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EDITORIAL

## Macaulay's children

*I wish I were as sure of anything as Macaulay is of everything.*

William Windham

English has been the language of choice for higher education in India. For the sciences, medicine, engineering and a host of other disciplines, this has, generally, been perceived as an advantage. Indian graduates gain easy acceptance internationally, particularly at a time when English has become the dominant language of science and technology. In the last few years, even European journals have succumbed to growing pressures, switching over to publishing in English. Russian, Japanese and Chinese scientific journals command little influence in the world of science, when they are not published in English. The British Empire may have vanished into the pages of the history books, but English remains an enduring and sometimes controversial legacy. There have been several educational commissions and reviews of national education policy, in the years since independence, which have emphasized the importance of instruction in regional languages, often echoing Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi and many others who went before them. But academic discussion apart, little has happened in seriously promoting any Indian language to a level, where they might appear as a serious and locally relevant alternative to English, in colleges and universities. Even at school level, English as a medium of instruction provides a major advantage to children, as they move into higher classes. But, English has its share of detractors, who believe that creativity and originality can hardly find expression in a language other than the mother tongue. This school of thought strongly argues that the turning point really came in 1835, when Macaulay wrote his famous 'Minute on Education'. Indeed, to those who believe that overemphasis of English and concomitant neglect of our languages has caused irreparable harm to Indian education, many of us are 'Macaulay's children'; a mildly derogatory description applied to those who are more comfortable with English, than any Indian language. A letter in this issue of *Current Science* describes the many remarkable medical insights in the

ancient manuscript, *Bhrigu-Samhita*, and argues that science is indeed 'culturally conditioned', suggesting as a corollary that the universality of science may in fact be a myth. The writer laments that 'we still continue to be Lord Macaulay's educational products' (A. D. B. Vaidya, *Curr. Sci.*, 2001, **81**, 735).

Who was Lord Macaulay? When Hastings, Wellesley, Cornwallis and Curzon have faded into the dim past of history, even the boulevards bearing their names in Delhi have been rechristened, why does Macaulay, a man who held no high office and commanded no armies, surface so frequently in our laments on the state of education in India. Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800–1859) came to India in 1834 to be a legislative member of the Council of India; according to biographical notes his intention was to 'achieve financial independence'. He stayed only till 1838, but in writing his famous 'minute', a year after his arrival, he ensured that he would be with us even a century and a half later. He was appointed President of the Council of Education by the then Governor General William Bentinck, who finds a place in history books for his assault on 'The Thugs' and his decisive step in abolishing Sati. The problem before Macaulay was clear and he stated the issue simply: 'We have a fund to be employed as government shall direct for the intellectual improvement of the people of this country. The simple question is, what is the most useful way of employing it?' Which language should be supported as the medium of instruction? The Council of Education was then divided: Orientalists on the one hand favoured Sanskrit, Persian or Arabic, classical traditional languages which were, however, not widely spoken, while Anglicists were clear that English would prove superior. Raja Rammohan Roy's reformist movement had already taken root in Bengal, its founder arguing forcefully in favour of English; indeed establishing an English school in Calcutta in 1817, nearly two decades before Macaulay wrote his 'minute'.

Macaulay confronted the Orientalists on the committee with many overstated and sometimes offensively worded sentences. His 'minute' has often been selectively quoted to highlight statements which appear to epitomise the arrogance of a colonising power. He states infamously: 'I

am quite ready to take the Oriental learning at the valuation of the Orientalists themselves. I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.' Much later in his 'minute', Macaulay makes his most widely quoted proposition: 'We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.' These two extracts of Macaulay's 'minute' have been held, for much of the 20th century, as being the root cause for many of the ills that affect our educational system, including the ever-increasing divide between the institutions of higher education and the mass of people who may aspire to a better future. But, in making Macaulay a favourite whipping boy most analysts use a common journalistic strategem, the technique of selective quotation. Reading the text of Macaulay's 'minute' (cf. Edwards, M., *British India 1772-1947*, Rupa Press, New Delhi, 1967) is instructive, for it reveals the thinking of man, dispassionately analysing a problem with which he was charged. Realizing that the commonly spoken languages in the areas under British control may be unsuitable for higher education, Macaulay faced limited choices; Sanskrit and Arabic on the one hand and English on the other. Indeed, none of the languages considered were commonly spoken at that time. But in proposing the creation of an intermediate English speaking class Macaulay had a purpose: 'To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population'. In proposing the abolition of the 'Madrasa

and Sanskrit College at Calcutta' and the retention of the 'Sanskrit College at Benares and the Mohamedan College at Delhi' Macaulay felt that enough was being done 'for the Eastern languages'. But he did propose that 'no stipend shall be given to any students who may hereafter repair tither, but that the people shall be left to make their own choice between the rival systems of education without being bribed by us to learn what they have no desire to know'. Macaulay was far sighted in many ways. In a remarkable speech in the British Parliament on the Government of India Bill in 1833, he had this to say: 'Are we to keep the people of India ignorant in order that we may keep them submissive? Or do we think that we can give them knowledge without awakening ambition? Or do we mean to awaken ambition and provide it with no legitimate vent? Who will answer any of these questions in the affirmative? Yet one of them must be answered in the affirmative, by every person who maintains that we ought permanently to exclude the natives from high office. I have no fears. The path of duty is plain before us; and it is also the path of wisdom, of national prosperity, of national honour.'

Reading Macaulay, I could not help but wonder at the free fall of our educational system over the years, with little by way of purposeful intervention. Should it not have been possible to generate an equally influential 'minute' which would redirect the sprawling system of school and university education? Or is it that we have collectively lacked the tenacity of purpose to confront the problems of our times? Or is it simply just wise to retain our present system and confine ourselves to occasionally deriding Macaulay's children?

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