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The Rise of English Education in Odisha: Colonial Policy and Regional Response (1850–1900)

Sourav Rout

Ph.D. Research Scholar
Ravenshaw University
Odisha, India
souravrout007@gmail.com

Abstract

The introduction and expansion of English education in Odisha during the second half of the nineteenth century were closely tied to British colonial educational policies and regional socio-political shifts. This article examines how policy instruments such as Macaulay's Minute and Wood's Despatch aimed to produce a class of English-educated intermediaries aligned with imperial interests, and how these efforts were received within Odisha. While segments of the Odia elite and emerging intelligentsia strategically embraced English education as a means of upward mobility and cultural reform, other sections of society—particularly traditionalists and vernacular advocates—expressed apprehension or resistance, fearing the erosion of indigenous learning and values. Through the founding of institutions such as Zilla Schools and Ravenshaw College, English education became a site of ideological negotiation: both a colonial imposition and a tool for self-assertion. The article argues that English education, though contested in its implementation and cultural impact, ultimately contributed to the formation of a modern Odia public sphere and played a transformative role in shaping the region's socio-political and intellectual landscape between 1850 and 1900.

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Keywords: English education, Macaulay's Minute, Wood's Despatch, Ravenshaw College, Odia intelligentsia, colonial policy, public sphere, vernacular resistance

Introduction

The nineteenth century marked a turning point in the educational landscape of colonial India, as British policymakers sought to establish English as the medium of instruction to produce a class of intermediaries aligned with imperial governance. Odisha, a region characterized by linguistic richness and cultural conservatism, encountered this colonial project in a manner shaped by delayed infrastructural development and minimal literacy. Though English education was introduced through policy instruments such as Macaulay's Minute (1835) and Wood's Despatch (1854), its reception in Odisha was far from enthusiastic.

This article examines the trajectory of English education in Odisha between 1850 and 1900, arguing that it was accepted less as a progressive aspiration than as an imposed necessity. While segments of the Odia elite and emerging middle class strategically engaged with English education to secure employment and social mobility, this engagement was often marked by cultural ambivalence and ideological unease. For many, English education represented a break from indigenous traditions rather than a seamless evolution. Through a study of institutional developments such as the establishment of Zilla Schools and Ravenshaw College, and the critical responses articulated in vernacular texts, the article demonstrates that English education in Odisha was largely embraced with resignation—acknowledged as essential for advancement, yet viewed with suspicion, restraint, and at times, resistance.

Colonial Educational Policy and Its Implementation in Odisha

The ideological foundation of English education in India was laid by Thomas Babington Macaulay's Minute on Indian Education (1835), which advocated the promotion of English over vernacular languages as the medium of instruction to cultivate a class which was "Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (Macaulay 57). This Anglicist agenda found institutional backing through Charles Wood's Despatch of 1854, which outlined a systematic approach to expand education with English as the medium of higher instruction (Sharp 89). These policies were intended to produce a class of English-educated Indians who could serve as intermediaries in colonial governance (Viswanathan 19; Zastoupil and Moir 106).

In Odisha, then part of the Bengal Presidency, the implementation of these policies was marked by delays and region-specific challenges (Mohanty 28). Compared to Bengal, Odisha's educational infrastructure was minimal, and literacy rates were low (Dash 44). The British administration, constrained by limited resources and local conditions, initially prioritized establishing elementary schools but soon moved towards setting up secondary and collegiate institutions to train a small, educated elite (Mohanty 30). This elite was expected to function as clerks, teachers, and civil servants serving colonial interests (Chatterjee 61; Mukherjee 21).

Early Educational Institutions: Zilla Schools and Ravenshaw College

Odisha's entry into the sphere of formal English education was marked by the establishment of Zilla Schools and District schools in key urban centers, such as Cuttack (1841), Balasore (1853), and Sambalpur (1864), which introduced English subjects alongside vernacular teaching (Pattnaik 45). These schools were initially funded and managed by the colonial government but gradually received support from local elites (Mohanty 37).

The watershed moment came with the creation of Cuttack College in 1868, which was renamed Ravenshaw College in 1878 in honor of Thomas Edward Ravenshaw, a key educational administrator (Sahoo 23). Ravenshaw College was affiliated with the University of Calcutta and became the premier institution for English collegiate education in Odisha (Dash 51). The College quickly became the most prominent center of English education in Odisha and played a central role in producing the region's first generation of English-educated professionals, administrators, and thinkers (Mohanty 39). While Ravenshaw College became a key site for English instruction, its emergence also marked the consolidation of an educational hierarchy that privileged English over local languages—an outcome not without cultural cost (Viswanathan 27; Mukherjee 19).

