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## Review Paper

## Indian Responses and Reform Movements

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the evolution of education in colonial India (1857–1947) as a complex terrain of ideological conflict, resistance, and reform. Under British rule, education was deliberately designed as a tool of control, promoting Western values and marginalizing indigenous knowledge systems. In response, visionary Indian leaders—Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Rabindranath Tagore, and Mahatma Gandhi—developed diverse critiques and alternative educational models rooted in Indian values, culture, and self-reliance. Movements such as the National Education Movement and the Wardha Scheme (Nai Talim) represented a concerted effort to decolonize the curriculum and redefine education as a vehicle for moral regeneration, national pride, and political awakening. Through literary resistance, student boycotts, and the establishment of indigenous institutions, Indian society actively challenged the cultural imperialism of colonial pedagogy. The legacies of these reform efforts—while varied in influence—played a foundational role in shaping post-independence education policy and continue to inform contemporary debates on identity, equity, and educational autonomy in India.

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### INTRODUCTION

Introduction-Education, as a sociopolitical tool, played a central role in the colonial and post-colonial struggle of India. During British rule, the introduction of a foreign curriculum, primarily aimed at producing a class of intermediaries loyal to the colonial state, was met with mixed reactions. While some Indian elites embraced Western education, others resisted it either in part or in totality. Significantly, a number of visionary Indian leaders—Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Mahatma Gandhi, and Rabindranath Tagore—led the intellectual resistance to the colonial educational model, proposing in its place a curriculum deeply rooted in Indian values, culture, and needs. Their thoughts and actions were complemented by indigenous initiatives

such as the National Education Movement and the Wardha Scheme of Education, which sought to redefine learning as a transformative and nationalist process.

The colonial era in India, particularly between 1857 and 1947, was a transformative period for the Indian education system. As the British tightened their grip on the Indian subcontinent following the Revolt of 1857, education emerged not merely as a tool of enlightenment but as an instrument of governance and ideological control. The nature, purpose, and reach of education were profoundly reshaped during this ninety-year span, reflecting both the aspirations of colonial rulers and the resistance of a colonized society seeking self-definition. The period witnessed the gradual evolution of education from traditional systems rooted in

indigenous knowledge to a Western-style model that prioritized English language, British history, and European sciences. British educational policies were not neutral; they were deeply intertwined with political motives to create a class of intermediaries, loyal to the Crown, yet Indian in blood and colour. This policy, famously articulated in Macaulay's Minute on Indian Education (1835), continued to cast a long shadow on subsequent developments.

This explores the multifaceted role played by these leaders, the indigenous educational movements they inspired or supported, and the broader resistance to the colonial curriculum. Through their educational philosophies and practical efforts, they laid the foundation for a nationalist vision of education—one which recognized learning as integral not just to economic advancement, but to civilizational revival, moral reawakening, and political emancipation.

### **Raja Ram Mohan Roy and the Foundations of Modern Indian Education**

Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833), often hailed as the "Father of the Indian Renaissance," was one of the earliest and most influential Indian reformers who sought to reconcile traditional Indian learning with the demands of the modern age. His vision of education was deeply tied to social reform, scientific inquiry, and rationality. Living during a period when Indian society was weighed down by social customs like sati, child marriage, and caste rigidity, Roy believed that education was the most effective means to awaken the Indian conscience. Unlike later leaders who would become deeply skeptical of colonial intentions in the educational realm, Roy initially welcomed British intervention in education. He advocated for the teaching of Western science and rational thought in English, as opposed to the traditional Sanskrit-based education that focused largely on theology, metaphysics, and classical grammar.

