



Cercles 24 (2012)

THE WHIG INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY APPLIED TO THE EMPIRE

MACAULAY'S MINUTE ON INDIAN EDUCATION

ADAM STEPHENSON

Université de Picardie Jules-Verne (Amiens)

A single shelf of a good European library (is) worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.

We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.
['Minute on Indian Education']

Anyone who has spent even a short time studying the history of modern India or of the British Empire knows these words. They were written by Thomas Babington Macaulay in his Minute on Indian Education of 2nd February 1835, which is often said to have set British policy in India on the path to anglicising the natives. When quoted by modern historians and critics, these words usually come coupled with epithets like 'infamous' or 'ineffable', and are often seen as a kind of smoking gun: proof positive that the British tried deliberately to kill off India's indigenous languages, cultures and political identity, the better to exploit it economically. The theories of Marx, Gramsci, Althusser, Foucault and others have been mobilised to explain this minute, and it has become an important text in new disciplines such as postcolonial theory and subaltern studies.

At first sight, it is difficult to disagree with much of this. Macaulay's remorseless dualism – the 'single shelf of a good European library' vs 'the whole native literature of India and Arabia', the 'Indian' bodies ('blood/colour') and the 'English' minds ('taste, opinions, morals, intellect') – invites most readers today to accept it and turn it back against him: not 'East bad, West good', but 'West bad, East good'. The whole British enterprise in India seems to be summed up in the Minute as a kind of 'invasion of the

soul snatchers'. It is seen as the '[nail in the coffin](#)' of a possible Indian modernity – or of an Indian way to modernity, or of an Indian way to avoid modernity – the decisive moment, too, after which the English language was bound to become the language of the ruling class in South Asia. On the [Net](#), one finds forgeries of supposed Indophobic speeches and minutes by Macaulay which the president of the country considers genuine. 'Macaulayism' is said by Wikipedia to be 'the conscious policy of liquidating indigenous culture through the planned substitution of the alien culture of a colonising power via the education system', and 'Macaulay's Children' is a term to describe the modern Indian elite, often supposed to be self-hating, having forgotten their native vernacular and with it their roots and their identity. Hindu nationalists use the term to describe members of the Congress Party, supposed to have sold their souls to foreign devils.

In what follows, however, I would like to nuance some of these judgments. In this, I am comforted not only by Macaulay's words, but also by some recent comments from India itself, whose historiography and historical memory are far less consensual than that of most Western countries.

Among the many issues associated with Macaulay's minute, three important groups stand out. They concern both his intentions and the results of his action.

The first is linguistic, relating to the history of English in India:

- Did Macaulay wish to impose the English language on India, and if so why? And
- What was the effect of his intervention on India's complex mix of languages?

The second group of issues is cultural:

- Did Macaulay wish to 'liquidate' Indian culture, and replace it with Western norms (literary norms, but also scientific, philosophical, political, legal, perhaps even religious ones)? And
- If so, did he succeed? What exactly did his intervention do to India's cultural identity?

The third group of issues is political:

- What were Macaulay's political aims in writing this minute? In particular, did he intend to consolidate British supremacy or even make Indian subordination permanent? And
- What were its long-term political effects?

Before addressing each of these issues, we need to know a little more about the circumstances surrounding this minute.¹

Between 1834 and 1838, Macaulay was in Calcutta, the seat of British government in India, as the Law Member of the Governor-General's four-man legislative council. In this capacity he wrote an Indian Penal Code, which was supposed to be followed by a civil code and a procedural code, all based on English law. These were only finally enacted in the 1860s, but still serve today as the basis of Indian and Pakistani law (unlike in England, of course, where there is no legal code). He was also Chairman of the Committee of Public Instruction, whose task, in the words of the 1813 Act of Parliament renewing the East India Company's charter to govern large parts of the sub-continent, was to allocate £10,000 a year 'for the revival and promotion of literature and the encouragement of the learned natives of India, and for the introduction and promotion of a knowledge of the sciences among the inhabitants of the British territories.' Taken at face value, these words seem to suggest that the committee should be supporting both Indian and Western education, perhaps Indian literature and Western sciences, but until 1833, it had spent nearly all the money on teaching Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian and the cultures that went with them. This was the policy of the so-called 'Orientalists' on the Committee, and it was conceived as continuing the practice of many of the Moghuls and other Indian princes who had preceded the British. The Orientalists were opposed by another group, the so-called 'Anglicists', who thought, on the contrary, that the committee should only support teaching in English, and not only in modern mathematics and natural philosophy, but also in literature, history and so on. As one would expect, Macaulay sided with the 'Anglicists'.

