

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF WOOD'S DESPATCH AND WOMEN EDUCATION IN TAMIL NADU

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ABSTRACT

Wood's Despatch was a landmark educational policy document in British India, published in 1854. It was authored by Sir Charles Wood, the then President of the Board of Control of the East India Company, and provided a framework for the development of education in India. One of the most significant impacts of Wood's Despatch was the promotion of female education. The document emphasized the importance of educating women and stated that "the spread of female education is essential to the progress and welfare of India." It also recognized the social and cultural barriers that hindered the education of women and called for measures to overcome them. In Tamil Nadu, the impact of Wood's Despatch on women's education was significant. Prior to the policy, female education was virtually non-existent in the state, with only a few privileged girls receiving some education at home or in private schools. However, the policy led to the establishment of government-funded schools for girls, which provided access to education for a larger number of girls. Initially, there was some resistance to the idea of educating girls, with many families reluctant to send their daughters to school. However, with the support of missionary organizations and social reformers, the government was able to gradually overcome these objections and promote female education. The establishment of women's schools in Tamil Nadu had a transformative impact on society. It not only provided girls with access to education but also enabled them to develop their social and intellectual capacities, which in turn, gave them greater confidence and independence. It also challenged prevailing social norms that viewed women as inferior and subservient to men. Over time, the policy led to an increase in the number of women who were able to enter into the workforce, which contributed to the economic development of the state. Today, Tamil Nadu has one of the highest female literacy rates in India, which can be traced back to the impact of Wood's Despatch and the subsequent efforts to promote female education in the state.

Keywords: Charles Wood, Education, Tamilnadu, Impact

1. Introduction

The greatest and most important contribution of the British to the national life of the Indians was the spread of Western Education. With its spread; the traditional sense of values regarding religion, education, culture and sense of beauty underwent a change and a new sense of values developed. The influences and attitudes that promote female education is important. During the first half of the 19th century a few schools for female education were established due to the initiative of the missionaries and a few Indian aristocratic families. The conservatives were, however, not in favour of female education. Female education in India spread due to the initiative of the western educated liberal minded Indians. During the 1st half of the 19th century female education did not make much headway. Ram Mohan Roy was a great advocate of female education. The Brahmo Samaj also contributed much in this regard. In creating an urge and mentality for female education, the journals like Umesh Chandra's *Banqabodhini* Girish Chandra Sen's *Mahila*, Basante Micra's *Bharat*

Mahila etc., played a very important part. The contributions of Prarthana Samaj and the Deccan Education Society also deserve special mention in this regard.¹ Concerning the goals and the purpose of women's education, two divergent views have emerged in the course of its developments. The one can be summarized as the demand for equality, including equal opportunities for women. The other conceptions, which emerged later, stress on the need for the development of human resources in the development process. In the actual educational policy of India, constant effort was made to harmonise these two conflicting tendencies.²

Women's Education Prior to 1854

In the early nineteenth century, philanthropists and missionaries were responsible for taking the initial step towards the advancement of women's education. This step was taken by establishing schools for girls. David Here established the very first school for young ladies in Calcutta in the year 1820. Patherson was responsible for the establishment of a number of schools in Bombay in the year 1848,

and J.E.D. Betherme established the renowned Bethume School in Calcutta back in the year 1815.³ These private efforts continued to be restricted to a select number of groups. The Muslims and Hindus were hesitant to send their daughters to these schools because of their religious beliefs.⁴ During this time period, the Madras Presidency was at the forefront of advancing the education of women. The Church Missionary Society of Tirunelveli established the very first secondary school there in the year 1821. In the year 1840, the Scottish Church Society embarked on an endeavour to establish six schools for Hindu girls in the city of Madras with the assistance of Reverend Isaac Wilson and his wife. Before the publication of the Despatch in 1854, there had been some development in the realm of female education despite the absence of any involvement from the state. This development was primarily led by missionaries. In Tirunelveli, the Church of England Societies were responsible for the establishment and upkeep of boarding schools from an early period on; however, the higher castes were the only ones who attended these schools. This attempt had to fight its way through a large number of challenges. In the year 1845, the city of Madras saw the opening of its first girls' school, which was run in part by locals. It was the first of many more that followed. In the year 1854, there were most likely seven thousand young women attending schools that were run by missionary societies. Although the vast majority of these students were indigenous Christians, there was also a sizeable population of Hindus who belonged to the higher castes. In 1843, there were nine students enrolled at the school of the free Church of Scotland; by 1854, there were approximately 700 students enrolled there.⁵

Woods Despatch in Madras Presidency

The Woods Despatch, also referred to as the Education Despatch, was a historic educational policy document that was issued in the year 1854 by Sir Charles Wood, who was serving at the time as the Secretary of State for India. The purpose of the Despatch was to provide a comprehensive plan for the development of education in India and to act as a blueprint for educational policy across the country. The

educational landscape in the Madras Presidency was significantly altered as a direct result of the Woods Despatch. The Despatch advocated for the establishment of a public education system that was available to anyone, regardless of their socioeconomic standing. It suggested establishing a primary, secondary, and collegiate level of education as the optimal structure for the educational system. As a direct result of the Despatch, the Madras Presidency decided to create a Department of Public Instruction in order to maintain control over the expansion of educational opportunities. Primary schools were established in rural areas so that all children could have access to a fundamental education. In addition, the Presidency was responsible for the founding of a number of prestigious educational institutions, such as the Madras Medical College and the Presidency College in what was then known as Chennai. The Woods Despatch placed an additional emphasis on the significance of enhancing the level of education as well as the training of educators. As a direct consequence of this, a number of different teacher training institutions sprouted up all over the Madras Presidency in order to equip teachers with the competencies and information they required to instruct students in the new educational system. Overall, the Woods Despatch was an important factor in the progression of education in the Madras Presidency, which in turn paved the way for the expansion of educational opportunities across the entirety of India.