In 1825, he established the Hindu College in Calcutta (later Presidency College), which became a hub for Western learning in India. His demand for English-based education led him to write to Lord Amherst in 1823, pleading for state support for Western education. However, Roy's vision was not of wholesale Westernization. He did not reject Indian culture, but rather sought to purge it of what he saw as superstition and stagnation. He promoted a synthesis of Eastern spirituality and Western scientific rationalism. His engagement with education was thus both modernist and reformist, aimed at creating an enlightened citizenry capable of rational thought, scientific inquiry, and moral uprightness. In this sense, he laid the intellectual groundwork for future debates over education, nationalism, and colonialism.

### **Bal Gangadhar Tilak: Education as National Awakening**

In sharp contrast to Roy's relatively conciliatory position toward colonial education, Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856–1920) viewed the colonial educational system as an instrument of cultural imperialism. For Tilak, education was not merely a

means for personal advancement but a tool for national awakening and political resistance. He believed that the British curriculum, by ignoring Indian history, culture, and moral values, deliberately aimed to produce a population that was alienated from its roots and hence easier to govern.

Tilak's vision of education was founded on the ideals of Swadeshi (self-reliance) and Swaraj (self-rule). He believed that Indians should control the content, institutions, and direction of their own education. In 1880, he co-founded the Deccan Education Society and later the Fergusson College in Pune, which became an important center for nationalist thought. These institutions focused on instilling pride in Indian civilization, while also offering scientific and modern education.

Tilak strongly opposed the Anglicized curriculum promoted by Lord Macaulay. He condemned the denigration of Indian scriptures, languages, and historical figures in colonial textbooks. He emphasized the importance of Sanskrit and Marathi as mediums of instruction and considered the study of Indian epics like the Bhagavad Gita essential for moral and civic education.[3]

Education for Tilak was a preparatory ground for political resistance. He popularized the phrase, "Swaraj is my birthright, and I shall have it," not merely through speeches and newspapers, but through a system of nationalist education that promoted self-respect, cultural pride, and political activism. By linking education to nationalism, Tilak significantly altered the discourse of colonial resistance /

### **Rabindranath Tagore: Education as Liberation of the Soul**

Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), Nobel laureate and founder of the Visva-Bharati University at Santiniketan, developed a unique educational philosophy that rejected both the rigidity of traditional Indian pedagogy and the mechanistic character of British colonial education. For Tagore, education was the liberation of the soul, the realization of beauty, truth, and harmony in human life.

Tagore was deeply critical of the British educational system, which he saw as lifeless, utilitarian, and coercive. He believed that it destroyed creativity and imposed rote learning. His own experiences at school were unhappy, and he often referred to the schools as "mills of conformity." In contrast, his vision of education was built on the ideals of freedom, creativity, and self-realization. He emphasized the role of nature, art, music, and literature in the formation of the child's mind and spirit. At Santiniketan, Tagore implemented his ideas by creating an open-air school where children were encouraged to learn through exploration and interaction with nature. The curriculum included Bengali literature, Sanskrit, music, philosophy, world cultures, and modern sciences. He promoted mother tongue instruction and was a strong advocate for cultural synthesis—not merely importing Western ideas but blending them with Eastern traditions to foster universal humanism.[4]

Tagore also saw education as a means of resisting colonial cultural hegemony. He insisted that Indians needed to rediscover the spiritual and aesthetic dimensions of their culture, which had been marginalized by the utilitarian focus of British education. His school became a model for alternative education not only in India but across the world, influencing thinkers like Maria Montessori and Mahatma Gandhi.

### **Mahatma Gandhi and the Wardha Scheme: Education for Self-Reliance**

Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) had perhaps the most radical critique of colonial education. His disillusionment with Western education systems is most clearly articulated in his 1937 address at Chatham House and in his seminal work, *Hind Swaraj* (1909), where he argued that British education had enslaved Indians mentally and morally. Gandhi saw colonial education as a tool for creating a dependent, elite class that would serve British interests rather than national or village welfare.