A minute is a memorandum making a policy recommendation. Macaulay's was addressed to the Governor-General, Lord William Bentinck, who had already, informally, signalled his agreement with him, and so, in spite of the bitter opposition of the Orientalists, of protests from the Sanskrit

¹ The best account of all this remains John CLIVE's biography, *Macaulay: The Shaping of the Historian* : 342-427, but see also ZASTOUPIL & MOIR.

college in Calcutta and the Madrassa or Islamic school, and petitions with thousands of signatures, the Anglicist policy won.

The 'Orientalist' point of view went back at least to Warren Hastings, fifty years before. It was a mixture of passion and prudence. Passion, because many of the 'Orientalists' liked and admired India and were involved in the rediscovery of its history, art and artefacts, excavating archeological sites, deciphering ancient languages, etc. (and in the process, founding the modern science of linguistics); but also prudence, because they thought that the British should 'orientalise' themselves if they wanted to maintain their hold over India, and they feared that abrupt breaks with the past would antagonise the conservative natives and lead to rebellion.

The 'Anglicists' on the other hand, were firm believers in progress. For them the 'Orientalist' view meant accepting – or even subsidising and encouraging – ignorance and superstition, and customs which Europeans found barbarous – most famously sati or suttee (widow burning), the exposure of baby girls, etc. According to them, India needed to be brought out of barbarism and into civilisation. In both India and London, at all ranks, by the 1830s, reformers had become a powerful force in the East India Company. James Mill, friend and chief ally of Jeremy Bentham worked for the company and, had written a *History of British India* (1818) in which the acts, laws and customs of both the British and the Indians were measured against the criterion of their usefulness in promoting the greatest happiness of the greatest number – and found wanting. Lord William Bentinck, the Governor-General from 1828-1835, was an enthusiastic reformer, and is remembered, among other things, for his suppression of sati and thagi or thuggee, the murderous sect of highway robbers.

In English terms, while most of the Orientalists were Tories (and had, some of them from a distance, opposed the 1832 Great Reform Act for similar motives of passion and prudence), most of the 'Anglicists' were Whigs, and Macaulay was the most prominent Whig among them. Before coming out to India he had been a Whig MP, and would be again after his return to England. He was well-known as a defender of the rights of Catholics and Jews and made some of the most notable parliamentary speeches in favour of electoral reform in 1831 and 1832 and of the first 'liberal' bills which followed, notably the West India Bill abolishing slavery. In 1831 & 1832 he had been the Chief Secretary of the Permanent Committee responsible for Indian affairs in London, and in this capacity was largely responsible for the Government of India Bill of 1833, which renewed and

transformed the role of the East India Company. He was also the most celebrated essayist on the *Edinburgh Review*, the chief intellectual organ of the Whigs and later the Liberals.

For Macaulay, like most Whigs, history was progress; progress was measurable in terms of prosperity and freedom; it was assured by the guarantee of private property, the rule of law and the spread of knowledge. He was not only a Whig politician and administrator, he was also a Whig historian and, like other Whig historians, tended to 'divide the world into friends and enemies of progress', to use one of Herbert Butterfield's characterisations in *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931).

