

Social Class Differences in Education under the Central School Commission

THE Central School Commission was established by a minute of the Governor Stewart Mackenzie, dated 27th March 1841. It was to consist of not less than nine members three of whom "whenever it was practicable were to be a clergyman of the Church of England, a Presbyterian minister and a Roman Catholic priest or layman." There were also sub-committees in important towns like Galle, Kandy and Jaffna. The duty of the Commission was "to promote by every means in their power the education in the English language of their fellow subjects of all religions in the Colony." This Commission was in charge of the provision of educational facilities in the country till 1869 when it was replaced by the Department of Public Instruction. The purpose of this article is to examine how far the organisation of education was determined by the class differences of the contemporary society.

The Central School Commission took over the schools formerly looked after by its predecessor, the Schools Commission. The schools included the Colombo Academy and a number of English elementary schools in Colombo and in some of the towns along the western coast of the Island. Many areas in the interior of the Island were mostly neglected. Even in the Western Province "there were many populous divisions where the means of instruction were wholly wanting." There were only two or three schools in the Kandyan districts. The Northern Province was left entirely in the hands of the missionary societies. There were a number of missions very active there and the Commission provided them with financial aid.

The elementary schools were conducted mostly in houses built for residential purposes but acquired on rent by the Government. Very often they were in areas unsuitable for schools, e.g. too close to a busy market or far away from the areas where the children lived. The number of pupils in each school seems to have been very small, rarely exceeding forty or fifty. Even then they were not at all regular in attendance. Each school was in charge of a school-master assisted by a number of monitors. There is no evidence to show that these school-masters had to undergo a course of

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training or pass any examinations except that some had been monitors in their schools. If the Inspector of Schools, or the Superintendent who was normally a member of the sub-committee was satisfied that the candidate possessed a fairly good knowledge of English he was appointed. Recommendations from influential people of the area were also very useful in securing appointments as teachers. The curriculum in these schools consisted mainly of Religious Instruction, English, Arithmetic, Geography and History. But as the school-masters themselves had not studied these subjects, there was hardly anything useful taught in their schools. The Commission before long realised the uselessness of these schools and attributed it to the poor quality of teachers and lack of facilities for supervision. The Commission also began to re-organise the schools according to what they called the requirements of the country. In this work of reorganisation it is evident that they always kept in mind what they considered to be the requirements of the different classes in society. Thus, before long, schools came to be divided into a number of categories each serving a particular social class.

The highest in this hierarchy of schools was the Colombo Academy which was meant for the higher classes whose ambition was to give their children the highest possible education, without subjecting them to the necessity of mixing unnecessarily with the lower orders.¹ The Colombo Academy was started as early as the time of Governor North² as part of his plan for the provision of a superior education for the upper classes. Public servants and the scholars whom North hoped to send to England annually for higher studies were to be chosen from this institution.³ In the days of the Central School Commission, the Colombo Academy was regarded as a school training the children of the higher classes "for the higher professions and positions in society." With this aim in view the Commission thought "it was necessary to strip the Academy of its inferior classes and present it to the public as an institution distinguished from all other schools of the Commission by the specific education it afforded."⁴ Every facility was to be provided in the Academy for the attainment of a "sound classical and mathematical education." With regard to curriculum, staff etc., it was planned on the same lines as a Grammar School in England. There is also evidence to show that the Colombo Academy was preparing students for admission to Bishop's College, Calcutta. During the early period of the

1. Central School Commission's report 1852, p. 3.

2. Frederic North (1798-1805)

3. De Silva, C. R., *Ceylon Under the British Occupation*, pp. 228 and 229.

4. C. S. C. report 1852, p. 13.

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Commission, the Colombo Academy was under the principalship of a Christian priest Barcroft Boake by name. In 1845, two members to the staff were recruited from England. Both of them were graduates of the Cambridge University and they succeeded “two native masters whose inefficiency had been considered one of the principal causes of the advancement of the Academy being retarded.”⁵ These two “native” teachers pronounced English with a local accent and therefore they were considered unsuitable for the instruction of the class of pupils who attended that school.⁶ Thus regarding staff and other facilities, the Academy enjoyed a much more privileged position than any other school in the country.

Next to the Colombo Academy in status were the Central Schools. The Central Schools were the result of an attempt on the part of the Commission to provide for the educational requirements of a class in society which they called the “the poorer orders.” They also said that the idea was to make education in Ceylon sufficiently practical.⁷ The pupils passing out from these schools were expected to be able to secure subordinate posts in the Government service or employment in private establishments. The curriculum originally prepared with this aim in view was as follows :—

General Geography and History.