In 1937, at the national education conference held at Wardha, Gandhi proposed an alternative model of education called the Wardha Scheme or *Nai Talim* (New Education). This scheme emphasized basic education through productive manual work, particularly handicrafts. The idea was not only to impart literacy but also to instill dignity of labor, self-reliance, and a spirit of cooperation among children. Gandhi envisioned education as intimately tied to rural reconstruction, moral development, and national self-sufficiency.[5]

The Wardha Scheme included mother tongue instruction, integration of education with work, and focus on character-building rather than mere information dissemination. For Gandhi, true education could never be neutral; it had to serve the cause of social justice, economic independence, and spiritual upliftment. He criticized colonial schools for ignoring Indian history, religion, and languages, and for promoting a sense of inferiority among Indians.

The scheme found institutional expression in institutions like the Sevagram Ashram and was later partially adopted in post-independence educational reforms. Despite criticism from some quarters for romanticizing rural life, Gandhi's educational philosophy deeply influenced nationalist thought and grassroots mobilization in colonial India.

### **The National Education Movement: Building a System of Self-Reliance**

The National Education Movement emerged as a direct response to the cultural and political alienation fostered by the British educational system in India. While individual leaders like Roy, Tilak, Tagore, and Gandhi critiqued colonial education from different ideological perspectives, the early twentieth century witnessed a consolidated, organized movement to create indigenous alternatives. This collective effort aimed at crafting a national educational framework that would reflect the needs, values, and aspirations of the Indian people.

The Swadeshi Movement of 1905 acted as a major catalyst for the National Education Movement. Following the partition of Bengal by Lord Curzon, the political mood in India grew increasingly militant and anti-imperialist. The boycott of British goods extended naturally to the boycott of British institutions, including schools and universities. Indian leaders began calling for the establishment of national schools, colleges, and universities that would reject British control and promote indigenous knowledge systems, Indian languages, and patriotic values.[6]

One of the earliest and most prominent institutions of this movement was the National Council of Education (NCE), formed in 1906 in Bengal. Its objective was to develop a system of education that combined scientific knowledge with Indian culture and values. It received support from nationalist leaders like Aurobindo Ghosh, Satish Chandra Mukherjee, and Rabindranath Tagore. Institutions like Jadavpur University, which eventually grew out of the NCE, exemplified the movement's goal to build technically proficient and culturally rooted educational spaces.

This movement was not limited to Bengal. In Pune, Tilak's Deccan Education Society became a model for nationalist pedagogy. In Punjab, the Dayanand Anglo-Vedic (DAV) institutions combined Vedic teachings with modern science. In Gujarat and other regions, nationalist leaders set up alternative schools that operated independently of government funding or oversight. These schools emphasized moral instruction, national pride, and service to society.

The National Education Movement also emphasized Indian languages as mediums of instruction, resisting the Anglicization of Indian education. It sought to empower students to understand their history and culture, promote vocational training, and include ethics and philosophy in curricula—subjects conspicuously absent from colonial syllabi. Though the British attempted to suppress these initiatives through administrative and financial control, the spirit of national education persisted and became a cornerstone of the freedom struggle.

### **The Wardha Scheme and Nai Talim: A Blueprint for Decolonizing Education**

As a culmination of earlier efforts and Gandhian philosophy, the Wardha Scheme of Education presented in 1937 marked a watershed moment in indigenous educational thought. Conceived during the Indian National Congress's efforts to chart a future course for independent India, the Wardha Scheme—also known as Basic Education or *Nai Talim*—was an educational model deeply rooted in Indian realities. Gandhi's emphasis on craft-centered education was revolutionary in both pedagogy and politics. The scheme proposed that children should learn through productive work, such as spinning, weaving, or carpentry, integrated into the school curriculum. This was not meant to replace academic learning, but to contextualize it—students would learn math through measuring cloth, language through describing their

work, and science through understanding the tools and materials they used.

### Nai Talim had three key principles:

**1. Education through craft:** Learning was linked to dignity of labor and self-sufficiency. Gandhi sought to dissolve the traditional disdain for manual labor entrenched by the caste system and reinforced by colonial education.