For Macaulay, as for many Whigs, England had a particular role to play in the history of progress. In the spring of 1835, at the same time as he was involved in the language debate in India, he was writing a long review of the *History of the Revolution in England in 1688*, by Sir James Mackintosh. The review was published in the July number of the *Edinburgh Review*. In it, Macaulay says:

The history of England is emphatically the history of progress. It is the history of the constant movement of the public mind, of a constant change in the institutions of a great society. We see that society, at the beginning of the twelfth century, in a state more miserable than the state in which the most degraded nations of the East are now. We see it subjected to the tyranny of a handful of armed foreigners. We see a strong distinction of caste separating the victorious Norman from the vanquished Saxon. We see the great body of the population in a state of personal slavery. We see the most debasing and cruel superstition exercising boundless dominion over the most elevated and benevolent minds. We see the multitude sunk in brutal ignorance, and the studious few engaged in acquiring what did not deserve the name of knowledge.

He then lists the steps forward typically cited by the Whigs – Magna Carta, Parliament, the Reformation, Habeas Corpus, the Revolution, the abolition of censorship and religious toleration, the Great Reform Act – leading to England becoming 'the land we know and love, the classic ground of liberty and philosophy, the school of all knowledge, the mart of all trade.' He sees all these as 'successive stages of one revolution' and insists on their continuity in England. They are not only advances for England, though: he says that they involve the 'dearest interests of the human race' and their

influence can be felt through 'half the monarchies of Europe and in the depth of the forests of Ohio'.²

Two features of this passage are worth pointing out here. The first is Macaulay's description of England at the beginning of the 12th century, which resembles his opinion of India in the 19th – perhaps England was even worse: 'more miserable than the state in which the most degraded nations of the East are now.' England was 'subjected to the tyranny of a handful of armed foreigners' as India has been for hundreds of years (for before the British there were the Moghuls, and before them, other Muslim conquerors). There was 'a strong distinction of caste separating the victorious Norman from the vanquished Saxon,' (note the use of the anachronistic word 'caste', usually applied to India, and here used to distinguish conquerors and conquered.³) To continue: 'We see the great body of the population in a state of personal slavery.' This was of course an exaggeration in both 12th-century England and 19th-century India, but for someone whose ideal was a free labour market, and who had been brought up in the family of one of the chief campaigners against slavery, and had recently voted the West India Act, the similarities would have outweighed the differences – and it fitted his scheme in which progress went from slavery to freedom. 'We see the most debasing and cruel superstition exercising boundless dominion over the most elevated and benevolent minds. We see the multitude sunk in brutal ignorance, and the studious few engaged in acquiring what did not deserve the name of knowledge.'

This is precisely what he says in his minute about the state of knowledge in India in his day: the teachers and students paid by the British are studying 'in the sacred books of the Hindoos all the uses of cusa-grass and all the mysteries of absorption into the deity... medical doctrines which would disgrace an English farrier, Astronomy which would move laughter in girls at an English boarding school, History abounding with kings thirty feet high and reigns thirty thousand years long, and Geography made up of seas of treacle and seas of butter.' With their money, the English are bribing men 'to waste their youth in learning how they are to purify themselves

² *The Westminster Review* 61 (July 1835) : [287-288](#).

³ 'God forbid that we should inflict on (India) the curse of a new caste,' he said in his speech to the House of Commons, July 10, 1833 and it was with this in mind that he pushed for the passage of the 'Black Act', intended to deprive the European community in India of special privileges; they never forgave him for it. [CLIVE : 333-338].

after touching an ass, or what text of the Vedas they are to repeat to expiate the crime of killing a goat.⁴

The other point I would like to insist on in this passage, in addition to the resemblances he finds between 12th-century England and contemporary India, is Macaulay's view of England's role in spreading freedom around the world. While England's path to freedom and prosperity is continuous – 'successive stages of one revolution', because based on 'the constant movement of the public mind' (though 'marked by actions and re-actions' as he explains a few lines later) – for other countries the path to freedom is likely to be subject to more violent breaks as English freedom comes into conflict with a more or less refractory public mind. And India is the extreme example of this for Macaulay.

