

Education in Pre-Colonial India: Insight from Dharampal's Research

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Abstract:

India, since ancient times, has been known for its lofty human values and unique scientific traditions. Its worldview has always been inclusive, never perceiving the world as divided into nations but as one family. However, with the rise of European expansion around 1600 AD, this harmony began to be disturbed. The establishment of the East India Company marked the beginning of European economic and political dominance in India. Initially, their interests were purely commercial, confined to trade and the study of Indian governance. Indian philosophy, religion, scholarship, and education attracted little attention until they gained political control over vast territories. Over time, however, the British became intrigued by India's intellectual traditions and educational practices. The consolidation of British rule brought transformations across all aspects of Indian life, with education among the most deeply affected areas. Through the interference of the British in education, Indian education lost its autonomy and became subservient to political power. Hence, the education system brought by the British (colonial education) disconnected Indians from their rich cultural and intellectual history. In such a context, only a few visionaries made efforts to rediscover India's lost educational and cultural glory; among them, Dharampal was foremost. Deeply influenced by Gandhian thought, Dharampal Ji sought to expose the distortions introduced by colonial rule and inspire Indians to reclaim their civilizational identity. In the present study, the researchers have highlighted the situation of education in pre-colonial India explained by Dharampal ji. Destruction of the indigenous education system of India and steps to revive indigenous education have also been addressed by researchers.

Keywords: Dharampal, Indigenous education, Colonialism, Pre-colonial India, Orientalists & Occidentalists

1. Introduction:

Every nation in the world possesses a distinct identity shaped by its lifestyle, traditions, beliefs, and values, collectively known as its culture. Broadly, two major streams of thought have influenced world civilizations: the European and the Oriental (Prachya). The European worldview often seeks to impose its own ideals on others, sometimes through exploitation and violence, whereas the Oriental perspective

respects the uniqueness of every culture and encourages mutual coexistence and exchange. Change, in this sense, occurs organically, while each civilization's core identity remains intact.¹ India, since ancient times, has been known for its lofty human values and unique scientific traditions. Its worldview has always been inclusive, never perceiving the world as divided into nations but as one global family.

However, with the rise of European expansion around 1600 AD, this harmony began to be disturbed. The establishment of the East India Company marked the beginning of European economic and political dominance in India. Initially, their interests were purely commercial, confined to trade and the study of Indian governance. Indian philosophy, religion, scholarship, and education attracted little attention until they gained political control over vast territories.²

Over time, however, the British became intrigued by India's intellectual traditions and educational practices. The consolidation of British rule brought sweeping transformations across all aspects of Indian life, with education being one of the most deeply affected areas. Before British interference, indigenous education was widely prevalent and deeply rooted in the community. Schools existed in nearly every village³, and the *Gram Panchayat* held collective responsibility for ensuring the education of children.⁴

There were four primary forms of educational institutions during this period:⁵

1. Home-based learning – Many Brahmins imparted education to their disciples at their own residences.
2. Tols and Vidyapeeths – Located in cities, these institutions specialized in Sanskrit literature and higher learning.
3. Madrasas and Maktabas – Focused on the study of Urdu and Persian for Muslim students.
4. Pathshalas – Village-level schools that provided primary education to children of all communities.

With the advent of British rule, these traditional systems began to decline. To meet their economic and administrative objectives, the British systematically dismantled indigenous education and introduced a new colonial education system. The purpose of this system was not the intellectual or moral development of Indians but the creation of a class of people who would serve as intermediaries, loyal to the colonial rulers and alienated from their own heritage. Through this process, Indian education lost its autonomy and became subservient to political power. Modern colonial education disconnected Indians from their rich cultural and intellectual history. In such a context, only a few visionaries made efforts to rediscover India's lost educational and cultural glory; one of the foremost among them was Dharampal. Indians remain indebted to Dharampal Ji for bringing to light the true picture of India's pre-colonial education system.⁶

¹ Dharampal, *Ramaniya Vriksha: 18-vin Shatabdi mein Bharatiya Siksha*, trans. Rajnikant Joshi and Kṛṣṇpal Singh Bhadauria (Ahmedabad: Punarutthan Trust, 2007), 13.

² Dharampal, *The Beautiful Tree: Indigenous Indian Education in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. J. K. Bajaj and M. D. Srinivas (Bengaluru: Rashtrottana Sahitya in association with Centre for Policy Studies, 2021), 3.