**2. Mother-tongue instruction:** Rejecting English as a medium of learning, Gandhi insisted that early education be given in the child's mother tongue, both for accessibility and cultural coherence.

**3. Character building over literacy:** Gandhi believed that literacy was not synonymous with education. True education involved the moral and ethical development of a child. Nai Talim focused on truth, non-violence, cooperation, and social service.

The Zakir Husain Committee was appointed to draft the educational program based on Gandhi's ideas, and it submitted a comprehensive report outlining how this system could be practically implemented. The scheme was introduced in several regions, with varied degrees of success, but faced resistance from elite urban families who considered it "anti-modern" or "backward." Critics claimed that it lacked academic rigor and failed to prepare students for competitive careers. Nevertheless, the Wardha Scheme had a profound ideological impact. It challenged the colonial notion of education as a mere pipeline for clerical jobs and reoriented it toward empowerment, rural upliftment, and nation-building. Its legacy endured in later educational commissions and remains influential in alternative education systems in post-colonial India.

### Rejection and Resistance to the Colonial Curriculum

The British colonial curriculum in India was designed with a strategic intent—to produce a class of individuals who were Indian in appearance but English in thought and values. This class would act as intermediaries between the rulers and the ruled. The most famous articulation of this goal came from Thomas Babington Macaulay's 1835 Minute on Indian Education, which dismissed traditional Indian learning and promoted English as the medium of education. Over time, this curriculum became increasingly alienating. It prioritized British literature and history while neglecting Indian languages, culture, and contributions. The British portrayal of India's past as backward and despotic further eroded national pride. In response, several waves of resistance emerged.

#### 1. Cultural Nationalism in the Curriculum

Resistance began through a revival of interest in Indian history, philosophy, and literature. Nationalist historians like R.C. Dutt, K.P. Jayaswal, and Jadunath Sarkar challenged the colonial narrative of Indian decline, instead highlighting periods of Indian greatness. Similarly, thinkers like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Swami Vivekananda urged youth to

read the Vedas, Upanishads, and the Bhagavad Gita as sources of moral strength and national pride.

By including Indian content in parallel syllabi and promoting indigenous languages, this cultural counter-curriculum became a form of intellectual resistance. Numerous vernacular newspapers and journals such as *Kesari*, *The Hindu*, and *Amrita Bazar Patrika* exposed students to ideas omitted in colonial education.

#### 2. Student Movements and Boycotts

During the height of the Swadeshi movement, student activism against colonial education reached its peak. In Bengal, thousands of students left government-aided institutions to join nationalist schools. The Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22) saw massive boycotts of government schools and colleges. Influenced by Gandhi's call, many students joined the national movement, embracing the idea that education must serve the cause of independence, not the interests of the British Empire.[8]

Universities like *Jamia Millia Islamia* (founded in 1920) and *Kashi Vidyapith* (founded in 1921) emerged as centers of nationalist education, distancing themselves from government control. These institutions were not merely educational centers but symbols of cultural and political resistance.

### 3. LITERARY RESISTANCE

Indian writers, poets, and playwrights also used literature as a weapon to challenge colonial education and its underlying ideology. Rabindranath Tagore's novels like *Gora* and *The Home and the World* explored tensions between tradition and modernity, East and West, and critiqued the limits of colonial "modernity." Subramanian Bharati's poetry in Tamil evoked nationalist sentiments and pride in Indian identity. Prem Chand, writing in Hindi and Urdu, critiqued the alienation caused by colonial education among peasants and urban youth alike. Through satire, storytelling, and essays, Indian writers dismantled the myth of British moral and cultural superiority. They depicted the real India—its sufferings, aspirations, and resistance—and thus educated a generation in national consciousness outside the classroom.