This passage on English history follows a paragraph criticising James Mill's *History of British India* (1818), contrasting the writing of history and political action. Political action has to be gradual, says Macaulay – you cannot run too far ahead of your time – and Mill does not seem to understand this: he 'appears to consider politics not as an experimental, and therefore a progressive science, but as a science of which all the difficulties may be resolved by short synthetical arguments drawn from truths of the most vulgar notoriety'. Were this opinion well founded, says Macaulay, 'the people of one generation would have little or no advantage over those of another generation.' Unlike the politician, the historian needs to judge on an absolute scale, and Macaulay approves of Mill's method of praising what is progressive in the past.

So, Macaulay's minute represents the application of his version of the Whig theory to India: progress is conceived absolutely and universally, but applied gradually and adapted to the particular case. Enlightenment is not going to emerge spontaneously from the 'movement of the public mind', so he wants, as he says in his minute, 'a great impulse (to be) given to the mind of a whole society', to nudge the public mind in one direction, so that it would then develop in its own way, inevitably, he thinks, towards progress.

⁴ These last examples of 'degrading and cruel superstition' Macaulay owes to Ram Mohun Roy, in his letter to the former Governor-General, Lord Amherst, denouncing British support for the Sanskrit College and calling for English education (11 December 1823) [ZASTOUPIL & MOIR : 110].

Now, to return to the questions with which we began. The first was: did Macaulay wish to impose the English language on India, and if so why?

Here the answer generally given is 'Yes – the better to exploit India.' English teaching is only one of the 'Masks of Conquest' [VISWANATHAN, 1989]. The aim is to produce a bilingual group who will never be at home in English. Very often it is suggested that all the British wanted were employees who had enough English to work in the lower ranks of trading companies or the administration. [e.g. ANDERSON : 93-95].

However, if we read the minute, Macaulay's comments associated with it and those of his allies,⁵ we can see that the answer is 'no'.

His ultimate aim is not to make the natives speak English: this is only the means to another end, that of 'refining' and 'enriching' their own languages ['Minute' : 249]. In the Minute, he compares the hoped-for effect of English on India to two 'memorable instances of a great impulse given to the mind of a whole society, of prejudices overthrown, of knowledge diffused, taste purified, of arts and sciences planted in countries which had recently been ignorant and barbarous.' The first example is the European Renaissance: 'what Greek and Latin were to the contemporaries of More and Ascham, our tongue is to the people of India.' In England, the Renaissance could never have emerged from the native 'Chronicles in Anglo-Saxon and Romances in Norman-French', and neither can progress emerge from Sanskrit and Arabic. The second example is Russia, which 120 years ago was 'in a state as barbarous as that in which our ancestors were before the crusades' and 'behind the Punjab'⁶ ['Minute' : 243] but which now 'has taken its place among civilised communities,' thanks to the introduction of French, English and German, the 'languages in which the greatest mass of information has been laid up. [...] The languages of Western Europe civilised Russia. I cannot doubt they will do for the Hindoo what they have done for the Tartar'.

When Macaulay talks about the 'vernacular dialects' we must understand what he means. The learned languages of India, Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic, were hardly spoken by anyone in India. Sanskrit was

⁵ Notably his friend and brother-in-law, Charles Trevelyan, *On the Education of the People of India*, 1838 ([Cambridge Library Collection – History, 2011](#)), although he was more in favour of educating the whole population and found it hard to contain his evangelical zeal.

⁶ At the time, the Punjab was an independent State.

the domain of the Brahmins, Persian of the government of many States, including the revenue collection and the courts of the Bengal Presidency, and Arabic of the Koran and of Muslim prayers. The vernaculars – the languages people actually spoke – were like English at the end of the Middle Ages or Russian at the end of the seventeenth century, having little normative literature and not yet standardised. They are not yet ‘refined’ or ‘rich’ enough, he thinks, to be ‘fit vehicles for conveying knowledge’. It would be up to a new class of scholars and teachers – Indian Erasmuses, Mores and Aschams, as well as more modest writers and schoolteachers – to make them so. This is the class ‘Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect,’ that Macaulay wishes to create; not simply junior clerks and compradors. ‘To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population.’ Indeed, he is not using the word ‘class’ in a sociological or political sense at all.⁷

Nowhere does Macaulay say that English should become the official language of India, any more than Latin or Greek should have become the languages of England and France, or French that of Russia. On the contrary, he sees it as a means to enrich vernaculars, and notably Bengali, which would remain the languages of the people.