³ Pramod Kumar and J. K. Bajaj, eds., *Dharampal Prasang: A Tribute on His Birth Centenary* (New Delhi: Indian Institute of Mass Communication, 2022), 33.

⁴ Pt. Sunderlal Sharma, *Bharat Mein Angreji Raj* (Allahabad: Onkaar Press, 1938), chap. 36.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Sahana Singh, *Revisiting Educational Heritage Of India* (Vitasta Publication, 2023), 221.

Born on 19 February 1922 in Muzaffarnagar district of Uttar Pradesh, Dharampal Ji was a remarkable historian and researcher who devoted his life to uncovering India's authentic past. Through meticulous archival research, he demonstrated that before the colonial period, India's social, economic, and educational systems were highly developed, self-sustaining, and people-oriented. He revealed how the British systematically disrupted these indigenous structures, replacing them with institutions that served colonial interests and undermined Indian creativity, self-confidence, and originality.

Deeply influenced by Gandhian thought, Dharampal Ji sought to expose the distortions introduced by colonial rule and inspire Indians to reclaim their civilizational identity. He believed that reconnecting with India's foundational values could enable the nation to rebuild itself and contribute uniquely to global progress. Over more than four decades of research, Dharampal Ji unearthed extensive archival material from India and abroad, providing documentary evidence of India's educational vitality during the 18th and 19th centuries. Following the journalistic maxim "*नामूलं लिखते किंचित*" (do not write anything without proof)⁷, his work stood as a factual counter to the colonial narrative that portrayed pre-British India as backward.

Through his seminal works, particularly *The Beautiful Tree*, Dharampal Ji highlighted a realistic and inspiring picture of India's indigenous education system, challenging the long-held misconceptions perpetuated by colonial historians. His research remains a guiding light for those seeking to understand India's intellectual heritage and revive its traditional systems of knowledge.

Survey of Indigenous Education:

Before formulating their own educational policies, the British undertook surveys to study the existing indigenous education system in India. These surveys were conducted in the Madras, Bengal, Bihar, and Punjab Presidencies to assess the state of schooling and the extent of literacy.

- The Madras Presidency Survey (1822–1825) was conducted by Sir Thomas Munro.
- William Adam carried out the Bengal and Bihar Surveys (1835).
- G. W. Leitner conducted the Punjab Survey (1865).

Among these, the Madras survey was the most detailed and systematic, providing accurate figures on the number of schools, students, and the caste-wise distribution of learners.⁸

During the 19th century, the Madras Presidency included the following linguistic regions:⁹

- Oriya-speaking region: Ganjam district
- Telugu-speaking region: Vizagapatam, Rajahmundry, Masulipatam, Guntoor, Nellore, and Cuddapah

⁷ Dharampal, *Ramaniya Vriksha: 18-vin Shatabdi mein Bharatiya Siksha*, trans. Rajnikant Joshi and Kṛṣṇpal Singh Bhadauria (Ahmedabad: Punarutthan Trust, 2007), 13.

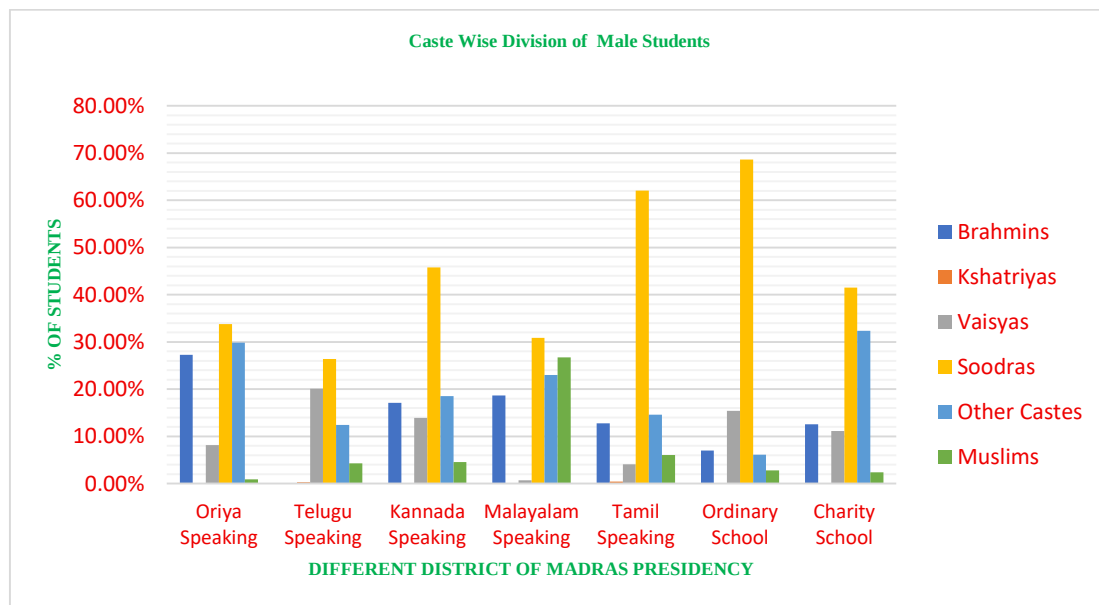
⁸ Pramod Kumar and J. K. Bajaj, eds., *Dharampal Prasang: A Tribute on His Birth Centenary* (New Delhi: Indian Institute of Mass Communication, 2022), 32.

