

A minute for Macaulay

Thomas Babington Macaulay has long been a favourite whipping boy for both the Right and Left in India. To many he is associated with the Western idiom, the reason why an English-educated elite ruled the country for more than a century. Of course several members of this elite later turned on their masters and joined, if not led, the movement for national sovereignty, or independence from colonial rule. Nevertheless, 'Macaulayism' is the term given to the deliberate policy of an imperial power to redirect a subject people's education in an attempt to influence their thought and self-understanding.

The signal moment that is cited is Macaulay's Minute on Education in 1835, a tract in which he set out to explain his proposal for promoting English education in India at the expense of Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit, which were being taught in colonial schools.

I contend, nonetheless, that the Macaulay Minute is both overrated and somewhat misjudged in Indian cultural studies. It is true that it came from a man who was directly charged with the formation of a loyal local herd that would be indebted in serving the colonial administration. He was, after all, a bureaucrat of high standing, obliging the Supreme Council of India for five years.

But Macaulay also fancied himself as a politically liberal and cosmopolitan intellectual. One needs to ask what such a claim (of intellectual integrity in particular) might imply, coming as it does from a long tradition going back to the pre-Socratics and the Vedanta.

For most, intellectual activity would simply be the task of asking philosophically rigorous questions about objects in the world and our relationships with them. It also places emphasis on the how, by asking what are the correct ways for people, governments and organisations to act in any given situation. Intellectual honesty demands that we engage with others' ideas as well with sincerity.

Of course, intellectuals are often not themselves honest in their words and actions; this could stem from ignorance as well as ideology. In our time, neoliberalism has proven to be an ideology that generated enormous harm to hundreds of millions. Yet many intellectuals have defended neoliberalism's rules of the 'free market', notwithstanding the destruction it continues to engender.

For Macaulay, the belief that colonialism was a moral right of the British Empire constituted such an ideology. That is why his wide-ranging essay is well worth reading in full. Unfortunately, even scholars tend to focus on select passages pertaining mainly to his suggested deployment of English-educated natives for the Empire's strategic purposes.

Indians, and perhaps Arabs too, are rightly indignant when Macaulay claims that in his conversations with learned men in India, no one would deny that "a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia". Still, I believe it is important to try to unravel the logic of the minute from other perspectives as well, without thereby excusing its egregious power claims and the cunning of British imperial politics.

Take, for instance, an extended comparison Macaulay makes with the case of Russia. Russia, in Macaulay's time, has "a large educated class, abounding with persons fit to serve the state in the highest functions, and in no wise inferior to the most accomplished men who adorn the best circles of Paris and London. There is reason to hope that this vast empire, which in the time of our grandfathers was probably behind the Punjab, may, in the time of our grandchildren, be pressing close on France and Britain in the career of improvement. And how was this change effected? Not by flattering national prejudices: not by feeding the mind of the young Muscovite with the old women's stories which his rude fathers had believed: not by filling his head with lying legends

about St. Nicholas: not by encouraging him to study the great question, whether the world was or was not created on the 13th of September: not by calling him “a learned native,” when he has mastered all these points of knowledge: but by teaching him those foreign languages in which the greatest mass of information had been laid up, and thus putting all that information within his reach. The languages of Western Europe civilized Russia. I cannot doubt that they will do for the Hindoo what they have done for the Tartar.”

Macaulay here is speaking of a nation's progress towards a more cosmopolitan outlook, but he is not thereby denigrating its own native cultures and practices. For instance, he speaks very highly of 19th century England and English literature and poetry of course, but also makes the claim that had the English literati not familiarised themselves with ancient Greek and Roman writings, they would never have produced a Shakespeare. “What the Greek and Latin were to the contemporaries of [16th century writers Thomas] More and [Roger] Ascham, our tongue is to the people of India.”

India today sits on the edge of greatness in its political and social influence in the world. The latter especially stems from its rich heritage of multicultural democratic polities and the novel ethics of ahimsa, the Dhammapada, and the grand philosophy of existence expressed in the Gita, not to mention numerous other traditions that are becoming resurgent.

But this growing presence surely also signals our inter-connectedness in a much larger planetary context, with numerous global ecological limits emerging in addition to geopolitical challenges, as well as other multicultural examples to learn from.

Indeed, it would be hard to imagine anyone asserting that a cosmopolitan education is less important or valuable today than it was two centuries ago. By default, that language and idiom are now English (it could well be Chinese in a few decades, but that is not so evident).

Similarly, like Macaulay himself, none would deny the value of alternative modes of education (from activity-based learning to gurukul structures) that dot the Indian landscape. These cannot be divided into Macaulite and non-Macaulite forms. I value my ‘Macaulite’ education greatly, at least as much or even more than my training in Carnatic classical music, but they are also mingled with the types of lessons my mother and father taught me from Indian epics, and so on.

Indeed, I would not be able to engage in this discussion here or with a wider group of colleagues from South Africa and Brazil to Indonesia, if I were not fluent in English. But engagement across cultures matters to me and, I suppose, to billions more across the world.

Moreover, given the vast disparities of caste, class and other markers of social status, excellence in education even in pre-colonial India was restricted to the elites, with a few Ekalavyas barely managing to get access to the gurukuls and other traditional schools. A Right to Education never existed prior to Macaulay and it would be disingenuous to claim otherwise.

What then are our pedagogical options? I believe it behoves us to find new hybrid forms that draw on a multiplicity of folk traditions but continue to place central emphasis on common curricula with universal access to English across the country. Otherwise, we will simply perpetuate our many ills and continue to blame Macaulay for them.

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The new U.S. Fed Chairman is unlikely to opt for policies that might upset the President's plan

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