Of course, it might be objected that the analogies drawn with Europe at the Renaissance and Russia after Peter the Great are vitally flawed: Russia is conceived to be one nation with one language to be enriched and refined; Europe is composed of several nations, each ideally with one national language; but India is one nation – or may one day become one – but there is no single Indian national language. So, even though Macaulay does not say so, it might seem obvious that English will become the national language, and that analogies with the Renaissance and Russia do not hold; however, it is not clear what anyone could have done about that, and the political

⁷ Homi Bhabha rightly connects Macaulay’s words to those of a missionary school inspector, Mr Thomason, but misquotes these in order to blacken Macaulay by association. According to Bhabha, Thomason talks of ‘a corps of translators’ who can be ‘employed in different departments of Labour’ (Bhabha’s capital letter and end of quote), where the original words were: ‘in different departments of labour in diffusing knowledge among their fellow countrymen’ [BHABHA : 125]. *The Missionary Register* (1821) : [54](#).

history of independent India is in part a history of battles over languages quite independent of the presence of English

This leads us to my second question specifically about the linguistic aspects of the reform: just what was the effect of Macaulay's intervention on India's complex mix of languages?

Actually, his intervention did not have much effect in itself, but was part of a general trend.⁸ He was not the only, or even the most enthusiastic 'Anglicist' and the Governor-General himself was in favour of the policy, for which Macaulay mostly supplied 'rhetorical and historical underpinnings' [CLIVE : 469]. Still, if we call this policy 'British', we should not see the British as unanimous about this, either in India, or in the Company in London, or in the British government – still less in wider British opinion. The same is true on the Indian side. The case of Rammohun Roy is well known, and if we believe Robert E. Frykenberg, around Madras, the demand for English teaching went back to the 17th century, for many, no doubt, as a way of getting a job [FRYKENBERG 1988]. The 'Bengal Renaissance' in the 19th century, like the European Renaissance in the fifteenth and sixteenth according to Macaulay, was indeed due in part to the 'enrichment' ('refinement' is a more difficult concept to define) of the Bengali language - through contact with English [LOURDUSAMY 2004]. Even if this led to a gap between the Bengali spoken by the upper classes and that spoken by the peasants, and whatever other results it had, it is far more complex than the dualism of either Macaulay or his denouncers allow, and cannot all be laid at his door.

Furthermore, Macaulay's part in the three-sided debate between vernaculars, traditional learned languages and English should not lead us to forget another debate concerning school levels. Both Orientalists and Anglicists on the Committee of Public Instruction agreed that it was secondary schools that should be supported. However, primary schools already existed in large numbers in many parts of India, and instruction took place in them in the vernaculars of the different regions. In the Madras and Bombay presidencies, the British were already financing some of these primary schools. In fact, in the 1850s, it became official policy to support not only English, but direct vernacular schooling too, and not only at primary level: the Calcutta Medical College started teaching in Bengali in 1851.⁹

⁸ This is the argument of ZASTOUPIL & MOIR : Introduction.

⁹ I am following the excellent introduction to ZASTOUPIL & MOIR.

Twenty-five years after Macaulay's death, English became the chief language of the Indian National Congress. At independence, Nehru and others hoped to make Hindi into the national language of India – English would be phased out as the official language by 1965 – but the non-Hindi-speaking South of India objected that this was North Indian imperialism, and the project has been more or less officially shelved. English remains the language of the Supreme Court and of legislation as well as much of the literary and political life at the top of society. Something similar has happened in Pakistan, where Urdu was meant to replace English, but East Pakistan – now Bangladesh – refused, and so in Pakistan today, English remains the language of the administration and justice. Today's South Asian novelists and poets who write in English do not use it as a foreign language. Unlike their predecessors, perhaps – who, like 19th-century English 'worker poets', sometimes seem to be simply imitating their 'betters' – they are in no way 'mimicking' the West. It comes perfectly naturally to them: languages contain no geographical or cultural essences; an Indian writing in English is not expatriating himself or placing himself on the periphery of a world that is not his; a soul that writes in English is not thereby an English soul.