⁹ Dharampal, *The Beautiful Tree: Indigenous Indian Education in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. J. K. Bajaj and M. D. Srinivas (Bengaluru: Rashtrottana Sahitya in association with Centre for Policy Studies, 2021), 22.

- Kannada-speaking region: Bellary and Seringapatam
- Malayalam-speaking region: Malabar district
- Tamil-speaking region: North Arcot, South Arcot, Chingleput, Tanjore, Trichnopoly, Madura, Tinnevely, Coimbatore, and Salem

The survey revealed a remarkable spread of education across these regions, with thousands of schools functioning in villages and towns. The data also reflected caste-wise representation of male students, showing that education was accessible to various social groups, not confined to any single caste or community. This extensive network of indigenous schools highlighted the vitality and inclusiveness of India's pre-colonial education system, a reality that contradicted the colonial portrayal of India as illiterate and uncivilized. Figure 1 represents the caste wise % of male students in the presidency of Madras:

Figure 1: Caste Wise Division of Male Students in the districts of Madras Presidency



Source: Dharampal, *The Beautiful Tree: Indigenous Indian Education in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. J. K. Bajaj and M. D. Srinivas (Bengaluru: Rashtrotthana Sahitya in association with Centre for Policy Studies, 2021), 22–23.

Description of Figure 1:

The data presented in Figure 1 provides a detailed picture of the distribution of schools and male students across various linguistic regions of the Madras Presidency during the early nineteenth century. It also reflects the remarkable inclusiveness of the indigenous education system, which embraced learners from diverse social and religious backgrounds.

- ✓ In the Oriya-speaking region, there were 225 schools with a total of 2,965 students. Among them, 27.25% were Brahmins, 8.24% were Vaishyas, 33.76% were Soodras, 29.88% belonged to other castes, and 0.91% were Muslims. Notably, there were no Kshatriya students recorded in the schools of this region.

- ✓ In the Telugu-speaking region, education was much more widespread, with 3,454 schools and 38,160 students enrolled. Of these students, 38.40% were Brahmins, 0.31% Kshatriyas, 20.11% Vaishyas, 26.40% Soodras, 12.46% from other castes, and 4.29% were Muslims. This data demonstrates a diverse and vibrant educational participation among different social groups.
- ✓ In the Kannada-speaking region, there were 551 schools with 7,194 students. The student composition comprised 17.13% Brahmins, 13.95% Vaishyas, 45.80% Soodras, 18.51% other castes, and 4.57% Muslims. Similar to the Oriya region, no Kshatriya students were reported here either.
- ✓ The Malayalam-speaking region recorded 759 schools with 11,963 students. Of these, 18.64% were Brahmins, 30.90% Soodras, 23.03% from other castes, and 26.71% Muslims, while no Kshatriya students were documented. This again shows a considerable proportion of learners from non-elite castes and the Muslim community.
- ✓ In the Tamil-speaking region, education was even more extensive, with 6,234 schools educating 87,367 students. Among these, 12.75% were Brahmins, 0.42% Kshatriyas, 4.12% Vaishyas, 62.03% Soodras, 14.59% from other castes, and 6.06% Muslims. The overwhelming representation of Soodra students in this region is particularly significant, indicating broad-based access to education.