Commercial Arithmetic, as Book-keeping, Exchange etc.

Mathematics, including Algebra, Geometry and Trigonometry and their application to Mensuration, Gauging, Surveying, Navigation and Drawing.

The outlines of Natural Philosophy and Chemistry and their application to Mechanics, Agriculture, etc.⁸

Three Central Schools were opened in Colombo, Galle, and Kandy, each under a teacher recruited from abroad.⁹ The training classes for English teachers which were formerly conducted in connection with the Academy were transferred to the Central Schools. Thus the Central School catered for the need of a school midway between the Colombo Academy and the Elementary English Schools. The Central Schools seem to have been popular

5. C. S. C. report 1844-45, p. 8.

6. Principal's report on Colombo Academy, January, 1843.

7. C. S. C. report 2, p. 13.

8. C. S. C. report 1841-42, p. 13.

9. The Head Masters of the three Central Schools were : Galle—Mr. Miller, Kandy—Mr. Murdoch (Trained in Glasgow Normal School), Colombo—Mr. William Knighton. Mr. Knighton was also the Secretary of the Royal Asiatic Society, Ceylon Branch.

and although the two schools in Kandy and Galle were closed down after a few years they were reopened in 1856-57. The Central School in Colombo lasted for a longer period and finally became a part of the Colombo Academy (in 1856-57) under the name Lower School while the Academy proper came to be known as the Upper School. In the Lower School the fees levied were the same as it was in the Central School and the course of instruction also remained the same. Meanwhile the Upper School continued to maintain its classical and mathematical bias.¹⁰

Inferior to the Central Schools were the Commission's Elementary Schools scattered in minor towns mostly along the Western coast of the Island. Some of these small towns with Elementary Schools were: Negombo, Wellawatta, Dehiwala, Galkissa, Moratuwa, Panadure, Kalutara, Paiyagala, Beruwala, Bentota, Kosgoda, Balapitiya, Galle, Matara and Weligama. In the Elementary Schools too the medium of instruction was English, but the education in them seems to have been of a very low standard. On his visit to the Kalutara Boys' School, the Commission's Inspector of Schools wrote in his report: "The Master Mr. Ree has been 3½ years in this school. He is a native of Glasgow, accustomed to tuition, and seemingly zealous in his duties. . . . I found a big boy placed as monitor, who out of four words spelt three incorrectly: e.g. beauty as beuty, cousin as cussen and so on."¹¹ Similarly with reference to the Galkissa Boys' School, the same inspector wrote: "The master Mr. Spittel has been in this school for four years; but on what merits he could have been appointed is a question I am prepared rather to ask than to solve". These extracts from the Inspector's reports show the general condition of the Elementary Schools meant for the poor who could not afford to send their children even to the Central Schools. Besides, these were the only English schools provided by the State for those residing away from the main cities of Colombo, Galle, and Kandy. The Commission was aware that hardly anything of any use was taught in these schools. Therefore some members of the Commission maintained that this type of education "imparted by means of English books, and in the English language would at least be but a sickly exotic, incapable of taking root in the native soil, much less of bringing any fruit."¹² On the other hand, there were some members of the Commission who were of the opinion that "to do any good at all or communicate any instruction worth acquiring or retaining, we must impart quite new knowledge to the native mind, but

10. C. S. C. report 2, (1842).

11. Ibid. Perhaps this spelling was influenced by the way these words were pronounced by the Head of the School, with his Glasgow accent!

12. C. S. C. report 8, p. 19.

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also impart it through a new medium.”¹³ However, the former view prevailed at the end and the Commission decided to open some Vernacular Schools. It is interesting to examine in some detail the facts that led to the opening of these Vernacular Schools. It was realised that those who sought an English education did so with the hope of securing employment under Government. It was also seen that the young men who got a smattering of English shunned manual occupations and became misfits in their society. Therefore, the Commission decided to restrict the English education to those “to whom it will be a boon and not a calamity.”¹⁴ Consequently Vernacular Schools came to be opened for the masses while English schools were maintained for a restricted few. In 1847, when school fees were introduced as a result of the crisis in the coffee industry, the Commission endeavoured to keep the school fees in the Colombo Academy and the Central Schools at a level that will make them inaccessible to the masses. From the Commission’s reports it is also evident that there was at this time a desire on the part of the parents especially in rural areas, to give their children an education in the Sinhalese language as well. They were not satisfied that their children should learn only English. Therefore it seems that in some instances they sent their children to Sinhalese schools early in the morning before the Government school hours.¹⁵ The Sinhalese schools referred to here must be the temples where the resident monks taught the children who came to them to read and write Sinhalese. In the opinion of the Commission’s Inspector of Schools, “it was only the Arithmetic and perhaps the Geography that induced them to attend Government Schools.”¹⁶

Beside the Elementary Schools and the Vernacular Schools catering for the masses, the Commission also opened some bilingual schools which they called Mixed Schools. In 1856-57, the Commission had 31 Mixed Boys’ Schools and 7 Mixed Girls’ Schools.