In the Indian constitution of 1950, there were 14 'scheduled' languages, which were meant to 'enrich' Hindi (rather as English was meant to 'enrich' the vernaculars) and make it a genuinely national language. However, now the tendency has been reversed: there are twice as many scheduled languages, which the government is pledged to supporting, and dozens of others that receive different kinds of support from the State. Some left-wing groups claim mischievously that it was the new ruling class around the Congress Party which instrumentalised English in order to maintain power. On the other side, Chandrabhan Prasad, a well-known journalist of dalit (untouchable) origin recently called on television for English to be divinised because it is the only language not marked by caste. In an earlier article, he had praised Macaulay's egalitarianism and called him, provocatively, 'India's first Gandhi' [PRASAD 2004]. We do not have to follow these arguments to say that, in any case, Macaulay's role in India's language wars is less clear, less Machiavellian, less destructive – and more modest – than it is usually presented as being.

The second group of issues I raised was cultural:

- Did Macaulay wish to liquidate Indian culture, and replace it with Western norms (literary, but also philosophical, political, legal, perhaps even religious)?

'Liquidate' is perhaps the wrong word, but he clearly hoped that when the Indians took to European philosophy, history, politics, law, science and so on, then they would gradually abandon their own. When he says that 'A single shelf of a good European library (is) *worth* the whole native literature of India and Arabia', he is not primarily making an aesthetic or a moral judgment, but saying that one is at least as *useful* as the other. Like any good student of Mill and Bentham, he is constantly looking at the 'utility' of any measure, that is, its value as a means to promote the ends of knowledge, freedom, prosperity, and so forth. This is not only true of the scientific subjects, but also of literature. Elsewhere in the Minute he says 'the grants for the encouragement of literature are no different from any other, and are to be judged by their *utility*... The simple question is, what is the most *useful* way of employing [the money]?' (my emphasis)

It is this judgment of utility, right or wrong, that we need to bear in mind, rather than the spectacularly insulting expressions about Oriental culture which 'every Indian schoolboy knows'. The Minute was not intended for public reading; it was not published until the 1850s, and Macaulay did not initially wish it to be. He regretted certain expressions it contained and, indeed, he was not really passing a judgment on Oriental literature, but rather baiting the Orientalists on the Committee, notably the very conservative Henry Thoby Prinsep [CLIVE : 393]. (His superiors in London and Calcutta regretted his lack of conciliatory skills [CLIVE : 392].) What is more, he thought that Sanskrit literature should indeed be studied as part of 'the history of opinions,' but that it was not the vocation of English schools to teach this to large numbers of people.¹⁰ In this, his argument was very similar to those in favour of a London University and against the Latin, Greek, maths and theology which dominated the syllabuses of Oxford and Cambridge.¹¹

Furthermore, he was certain that the British government should not interfere with Indian religion, and was against the work of the missionaries. In the minute he says, 'We abstain, and I trust we always shall abstain, from

¹⁰ 'It is very well for a few studious men to pass their lives in tracing the history of opinions. But the great mass of students have not a life to give to such researches.' *Letter to J. Tytler* (another 'Orientalist' on the Committee), 28th January 1835.

¹¹ Macaulay. 'The London University'. *Edinburgh Review* 139 : 417-436.

giving any encouragement to those who are engaged in the work of converting natives to Christianity', and expresses the same sentiment in many places. This was no doubt mostly for fear of provoking revolts, but also, as is clear from his notes to the clauses in the Indian Penal Code against religious defilement and insult, because he recognised the pain that could be caused by religious insults and loss of caste.¹² However, critics, from Benedict Anderson to militant Hindus, like to cite a letter to his father dated Oct 12th 1836, as proof of darker intentions:

Our English schools are flourishing wonderfully. We find it difficult, indeed, in some places impossible, to provide instruction for all who want it. At the single town of Hoogly fourteen hundred boys are learning English. The effect of this education on the Hindoos is prodigious. No Hindoo, who has received an English education, ever remains sincerely attached to his religion. Some continue to profess it as matter of policy; but many profess themselves pure Deists, and some embrace Christianity. It is my firm belief that, if our plans of education are followed up, there will not be a single idolater among the respectable classes in Bengal thirty years hence. And this will be effected without any efforts to proselytise; without the smallest interference with religious liberty; merely by the natural operation of knowledge and reflection. I heartily rejoice in the prospect.