In addition to these, the Madras Presidency also recorded two special categories of schools: Ordinary Schools and Charity Schools.

- ✓ In the Ordinary Schools, 5,109 students were enrolled, comprising 7.00% Brahmins, 15.44% Vaishyas, 68.62% Soodras, 6.12% other castes, and 2.79% Muslims, with no Kshatriya students.
- ✓ The Charity Schools had 414 students, among whom 12.56% were Brahmins, 11.11% Vaishyas, 41.54% Soodras, 32.36% other castes, and 2.41% Muslims, again with no Kshatriya representation.

The overall analysis of this data offers a striking revelation. Contrary to the commonly held belief that education in pre-colonial India was limited to the so-called “twice-born” or upper castes, the reality was far more inclusive. In many districts of the Madras Presidency, Soodras and other marginalized castes actually formed the majority of the student population. This evidence challenges the colonial and postcolonial narrative that portrayed indigenous education as elitist and exclusionary.

Hence, based on the above data, it can be asserted that the indigenous education system of 18th-century India was inclusive, community-oriented, and accessible to learners across caste and religious lines. Students from different social backgrounds studied together, reflecting a harmonious and egalitarian approach to education deeply embedded in Indian tradition.

Age of Enrollment, Daily Timing, and Books Used

In traditional Indian education, children typically began their formal learning at an early age, reflecting both cultural customs and practical considerations. The average age of enrollment was around five years. In certain regions, such as the district of Rajahmundry, there were even auspicious traditions associated with the commencement of schooling; it was considered ideal for a boy to begin his education on the fifth

day of the fifth month of his fifth year.¹⁰ However, variations existed across regions and social groups. In the Cuddapah district, for instance, children from higher castes generally began their education between the ages of five and six. In contrast, those from lower castes started a little later, usually between six and eight years of age.¹¹ In areas like Nellore and Salem, the starting age ranged from three to six years, depending on family customs and the child's individual readiness.¹² The total duration of schooling also differed considerably, lasting anywhere from five years to as long as fifteen years, depending on the level of learning pursued. The daily routine in these traditional schools, whether *pathshalas* or *gurukuls*, was both disciplined and comprehensive. Classes generally began early in the morning, around 6 a.m., and continued until sunset, with short intervals for meals and rest.¹³ Education was seen as an all-day pursuit, blending study, recitation, and practical activities. In some regions, the school timings were adjusted according to seasonal and agricultural cycles, ensuring that children could assist their families during periods of intensive farming.

This structure demonstrated the flexibility and community-oriented nature of traditional Indian education. Learning was not confined to fixed hours or rigid structures; rather, it was integrated with the rhythm of daily life. Children usually began their education between the ages of five and seven, depending on their maturity and family circumstances, and were gradually trained in reading, writing, arithmetic, and moral instruction through the use of locally relevant books and oral traditions.

Method and Content of Education:

In the traditional Indian education system of the 18th century, the method of teaching was systematic and gradual. Dharampal ji has written that during the initial 8 to 10 days of schooling, children began their learning journey by practicing the writing of vowels and consonants. They first traced letters on the ground with their fingers or wrote them on slates. As they advanced, they started using pencils or white clay (*khadiya*), and later, ink pens on palm leaves. In the first year, students were taught to combine consonants to form words, pronounce the alphabet correctly, and engage in basic literacy and numeracy activities. They learned counting, simple calculations involving weights and measures, and the art of expressing gratitude—reflecting moral and value-based learning. Students also practiced writing the names of important people, objects, and places, which helped them connect education with their immediate environment.¹⁴ The curriculum was locally relevant. In rural areas, education was centered around arithmetic, field measurement, and agricultural accounting, equipping learners with practical skills for village life. In urban settings, the focus shifted to business-related arithmetic, bookkeeping, and narrative writing, aligning with commercial needs. Alongside these, students practiced recitation and memorization of poems, enhancing both linguistic and aesthetic abilities.¹⁵

The books and texts that Dharampal ji identified from this period were deeply rooted in Indian society, civilization, and cultural tradition. The core subjects taught were Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic, while

¹⁰ Dharampal, *The Beautiful Tree: Indigenous Indian Education in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. J. K. Bajaj and M. D. Srinivas (Bengaluru: Rashtrottthana Sahitya in association with Centre for Policy Studies, 2021), 25.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 26