#### Legacy and Post-Independence Reflections

By the time India gained independence in 1947, the nationalist critique of colonial education had reshaped the discourse on learning and policy-making. Indian leaders recognized that the colonial legacy had to be dismantled and replaced by an education system aligned with democratic values, development needs, and cultural resurgence. The post-independence government, led by leaders deeply influenced by Gandhian and nationalist educational ideals, undertook significant reforms. The University Education Commission (1948–49) under Dr. S. Radhakrishnan and the Secondary Education Commission (1952–53) emphasized Indian values, national integration, and scientific temper.



Language policies were reoriented to support Indian languages, and efforts were made to promote rural education. However, the tension between mass education and elite aspirations persisted. English retained its dominance in higher education, and private schooling created class divides. While the Gandhian model was institutionally marginalized, its emphasis on holistic development, dignity of labor, and ethical instruction found expression in alternative schools and NGOs. Tagore's legacy lived on in open schools and cultural education programs. Tilak's demand for historical pride and Swadeshi values influenced curriculum content. Roy's embrace of modernity remained foundational in shaping secular, scientific education in India. The nationalist struggle for educational autonomy thus left a complex yet enduring legacy. The story of Indian education during the colonial period is not merely one of subjugation but of resistance, creativity, and vision. Indian leaders like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Tilak, Gandhi, and Tagore not only critiqued colonial education but also reimagined what education could mean in a free and culturally rooted society. Their ideas shaped educational movements that challenged colonial hegemony and proposed alternative systems aligned with Indian realities. The Wardha Scheme and National Education Movement were not just policy initiatives but revolutionary acts of defiance. Through student boycotts, indigenous institutions, vernacular literature, and cultural revival, India mounted a comprehensive resistance to the colonial curriculum.

Though independence marked the formal end of British control, the intellectual and ideological struggle over education continues even today. The vision of these leaders remains relevant as India navigates the challenges of globalization, cultural identity, and inclusive development. Their legacy is a reminder that education is not just about acquiring skills—it is about shaping minds, societies, and nations.

## CONCLUSION

The period of British colonial rule in India witnessed a wide spectrum of responses from Indian society, ranging from collaboration and accommodation to resistance and reform. These responses were not monolithic but deeply rooted in the complex socio-cultural, economic, and political landscape of the time. The 19th and early 20th centuries, in particular, saw the rise of a series of social, religious, and educational reform movements that played a crucial role in shaping modern India.

The Indian reform movements emerged as a response to the challenges posed by colonial modernity, Christian missionary criticism, and internal social stagnation. Reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Syed Ahmed Khan, Swami Vivekananda, Jyotirao Phule, and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar became the torchbearers of a new vision for Indian society. They sought to eradicate social evils such as sati, child marriage, untouchability, caste discrimination, and gender

inequality, while simultaneously attempting to reinterpret India's religious and philosophical traditions in the light of rationalism and universal human values.

The reform movements were diverse in their ideology and approach. While some movements were influenced by Western liberal thought and scientific rationalism, others drew inspiration from ancient Indian scriptures and spiritual traditions. Some emphasized social reform through education and legislation, while others focused on religious revivalism and moral purification. Despite their differences, what united these efforts was a shared aspiration for national regeneration, moral upliftment, and social justice.

These reform efforts were not without limitations. Many movements, especially in their early stages, were elitist in nature and often failed to address the concerns of the rural masses and marginalized communities. However, they laid the foundation for later mass-based political and social movements, including the national freedom struggle. The reformers' insistence on education, women's rights, caste equality, and democratic values significantly influenced the making of modern India's constitution and public policy.

Indian responses and reform movements during the colonial period were dynamic, multifaceted, and deeply transformative. They reflected an awakening society's endeavor to reconcile tradition with modernity, indigenous values with global ideas, and spiritual heritage with rational inquiry. These movements not only resisted the cultural domination of colonialism but also paved the way for an inclusive and progressive Indian nationhood. Their legacy continues to inspire contemporary efforts toward social justice, equality, and national unity.

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