

[February 2, 1835] This Day in History

2 February 1835

Macaulay's Minute on Indian Education

What happened?



Thomas Babington Macaulay

On 2 February 1835, British historian and politician Thomas Babington Macaulay presented his 'Minute on Indian Education' that sought to establish the need to impart English education to Indian 'natives'.

This minute is a very important document for UPSC history. Aspirants should know the gist of this minute and its impact on Indian education and society for the IAS exam.

Background

- British education policy in colonial India was initially almost non-existent as their sole purpose was to make profit through trade and other means. Gradually, the importance of education was appreciated and the company started building a few institutes of higher learning. These learning centres taught Indian subjects in languages like Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian. Persian was the court language too.
- The Charter Act of 1813 was the first concrete step towards modern education in the country. This act set aside an annual sum of Rs.1 lakh to be used in educating the 'subjects'.
- One must note that missionaries were already present in the country and they were involved in this field as well. However, they chiefly imparted religious education and their primary motive was Christianizing the 'heathen' natives.
- After the Charter Act, there was a split among the British regarding the mode of education to be imparted to Indians. While the orientalist believed that Indians should be educated in their own languages and taught their own scriptures and texts, the other group decided that English education was the best kind to be imparted.
- It was in the midst of this that Macaulay landed in India in June 1834, as the President of the General Committee of Public Instruction (GCPI).
- Macaulay was a proud Englishman convinced of his own nation's greatness and achievements, which he considered the best whether it was in the sciences or the arts. Nothing wrong with that, except that he was

perhaps too prejudiced to see things from a different perspective. His famous minute will reveal his scant regard for anything Indian.

- In his minute on education, he justified the use of English as the medium of instruction, and also the teaching of western education to Indians.
- He lampooned Indian knowledge and languages and thought them completely worthless. For instance, he said of Indian literature:

“...a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.”

- He also believed that western science was far superior to Indian knowledge. *“It is, I believe, no exaggeration to say that all the historical information which has been collected from all the books written in the Sanskrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgments used at preparatory schools in England.”*
- Of course, one must remember that these were not just his own ideas or opinions. He was merely reiterating what many in the west thought then.
- Macaulay wanted the government to spend money only on imparting western education and not on oriental education. He advocated the shutting down of all colleges where only eastern philosophy and subjects were taught.
- He also advocated that the government try to educate only a few Indians, who would in turn teach the rest of the masses. This is called the ‘downward filtration’ policy.
- He wanted to create a pool of Indians who would be able to serve British interests and be loyal to them. This class would be *“Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.”*
- Macaulay’s proposals were promptly accepted by Lord William Bentinck, but he cleverly deferred its implementation until he was to relinquish his post as governor-general. Bentinck perhaps wanted to avoid a backlash from some quarters. He nevertheless, did not shut down oriental learning completely as proposed by Macaulay.
- Macaulay’s proposals were officially sanctioned in March 1835. In 1837, English was made the court language. In 1844, high government posts were open to Indians.
- Later the Wood’s Despatch in 1854 regularised British efforts for education in India.
- Macaulay obviously won the debate against the orientalist. It would not be an exaggeration to say that he set the tone of education in India for good.
- In his minute, he had said that a day could come when the vernacular languages would die a natural death. Today, he has been proved wrong. The number of people who use these languages is increasing by the day. The literature in these languages is also expanding and evolving.
- He has of course been successful in creating a class of Indians who have taken to the English language enthusiastically. Many in the country use it as a first language although this number is small.
- It could be argued that moral victory is with the Indians in this English versus native debate. Whether Macaulay was able to make Englishmen out of Indians is debatable, but the English language has been conveniently Indianised and altered to such an extent that sometimes it is hardly discerned by the native English!