This letter has often been held against him, too, particularly the sentence 'if our plans of education are followed up, there will not be a single idolater among the respectable classes in Bengal thirty years hence'. There are dozens of hostile Internet citations of this letter, claiming that this shows that Macaulay intended to convert the Hindus to Christianity. But this would not be a fair conclusion. Macaulay, himself no Christian, is writing to his old Evangelist father, and finding things to say which will please him. By 'idolater' he did not mean simply 'Hindu', but worshipper of idols (his father thought that Catholics were idolaters, too). He knew of the Brahmo Samaj of Ram Mohun Roy and was aware of the links between it and the Deism, Unitarianism and so forth which might emerge from Hinduism by 'refining' out the 'idolatry', as he put it. Furthermore, he thinks that this 'refinement' will happen 'merely by the natural operation of knowledge and reflection' a typical Whiggish sentiment: once the 'public mind' has been nudged in the right direction, it can work for itself. Interestingly, in this he thinks that Hinduism is more open to change than Catholicism, which, he remarks in his review of Ranke's *History of the Popes*, has progressed since

¹² Macaulay *et al.* 'Indian Penal Code' : Chapter XV, Sections 295 to 298, *Of Offences relating to Religion* [CLIVE : 455-457].

the Reformation despite scientific advances; presumably, this is because traditional Hindu geography and history are more easily refutable than the equally erroneous Catholic cosmology.¹³

Our second question on the subject of culture was: What exactly did Macaulay's intervention do to India's cultural identity? The answer here is that Macaulay had, of course, only a tiny role in India's meeting with the West, and that the ongoing dialogue owes very little to him. This question goes well beyond the scope of what we are looking at here. Some English-educated Indians like Swami Vivekananda and Gandhi, refuting Macaulay's idea of inevitability, finally rejected most of what the West had to offer them, officially at least. Gandhi, for instance, in London or South Africa at first, looked very much 'Indian in blood and colour, English in taste, opinions, etc.' So that, forty years later, Churchill could, rather mischievously, call him a 'Middle Temple lawyer posing as a fakir'. Ironically, it is among the Hindutva extremists attached to the BJP, those who hate Macaulay most, that one finds the strongest attachment to the economic liberalism that reforming Whigs like Macaulay believed in. Indeed, Macaulay uses an argument from political economy to defend his proposed reform. The Sanskrit and Arabic students receive stipends to study, while there are plenty of others who willingly pay to learn English. Why then is it necessary to pay people to learn Sanscrit and Arabic?

Evidently because it is universally felt that Sanscrit and Arabic are languages, the knowledge of which does not compensate for the trouble of acquiring them. On all such subjects, the state of the market is the decisive test.

One very widely held idea about the effect of Macaulayism is that Indians who copy English ways are not real men (the notion of 'mimic men' has been explored from VS Naipaul to Homi Bhabha and others). This is an idea in which 'Eastern' and 'Western' sexual fantasies seem to have coincided for a long time. What Benedict Anderson calls 'mental miscegenation' is thought to lead to a loss of virility. Towards the end of the 19th century, we find in English newspapers and cartoons and the stories and poems of Kipling the stereotype of the effeminate 'babu', a laughable figure. At the same period, we find the identical cliché in the writings of the charismatic guru Swami Vivekananda: 'the Europeanised man has no backbone...: what are we to call them, men, women, or animals? While those old orthodox people were staunch and were men' [VIVEKANANDA 1897] and a little later in

¹³ Macaulay. 'Von Ranke' (Review of *The Ecclesiastical History of the Pope's of Rome*). *Edinburgh Review* (October 1840) : 97-143.

