solutions to the problems faced by the University of Calcutta. But its scope gradually widened and the commission investigated the whole educational system in India with a special focus on the relation of secondary and higher education. As the education provided to the students at the university is directly related to the standard of education that they get in their secondary schools, it is essential to provide 12 years of schooling before going to any university. Thus, one option is to make an independent institution called Intermediate Education by establishing intermediate colleges and education boards separately. Then a three-year-degree program can be pursued. Proper training of teachers and providing equal opportunities to both men and women are very important for the development of the educational system. Furthermore, the emphasis should be laid on practical education and science and technology. Universities should become centers of learning and research.

### 8. Hartog Committee

The Hartog Committee (1929) was set up by the British Government under the chairmanship of Sir Philip Hartog to look into the progress of education in India. This committee studied the status of primary, secondary, and higher education and pointed out many problems in the education system. But the foremost finding of this committee was that of wastage and stagnation in primary education. Many students used to leave before completing their education and many remained confined to the same class for a number of years. Instead of increasing the number of students, it recommended the improvement of the quality of primary education through improved training of teachers, school inspections, and teaching techniques. Regarding secondary education, it advocated the introduction of vocation and technical education so that the student may get a chance of employment and earning after completion of his studies. For secondary education, it also recommended the educational guidance for the students. As far as higher education is concerned, it recommended against the hasty growth of the universities and for maintaining high standards of education.

### 4. CONCLUSION

The educational reforms introduced during the time of the British regime had a very significant impact on the Indian education system. They paved the way for the establishment of modern education, scientific temper, organized schooling, and institutions of higher education in India. The spread of the English language helped to establish a link between the Indians and the rest of the world by making them familiar with the outside world through literature and knowledge. On the contrary, there were also certain negative impacts of British educational policies. Traditional Indian education systems, native languages, and native knowledge received less importance. The aim of education to a great extent remained confined to serving the purpose of administration only. Hence, it can be concluded that the education reforms of the British had a mixed effect on the Indian education system. It not only gave birth to the modern Indian education system but has its own merits and demerits as well.

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#### About the Author



**Abdul Rahaman** is a Research Scholar in the Department of Education at Glocal University, Saharanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India. His research interests include educational policy, teaching and learning methodologies, curriculum development, and contemporary issues in education. He is committed to advancing educational research and promoting quality education through scholarly inquiry.