The class character of this system of schools became still more evident in 1847 as a result of the crisis in the coffee industry. In that year, the educational grant was drastically reduced and the Commission, in order to meet the expenses of maintaining the schools, decided to levy fees from the pupils. In the scheme prepared for this purpose, schools were classed under different categories and the fees to be levied in each class of school was

13. Ibid.

14. C. S. C. report 12, p. 28.

15. C. S. C. report 12.

16. C. S. C. report 12, p. 28.

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clearly stated.¹⁷ The Colombo Academy where every pupil was required to pay £12 per annum or £ 1 per mensem in advance, was the only school that belonged to the first-class. The Central Schools, of which there were two at this time (in Colombo and Kandy), formed the second class. Every pupil in these schools was expected to pay £ 2. 2s per annum or 3s 6d per mensem in advance. The third class was the Elementary schools where each pupil was expected to pay 18s a year or 1s 6d a month in advance. The fourth class was the Mixed Schools where pupils had to pay 6s per annum or 6d per mensem in advance. Vernacular Schools formed the fifth class where each pupil was expected to pay 3s per annum 3d per mensem in advance. Girls' schools were also similarly divided into three categories : Dutch Consistory Girls' School and Female Seminary were placed in the first class where each pupil had to pay 18s per annum or 1s 6d per mensem. Girls' Elementary English Schools formed the second class and there was no payment of fees in these schools. In the third class were the Girls' Vernacular Schools, and in these also levying of fees was considered inexpedient. The Committee which recommended the above classification also recommended that "the officers of the Commission be instructed to prepare without delay, and enforce the adoption, of a distinct and definite plan of education adapted to each class of schools, so that, in each class, the limits be fixed and settled and the course of studies be kept quite separate and distinct from one another."¹⁸

The reaction to the introduction of fees was a sudden increase of attendance at the Central School in Colombo. This increase was at the expense of the Academy. The Commission lamented this failure on the part of the parents to realise the value of the services rendered by the Colombo Academy.¹⁸ It also thought that the popularity of the Central School "where an excellent elementary education in English is offered at a cheap rate, is an index of the wants of the people of Colombo and the cost at which they are prepared to purchase their education."¹⁹ The number of applications for admission in that year (1852) was so large that the Commission decided to enlarge the School. The expenses for this enlargement were met with the fees collected.

At this time, some of the missionary societies also followed the Government's policy of restricting English education to the upper classes. For

17. Report of the Committee appointed for the revision of schools on the establishment of the Central School Commission, 1847.

18. Report of the Committee appointed for the revision of schools, 1847.

19. C. S. C. report, 1852, p. 3.

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instance, the Wesleyan Mission Central School in Jaffna levied fees ; and Rev. J. Walton of the Wesleyan Mission was happy that the scale of fees levied in that school " excluded a class of boys who, I have long thought, ought not to seek an English education."²⁰ Similarly, Rev. R. Bren of the Church Mission reported that in order to limit the opportunities of acquiring an English education, the Church Mission has transformed the Seminary at Chundicully, which was formerly a boarding school, and as such objectionable to higher classes on account of caste distinctions, to a day school. The motive behind this action was probably to make room for children of the upper class at the expense of those of the lower castes who attended school mainly because of the financial aid given by the missions.²¹

From the Commission's system of schools described above, it is clear that education was provided according to what the Commission considered to be the requirements of different social classes. It was also designed with the idea of safeguarding the existing social structure. Education was made available not according to the age, ability and aptitude of the pupils but according to the amount of money the parents could pay for the education of their children. There was also no system of scholarships by which a poor child could hope to receive a good education. However, the Central School Commission cannot be blamed for this class discrimination in its school system, for it was long before the principle of equal opportunity in education was recognised in any part of the world. But for us it reveals how the foundation was laid for a system of schools which perpetuated the class-system in our society.

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20. C. S. C. report, 1856.

21. Vide : C. S. C. report, 1856.