Gandhi: 'English education in the manner in which it has been given has emasculated the English-educated [Indian...](#)' The problem is doubled for the Bengali babus, because in the imagery of both Indians and British, Bengali men are already not very 'manly'. Interestingly, I have not read that anglicised Indian women lost their 'femininity', though Katherine Mayo, when she denounced the treatment of women in India in *Mother India* (1927) was derided by anti-colonialists both there and abroad as a sex-starved spinster [JAYAWARDENA : 96-99].

The third group of questions I raised concerned Macaulay's political aims in writing this Minute is: did he intend to make British rule of India permanent?

The answer here is, despite all the hundreds of times one reads the contrary, clearly not. Of all the British politicians who talked about India, he was the most firm in asserting that the only possible justification for being there was to prepare India for independence. In his [speech](#) to the House of Commons on the Government of India Bill on 10th July 1833, before he ever went to India, he says 'No nation can be perfectly well governed till it is competent to govern itself'.

If critics of Macaulay say that he wished to teach the Indians English to make them more amenable to British control, then Macaulay's opinion is quite the opposite: it is teaching them Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian which does that:

We shall never consent to administer the pousa¹⁴ to a whole community, to stupefy and paralyse a great people... for the wretched purpose of rendering them more amenable to our control. [...] Are we to keep the people of India ignorant in order that we may keep them submissive?¹⁵

On the contrary, like any good liberal, he thinks that an independent, well-governed India buying British goods – an ex-colony like the United States of America, say – would be more in Britain's interest than a servile dependency, and that it would also be to Britain's honour to make India

¹⁴ 'A preparation of opium, the effect of which was in a few months to destroy all the bodily and mental powers of the wretch who was drugged with it.'

¹⁵ Macaulay. 'Speech to the House of Commons' (10th July 1833).

capable of independence. And even if the Indians expel the British before the time is ripe – as he would no doubt have thought happened – then the Whiggish evolution of the public mind would take India willy-nilly forward on the path of civilisation.

If there is a conclusion to be drawn from this, it is that the bitter arguments around Macaulay's minute tend to dissolve when we look closer at the documents and the circumstances surrounding them. Furthermore, once we see that both the Indians and the British in the 1830s and today do not form monolithic blocks – there were people on both sides of every debate, and no doubt contradictions in the hearts of many people – and that India's path to what we call 'modernity' was always likely to be more contradictory than that of any other nation, then Macaulay's minute, for all its cocksureness and brutal elegance, does not provide much ammunition for either of two imagined camps.

References

- ANDERSON, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1983.
- BHABHA, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- CLIVE, John. *Macaulay : The Shaping of the Historian*. New York: Vintage, 1973.
- CLIVE, John & PINNEY, Thomas (eds.). "Minute on Indian Education" in Thomas Babington Macaulay. *Selected Writings* (ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972 : 238-250. The minute is reliably reproduced at several sites on the Internet, e.g. [here](#).
- FRYKENBERG, Robert E. 'The Myth of English as a Colonialist Imposition upon India : A Reappraisal with Special Reference to South India'. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 2 (1988) : 305-315.
- JAYAWARDENA, Kumari. *The White Woman's Other Burden : Western Women and South Asia during British Colonial Rule*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- LOURDUSAMY, J. *Science and National Consciousness in Bengal, 1870-1930*. New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2004.
- PRASAD, Chandrabhan. 'Reinventing Lord Macaulay'. [Countercurrents](#) (27 October 2004).

- VISWANATHAN, Gauri. *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*, Columbia University Press, 1989.
- VIVEKANANDA, Swami. '[Reply](#) to the Address of Welcome at Ramnad, 25th January 1897'.
- ZASTOUPIL, Lynn & MOIR, Martin (eds.). *The Great Indian Education Debate : Documents Relating to the Anglicist-Orientalist Controversy, 1781-1843*, London Studies on South Asia, vol. 18. London: Curzon, 1999.