Regional Response: Acceptance, Aspiration, and Anxiety

The reception of English education in Odisha was marked by pragmatic acceptance and cultural hesitation. Urban elites and Brahmin families largely embraced English schooling out of necessity, not conviction, as a pathway to socioeconomic advancement. Figures like Madhusudan Das, the first Odia to obtain a B.A. and M.A. from the University of Calcutta, exemplified this emerging class, using English education as a platform for social reform and political activism (Mohanty 36).

English education also created platforms for leadership in public life, particularly in debates on linguistic identity, province formation, and educational reform (Dash 112). Conversely, some sections viewed English education with suspicion, fearing it threatened indigenous knowledge systems and Sanskrit traditions. Resistance was also rooted in practical concerns: access was limited by caste, gender, and geography, leaving rural and marginalized communities largely excluded (Viswanathan 23). From early to mid-nineteenth century, indigenous education in

Odisha was oblivious to the systematic concept of modern classroom teaching; instead, existing only through elementary schools known as a ‘chatasali’ or ‘pathasalas’ in villages (Mohanty 42). Such a mode of primary education, although widespread, was not sufficient to absolve people of their superstitious beliefs and suffered from the lack of a modern incentive as well. The solution to this problem was eventually resolved through the implementation of practices propagated in Macaulay's Minute of 1835, in which Macaulay had contended that English, as the language of Western knowledge and scientific advancement, would provide Indians with access to modern, rational thought and enable them to break away from what he perceived as the backwardness of traditional Indian practices (Macaulay; Said 134).

However, despite the advancements made by the propagation of western education in Odisha, several local intellectuals gradually began expressing doubts with regard to the authenticity of British claims of using English studies solely for the purpose of civilizing the Odia people (Chatterjee 59). They feared that the promotion of English and Western education would erode traditional Odia culture, values, and language and saw it as a means of undermining the indigenous education system and promoting colonial ideologies that privileged the English language and Western norms (Bhabha 87). Additionally, there was skepticism about the utility of English education in addressing the practical needs of the local population, many of whom were engaged in agrarian and artisanal work (Mukherjee 19). Native scholars also criticized the Western education system for being disconnected from the realities of Indian society, and for fostering a sense of alienation rather than empowering the local communities (Viswanathan 34; Patnaik 58).

Several Odia scholars opting for higher education, witnessed a shift from Odia customs and values to the *babu* or *saheb* demeanour. Such alarming attitudes have been critiqued in patriotic Odia texts such as *Fiuchar Saheb* (1892) and *Ghar Katha* (1908), both of which were published

anonymously and served as critical expressions of discomfort with Anglicized identity. On one hand, the writer of *Fiuchar Saheb* (Future Sahib) satirically admonishes the native mentality to assimilate oneself in the English culture and way of thinking, by dressing and behaving like a typical British ‘sahib.’¹ People dressing up in coats, trousers, ties, shoes and socks were generally addressed as *sahebs* (sahibs) throughout the country. The writer has phenomenally presented this “sahib” mentality in the text, while mentioning that it was not uncommon for the common man to dream of being a “sahib” in the afterlife, and this is referenced beautifully in the beginning as the writer says:

**"This time in death, I'll rise a sahib bold,
With a crimson cap atop my head I'll hold."**²

On the other hand, the anonymous writer of *Ghara Katha* advises his fellow countrymen not to be influenced by English culture. He asks them to abstain from using foreign-made goods, emphasizing that it will only allow the foreign rulers to strengthen their hold over the nation.³ He advises people to be industrious, and advocates the usage of country-made goods. Moreover, in sections 45 and 95, the writer is clearly seen advising people against going for higher education in foreign countries, apprehending that it might lead to their assimilation in English culture and their eventual desire of being identified as *babus* (masters). In fact, owing to the fact that the medium of higher education was predominantly English at the time, the author also indirectly discourages the native desire for English education within the state.

Curriculum and Pedagogy: Balancing English and Vernacular Traditions

¹ Ratha, 3

² *Ethara male saheb hebi / Lal mundare kep debi.*

³ *Gharakatha*, 1-15.

The curriculum at Ravenshaw College and other institutions was modelled after the University of Calcutta's standards, emphasizing English literature, grammar, and composition. Texts by Shakespeare, Milton, and other canonical British authors dominated syllabi, reflecting the colonial agenda of cultural inculcation (Mohanty 112).

