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# Educational Activities of the British Governors before the Colebrook Constitution (1796-1833) - A Historical View

K. Arunthavarajah

## Abstract

- *Introduction*

**G**ENERALLY Sri Lanka was under the foreign influence of the Europeans from the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century until the middle part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During this period the British were not interested much in the educational activities especially during the initial period their rule before the Colebrook Constitution. The administration of Sri Lanka was then under the purview of the Governors.

- *Purpose*

The aim of this article is to focus about their educational activities in the areas under their control during that time. Further the main aim of taking this period solely for this research was that the trading activities of the British at that period were well very prominent. But the British did not prefer to develop the social aspect of the Sri Lankans. Yet it is preferable to analyze as to how far they paid attention to the welfare of the Sri Lankans regarding education. The educational activities they carried out had on their own benefits in view.

- *Methodology*

My research is historically oriented is reports of the governor and their letters are used as primary sources. At the same time the books and article written by competent scholar on the subject also are consulted as far as possible.

**Keywords---** *Missionaries, Reforms, Traditional Education, Formal Education System*

## I. TRADITIONAL EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

Before the arrival of the Europeans there were two traditional system of education namely, the Hindu educational tradition and Buddhist educational tradition prevalent in Sri Lanka. These Educational traditions were brought here from India at different periods. When time passed the indigenous traditional system was affected by these two times and the latter evolved in to a Sri Lankan traditional education system.<sup>1</sup> This was the education system found in Sri Lanka when the Portuguese arrived here.

## II. THE PORTUGUESE ERA (1505 – 1658)

The Portuguese used education as a tool in Sri Lanka mainly with the purpose of spreading Christianity. They added the Catholic educational system with to traditional educational activities in the areas under their control using the

indigenous languages<sup>2</sup> It is not worthy to say that different missionary groups headed by the missionary priests were sent to Sri Lanka with the purpose of imparting education during the period of the Portuguese.<sup>3</sup>

### III. THE DUTCH PERIOD

Like the Portuguese the Dutch also used education as a tool for spreading their religion but they did not act intensely in spreading their religion as the Portuguese did. At the later period they changed their educational system to fulfill the social needs and established organized schools. We can consider this as the special characteristic of the Dutch.<sup>4</sup> In this way they were considered as special in the history of Sri Lanka as they established a formal organized educational system.<sup>5</sup> Moreover the Dutch did not fully handover the educational activities to the missionaries as the Portuguese did but kept them under the control of the government . In this way their educational administration was directly under the control of the government.

### IV. THE BRITISH PERIOD

When we look at the primary educational activities of the British period in Sri Lanka at the initial stages the British Governors played a very important role in them. Because until the implementation of the 1833 political reforms these Governors had supreme power in the direct administration of the country and they could take any decision regarding education. The maritime provinces of Sri Lanka were captured by the British around 1796. Yet they also thought that there could arise a situation to give back Sri Lanka to the Dutch. So they temporarily annexed them. This type of administration was known as the Madras Presidency system. This system lasted until 1798. Following that, the British East India Company and the British government jointly ruled the maritime provinces of Sri Lanka.

### V. FREDERIC NORTH(1798-1805)

The organized formal education seen in the maritime provinces of Sri Lanka during the Dutch was affected by the Madras Presidency. They gave up this education system as they were mainly interested in economy.<sup>6</sup> But Frederic North the first British Governor of Sri Lanka appointed in 1798, laid the foundation for the British education in Sri Lanka. His period lasted until 1805 and the reforms he made in education in Sri Lanka were very prominent in the field. When Fredric North arrived in Sri Lanka the educational system introduced by the Dutch had been neglected. But some teachers were getting the salary from the government. They also acted as the village registrars. But the school education was seen at the low level. Many buildings were about to collapse. His main objective was to develop the western education in the Christian atmosphere. At that period there was a shortage of British missionaries so he got the service of the some British missionaries who had been arrested and then released by the Madras government. The arrival of James Cordiner and the London missionary society led the educational activities in a proper way. North appointed Cordiner as the superintendent of all the schools and supervisor of school teachers. With the arrival of the Cordiner steps were taken to reconstruct the parish schools. One of the steps was the salary of the teacher.<sup>7</sup> Though the amount was very less the system to give financial aid to the states school started with this .

North appointed the missionaries and the priests to supervise the work done in the schools with the purpose of reconstructing the parish schools. Decision was made to appoint each preacher to each ancient towns. <sup>8</sup> Religious education was the main subject in the curriculum of the Parish schools. He observed that the attendance of the students in school was very less. So he issued a government circular giving order in order to increase the number of the student in

schools. All the parents belonging to the Protestant religion were urged to send their children to the legally organized schools. The Muthaliyars and the village leaders were ordered to supervise this.