¹⁴ Dharampal, *Bharat Ka Swadharm* (Vagdevi Prakashan, 2019), 37.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

the most widely used texts included the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and *Bhagavata Purana*.¹⁶ For children belonging to artisan and manufacturing communities, texts like *Vishvakarma Purana* were used, reflecting vocational relevance. Grammar (*Vyakaran*) was also an important component of study, and lighter literary works such as the *Panchatantra* were included to foster moral understanding and storytelling skills.¹⁷

The educational texts of 18th-century India thus reflected a harmonious blend of cultural, religious, and practical learning. They were designed not only to impart knowledge and skills but also to cultivate ethical, social, and spiritual values, integrating education with life itself.

Destruction of Indigenous Education:

From 1757 onwards, the British debated for a century whether educating Indians would support or threaten their rule. Initially, most British officials opposed Indian education. However, by the late 18th century, differing opinions emerged due to two significant challenges. **First**, the decline in the number of educated Indians created a shortage of qualified individuals to fill government roles, which were essential for administration. **Second**, the British needed intermediaries to bridge the gap between the government and the Indian people. Additionally, some British leaders saw education as a means to promote Christianity in India, aided by translating Christian texts into local languages, tolerating missionaries from England, and funding mission schools.

By the early 19th century, those favoring Indian education debated what form it should take. Two groups emerged: the Orientalists, who advocated teaching ancient Indian literature, science, and classical languages like Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic; and the Occidentalists, who promoted English education, including Western literature and science.¹⁸ This debate continued for years until Lord Macaulay arrived in 1834. Macaulay dismissed the value of ancient Indian knowledge and championed English education, aiming to suppress nationalist sentiments among Indians and mold them into instruments for sustaining British rule. After extensive deliberation, the British concluded that providing English education to a select few Indians was crucial to maintaining their empire. The lives and attitudes of Indians educated in this system reflect the calculated success of Macaulay's policies. Consequently, a country once renowned for its educational excellence became, after 150 years of foreign rule, one of the most educationally backward nations among those considered "civilized."

Conclusion:

It is generally assumed that the British introduced the education system to India, significantly impacting the country's educational landscape by bringing in new concepts like science, literature, and technology, which were previously not widely accessible in the traditional Indian education system. It is also said that education was not accessible to all communities and limited to upper castes of the society only but as we see from Table 1 in Madras Presidency there were many districts where soodra children in large numbers were taking education. These types of misconceptions are due to the misinformation spread by people to defame India. When British systematically dismantled India's indigenous education system and imposed

¹⁶ Dharampal, *The Beautiful Tree: Indigenous Indian Education in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. J. K. Bajaj and M. D. Srinivas (Bengaluru: Rashtrottthana Sahitya in association with Centre for Policy Studies, 2021), 26.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 28

¹⁸ B L Grover and Alka Mehta, *A New Look at Modern Indian History, From 1707 To Modern Times*, 32nd Ed., (New Delhi: S Chand And Company Limited, 2018), 258.

their narrative on Indian society, art, literature, and religious texts the people of India believed blindly on Britishers narrative and didn't try to discover the truth. In their kingship they dictated how Indian sacred texts were to be read, how art was to be understood, and how history was to be interpreted. The essence of this indoctrination was to instill forgetfulness—to prevent Indians from questioning their past and to impose the British narrative as truth. Indians were led to believe that the British interpretations accurately represented their heritage, which many accepted without question. We must reconnect with our past to be free from this imposed narrative. Dharampal Ji dedicated his life to uncovering the true strengths and weaknesses of Indian society, gathering vast amounts of data from both India and sources from abroad. His work provides a foundation for reclaiming our intellectual and cultural heritage.

To restore this knowledge and strength, the following steps are essential:

1. University boards of studies and academic councils should deliberate on this subject and integrate relevant content into academic curricula.
2. Universities should create textbooks through their textbook centers that focus on indigenous knowledge and history.
3. Regular workshops and seminars should be organized to explore and discuss these topics.
4. Activities like drama, poster presentations, and debates should be conducted for students to deepen their engagement with the subject
5. Awareness campaigns should be launched to educate communities about India's rich heritage and knowledge systems.
6. Educational materials in oral formats should be developed for school-level students to make this knowledge accessible.

By implementing these steps, we can revive our understanding of India's indigenous knowledge systems and foster a sense of pride and self-awareness in future generations.

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