The curriculum reflected the colonial emphasis on British literary and moral ideals, which many Odia students internalized reluctantly, often at the expense of their own linguistic traditions (Mohanty 114). However, the interaction between English and Odia intellectual traditions was not merely one-way. Many students and faculty engaged critically with English literature, blending colonial knowledge with regional cultural sensibilities (Mohanty 116). This dynamic gave rise to a bilingual literary culture where English proficiency became a tool for intellectual and political mobilization while Odia language and literature asserted their distinctiveness. Thus, the coexistence of English and Odia literary engagement points to a layered negotiation with colonial culture, rather than full assimilation (Mohanty 118).

A pivotal moment in colonial Odisha's embrace of English studies coincides with the establishment of Ravenshaw College and the inception of its esteemed publication, *The Ravenshavian*. This magazine stands as a testament to the flourishing of English literature in modern Odisha, its pages adorned with the creative endeavors of both students and faculty alike. From its inception in 1917 until India's independence in 1947, *The Ravenshavian* chronicled the intellectual and cultural pulse of the era across 26 digitized volumes. Post-independence, its legacy continued, further enriching Odisha's literary landscape. More than a mere publication, *The Ravenshavian* served as a vibrant platform for showcasing student talent, discussing educational matters, and documenting noteworthy events within and beyond the college. In its pages, one can find not only creative expressions but also insightful reviews and critical analyses of English literature, alongside reports on various club activities

and academic achievements. The magazine's inclusive approach extended beyond the confines of formal education, fostering a sense of community and collective engagement with English language. Indeed, *The Ravenshavian* embodied more than just a literary publication; it encapsulated a holistic ethos that transcended institutional boundaries, nurturing a deep and immersive relationship with English studies in Odisha. Its enduring influence resonates as a testament to the dynamic interplay between colonial presence and indigenous cultural aspirations, shaping the trajectory of education and language in the region.

The advancement of English studies at Ravenshaw college can be seen in the light of various developments, especially with the acceptance of T.S. Eliot into the English curriculum. In 1941, P. S. Sundaram, notable Indian professor of English and erstwhile head of the English department at Ravenshaw College in Cuttack, wrote an article in *The Ravenshavian*, called *Literature in a Machine Age*, where he quotes a few lines from *The Wasteland*:

‘When lovely woman stoops to folly and

Paces about her room again, alone,

She smooths her hair with automatic hand

And puts a record on the gramophone.’

English Education and Odia Linguistic Identity

A significant element of Odisha’s educational history in this period was the contestation over language. In the mid-nineteenth century, the imposition of Bengali as the administrative and educational language in Odisha sparked resistance among Odia intellectuals, who advocated for the primacy of the Odia language (Mohanty 78).

English education played a paradoxical role: it enabled the articulation of Odia identity in a modern political context while also contributing to the marginalization of vernacular languages. Odia writers such as Fakir Mohan Senapati, educated in English and familiar with Western literary traditions, pioneered the modern Odia novel and used literature to challenge colonial and social hierarchies (Senapati 103).

Hence, English education, while facilitating entry into modern discourse, was also perceived as a threat to Odia linguistic pride—a tension that defined much of the region’s educational experience during the colonial period.

Formation of the Odia Middle Class and Political Awakening

English education catalyzed the rise of a distinct Odia middle class, which became instrumental in the socio-political transformations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Graduates of Ravenshaw and similar institutions entered professions as lawyers, teachers, and bureaucrats, gaining influence in public affairs (Sahoo 27).

While the English-educated middle class became instrumental in Odisha’s political evolution, its identity was shaped by a reluctant embrace of colonial language and norms—a calculated adaptation to historical inevitability. This educated class nurtured nationalist sentiments and regional consciousness, which eventually coalesced into movements demanding Odisha’s political recognition as a separate province—achieved in 1936. The foundations for this awakening were laid in the period under study, as English-educated elites negotiated their identities between colonial modernity and indigenous traditions.

7. Conclusion

Between 1850 and 1900, the spread of English education in Odisha reflected the broader colonial project of cultural domination, yet its reception was far from uniform. For many in the region, particularly the emerging intelligentsia, English education was a double-edged experience—both a path to opportunity and a source of cultural dislocation. Rather than being enthusiastically embraced, it was largely accepted with resignation: as a necessary instrument for socio-economic mobility in a system that increasingly devalued indigenous knowledge. This ambivalent acceptance of English education reveals the deeper tensions at the heart of Odisha's colonial encounter and invites renewed attention to how educational policy shaped regional identity under imperial rule.

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