North felt the importance of English education and established higher schools for education. This type of schools had two categories namely the secondary schools and these of missionaries. The first category was getting education and preparing the students for the seminary had three types of schools. They were the schools for Tamil, Sinhala, English and the European students. These there were seen in single building. But they functioned separately. The main purpose of this was to prepare the youth for the government service. He believed that the discipline should be developed through education.<sup>10</sup> He feared that if the Christians during the Dutch period reverted to Buddhism or Hinduism that would be a problem to the British rule in Sri Lanka. So he reestablished the primary schools.<sup>11</sup> He also looked after the orphanages. These orphanages were reconstructed for the children of the parents (The European father and the native mother) and for the children of the low cast Burghers.<sup>12</sup> Here the job oriented education was imparted. These orphanages were established in Trincomalee, Colombo, Galle and Jaffna.

## VI. THOMAS MAITLAND (1805 – 1812)

During his period education progressed a little. The reason for this was the careful and the minute activities of the British. In this background Maitland brought about some reforms in the school system. He handed over a plan for this to the government. His plan included the things such as repairing the buildings looking after them, salary of the teachers, training the teachers and, increasing the standard of education.

One of his important educational activities was giving scholarship to the local youth for their higher education in England. The Parish schools established by the Dutch were given up during his period. This shows that the British government did not pay attention or concern towards education.<sup>13</sup> We could understand that education was affected during this period through the report he sent to the British government. He stated that condition of education was seen as it had been at the time of his arrival.<sup>14</sup>

At his initial stage the three schools of the Colombo academy were reduced into two schools. That is the Sinhala and Tamil schools were combined into one but the European schools functioned separately. But later all the schools were united. Thus the new school was known as united school. He formed a crew to supervise these schools. Three members were found in these groups.

## VII. ROBERT BROWNRIGG (1812-1820)

The ruling period of Brownrigg was considered an important period with many changes in the Sri Lankan education history. He was very fond of Christianity. So he tried to establish a suitable religious educational system.<sup>15</sup> For this activity he got the support of the government and the support of the missionaries from his motherland. The impact of industrial revolution and the French revolution also had fact in Sri Lanka. Because of this, the education for people and the government support to education and emergence of mission schools were also found in Sri Lanka. The responsibility of education was handed over to the Christian missionaries whom he invited.<sup>16</sup> These Christian missionary groups were enjoying the same rights and privileges. In this way he founded the missionary schools in Sri Lanka. By about 235 schools were opened during the period between 1812-1832. These Schools had a firm educational policy with the support he gave to the missionaries for the educational progress in Sri Lanka.

After he captured Kandy in 1815 he formulated a planned education for the whole island. A reason for this was that he suppressed the 1818 riot. *Aththiaadsa Guruthpanam* was established in Colombo in 1818.<sup>17</sup> This helped education a

lot . After the establishment of this the Sri Lankan government gave administrative approval for the first time. The British Church in Sri Lanka was in charge and responsible for the state education department . This institution was responsible for the spread of western education in Sri Lanka.

He Introduced the Sunday school system. The first Sunday school was established in 1814 by the Wesleyan missionary group . It was opened in Colombo. Within a short period a lot of students joined this. Girls also joined this institution Moreover these schools were started in Jaffna and Negombo. <sup>18</sup>

His other important educational activity was the establishment of *dhamma* school. These schools were established in giving free education to the poor students. The first *dhamma* school were opened in 1812. From 1815 the governor started giving donation to the schools.<sup>19</sup> The job oriented education imported here for the future job opportunities. Moreover Browning took some steps in improving English education. He implemented the teaching of English at each of the district academy in the beginning of his ruling period. According to this the Sinhala, Tamil and European students joined this institution. He trained the students in improving English education and to engage them in the teaching process. For this he established many schools in different parts of the country with the help of the western missionary groups and encouraged their activities.

Private schools were established during his period. More or less they were seen as English schools. Many private schools were opened between 1812-1825. The students had to pay for their education in these schools. Many boys and girls studied in these school established in Colombo. These schools had hostel facilities too.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

The educational renaissance occurred greatly in the history of the British period in Sri Lanka. The early British governors laid the strong foundation in education. The power they had and support of the government made favourable condition for their activities. The governors Frederic North, Thomas Maitland and Robert Browning carried out various activities in raising the standard of education of the Sri Lankans. They had also the objectives of spreading their religion and imparting English knowledge to the Sri Lankans. But they were the dictators until the political reforms of Colebrook and Cameroon. Yet the educational activities they promoted were the guidelines for the later educational reforms in Sri Lanka.

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