Wood's Despatch of 1854: 'Magnacarta of Education'

The education despatch of the Court of Directors, dated 19 July 1854, is a document that holds significant weight in terms of its historical significance. It is the most significant piece of paper ever written about education in India. It reaches the pinnacle of the difficulty and grasps it in its entirety, both in terms of length and breadth.⁶

The despatch written by Wood marked the beginning of a new era of organised educational administration. It also established the goal of Indian education and determined how the government would respond to the demand for women's and technical education.

In spite of the fact that it had recommended that the British Government should support women's education and give financial assistance for the opening of girls schools, the department of education did not take active measures for another decade or two after it had made those recommendations.⁷

The suggestion made in Wood's Despatch was taken up by the Government of Madras, which resulted in the establishment of a department of education as well as the implementation of a grant-in-aid system. Throughout the city of Madras, educational development was observed at a variety of levels.⁸ A Director of Public Instruction was given the responsibility of overseeing education in the Presidency of Madras, and he was given a team of Inspectors and Assistant Inspectors to work alongside him. The Educational Department in each province is directly responsible to the respective Provincial Government, and each province's Educational Department has developed a method of operation that is more or less uniquely its own. This method of operation is more or less distinctively its own. It took over the instructions that had been developed by the Government or the Board as a result of the earlier efforts of the East India Company and adopted them.⁹

As a direct consequence of the despatch issued in 1854, the native schools in the city of Madras began to function in a more effective manner in terms of the elementary education they provided.¹⁰ In relation to primary schooling, the Despatch presented a number of ideas that were considered to be of the highest possible significance. In 1823, the Minutes written by the Governor of Madras, Lord Elphinston, did not include a single mention of the issue concerning the lack of educational opportunities for women. On the other hand, Lord Dalhousie made the following statement: "It is the opinion of the Governor General — in — Council that no single change in the habit of the people is likely to lead to more significant and beneficial consequences to female children." This declaration made by Lord Dalhousie served as a precursor to the now-famous Wood's Education Despatch of 1854, which established "the encouragement of female education" as the central tenet of the Company's educational mission statement. It

was the very first time that an official decision had been made to give open and friendly support for the education of females.

Even though the importance of female education was emphasised in the Despatch, no information about how this should be accomplished was provided. Even fourteen years after the Despatch was passed, the government at Fort St. George did not have any concrete proposal for promoting the education of women.¹¹

This Despatch made a recommendation, and based on that recommendation, three major universities were established in India: Madras, Bombay, and Calcutta. These universities contributed significantly to the development of the educational landscape in India.¹² The Western conceptions of education, both in general and in regard to the education of women in particular, were given a lot of emphasis by these universities.

Even though several missions had already taken concrete steps towards the establishment of elementary schools for girls prior to that year, the subject of female education did not come under the serious consideration of the government until 1858, when power was transferred to the British parliament.¹³ Throughout the presidency, nonreligious institutions of higher education had begun to proliferate. The establishment of a normal school in Madras for the purpose of educating native girls in the art of theatre became a significant step.

The Despatch suggested that the British government provide financial assistance to established private schools in the form of a 4% grant in order to encourage female enrollment. In 1858, the Sarah Tuchker Female Training School was established in Palamcottah.¹⁴ The institution was named after the sister of the C.M.S. secretary who worked in Madras. In the year 1867, Mr. and Mrs. Lash were the fortunate recipients of this property.¹⁵ The Big Parcharry in Madras was made up of eight divisions, but there was no girls school that could be found anywhere within its boundaries. The establishment of a school for this area was one of the many good deeds that the Reverend C. R. Drury performed for the community. On Church Street, it first opened its doors in the year 1860.¹⁶

In the year 1860, the first female-only school in Black Town, Madras, opened its doors to students. It was entirely capable of supporting itself as a school. Recently, it was subjected to an inspection by the government, and as a result, it was awarded a grant.¹⁷ It is believed that the London Mission Society opened its first Caste Girl's School in the month of January in the year 1862. This was in the Black Town neighbourhood. Subsequently, three more schools were opened; however, after some time, the children from four schools, or the majority of them, were persuaded to assemble so that they could take advantage of the more continuous supervision and instruction provided by the lady in charge of the schools. In the year 1866, the village of Purasawakkam became home to the first caste girls' school. Recent inspections have been conducted on it, and a modest grant on the results system has been acquired.

Conclusion

Woods Despatch, in conclusion, undoubtedly considered a schooling system for India. Charles Wood's efforts to promote the creation

of educational institutions, especially higher education opportunities for women, a grants-in-aid system, and the use of the vernacular as the language of instruction cannot be understated. A singular challenge in this regard is to place all of education under the jurisdiction of a single government agency. Women who had previously been excluded from the educational system were given access to the western system of learning thanks to Charles Wood's advocacy for gender equality in the classroom. Clearly, the goal of this dispatch was to advocate for women's access to higher learning. While the 1854 despatch acknowledged the value of girls' education, it said nothing about how to encourage it. Fort St. George's government still had no plan to promote female education fourteen years after the Wood's Despatch was passed. Despite this, the groundwork laid by Wood's Despatch was crucial in allowing women to make significant strides in their educational advancement, which in turn gave them the self-assurance and bravery they needed to face the challenges they continue to face to this day.

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