McCausley's (1835 Minute on Indian Education: Believe or (Don’t Believe) The Hype?

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It was famously (or more to the point) infamously noted that the 1984 Fatwah passed on British Asian writer Salman Rushdie (author of The Satanic Verses, his best known work) was largely the result of a one page section of the (at nearly 250,000 words, generally weighty) novel for the most part concerned with documenting the South-Asian migrant experience in relation to the ascendancy of Margaret Thatcher as UK Prime Minister in the early 1980s. This was the subject of major international debate and numerous incidents which culminated in the author spending several years in hiding. An interesting delineation of responses can be found here

Whilst Macausley’s (1835) minute on Education is at a little over 5,000 words a literary snip in comparison, the controversy surrounding it, within the intellectual cosmopolis, remains nearly 200 years on, very considerable. Such controversy seems to rest largely on two paragraphs – both highly rhetorical and within the context of post-colonial politics, in equal measure, controversial. Evidence for the continuing villainization can be found in Suhir Chella Rajan’s (2017) article in The Hindu, which seeks to contextualise the less ‘palatable’ elements within his writing. In this piece, I adopt a broadly Culturally Materialist mode of analysis to argue that in the weight of both textual and historiographical evidence, Macausley’s principle mode of discourse (whilst unabashedly Orientalist) is to the same degree influenced by a politicised version of the principles of Instrumental Rationality, as delineated by the 19th century Sociologist Max Weber. I would contend that through the weight of such evidence, it is possible to see a less racially determinist, slightly more nuanced account of the political, cultural and ideational context of Macausley’s ideas.
In terms of his address, this is in front of an audience acknowledged by Macauley himself as divided. The division is on the basis of mode of instruction concerning language – whether that be Sanskrit or English. The opening paragraph to Macauley’s minute is what I would term ‘Rhetorical Orientalism’. This may sound tautologous though can be bracketed as such through statements on Egyptian culture that dispenses with any concern regarding substantiating points. The rhetoricism is arguably a reflection of the audience that he is addressing, though at an individual level has (in places), strong connotations of what in our own contemporaneity would be labelled pomposity: *would any body infer that he meant the youth of his Pachalik to give years to the study of hieroglyphics, to search into all the doctrines disguised under the fable of Osiris, and to ascertain with all possible accuracy the ritual with which cats and onions were anciently adored?* This can be read through the general context that Macauley believes Egyptian culture has basically de-generated from a position of reverence to seemingly being worthy of no more than trivialisation.

The next section of the argument deploys instrumental rationality in its concern with the belief that the ruling British owe no cultural debt to India to maintain the vibrancy of existing ‘Oriental languages’. This then gives way to a central question within Macauley’s speech: *How should the British regime disburse the funds that they have been granted by Central Government?* In terms of justifying principles, the terms *most advisable* are proffered, the question that is invited being, most advisable to whom exactly? This is an important contextual point in relation to the subsequent, more controversial elements of Macauley’s speech. These controversies are manifold and hence need to be outlined in turn. In relation to the two principal languages spoken by the Indian population – Sanskrit and Arabic, whilst professing ignorance of the two languages, he notes how *a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. The intrinsic superiority of the Western literature is indeed fully admitted by those members of the committee who support the oriental plan of education.*

This is the first blanketly Orientalist statement within the ‘Minute’. The term ‘Orientalism’ was coined by Edward Said in his 1978 work bearing that title. Using a broadly Foucauldian framework, his ideas were concerned with the interactions of Power/Knowledge within Colonialist
and Imperialist writings which in turn provided the justification for Western Powers to dominate and marginalise cultures considered to be ‘Other’. Said notes: *It operates as representations usually do ... in a specific historical, intellectual, and even economic setting.* As I will go on to show, this is an important point when discussing Macauley’s minute.

In contrast to his dismissal of ‘Oriental’ languages, Macauley is effusive in his praise of the English Language and its works: *Whoever knows that language has ready access to all the vast intellectual wealth which all the wisest nations of the earth have created and hoarded in the course of ninety generations.* The outright dismissal of Arabic and Sanskrit continues albeit in a slightly different vein. The language of bigotry and the perceived cultural stasis that it creates is invoked in relation to the existence of Colleges teaching Sanskrit and Arabic which is subsequently followed by a legal argument relating to the codification of these languages within Hindu and Muslim judicial principles.

The denouement of Macauley’s speech reveals its most controversial and oft quoted element in which he declares: *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 tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect. 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.*

This has been viewed as controversial at several different levels and for different reasons. Foremost of these is that by adopting an *essentialised* account of Identity there is a clearly racist logic being implied. The categories of *taste, morals and intellect* are especially inflammatory in seeming to valorise some of the ugliest enunciations of Racial Science, expressing a doctrine of Racial Superiority. It is also dismissive of indigenous Indian Cultures and furthermore, implicitly dismisses any claims that they may have towards any notion of Scientificity.
In writing about Macauley’s minute, I will examine two specific responses. The first of these is a contextual piece written by Steven Evans in 2002 whilst the second is a more detailed and also contemporaneous response from Gauri Visvanathan in her earlier book *Masks of Conquest* (1989).

Evans’ (2002) paper *Macaulay’s Minute Revisited: Colonial Language Policy in Nineteenth-century India* seeks to answer some of the considerable criticisms levied at Macauley by situating his (1835) minute within a broader context.

The analysis is essentially revisionist in tone, indicating a variety of different points, historical facts and qualifying points that serve the overall function of suggesting that there was limited substance behind Macauley’s actual rhetoric. The basic premise of Evans’ arguments is that whilst there was not necessarily anything exaggerated in Macauley’s rhetoric *per se*, its overall importance was exaggerated or at the very least overstated. He draws on various different sources, including a study by Phillipson (1992) in relation to Macauley’s role along with the testimony of Arthur Mayhew, a Senior Educational Adviser in British India.

Having established the contours of his argument, he goes onto argue that the dynamics of Education Policy in Colonial India were certainly not ‘zero sum’. That is to say that historically, the East India Trading Company had a policy of upholding and preserving Indian language and culture, as evinced by the establishment of the Calcutta Madrasa, to which the earl of Bengal, Warren Hastings contributed personally, and the Sanskrit College at Benares, which owed its foundation to the initiative of the Company official Jonathan Duncan. Evans contends that through its patronage of the two institutions, the company signalled its willingness to uphold the scholarly traditions of its Islamic and Hindu predecessors. This policy was intended to conciliate influential sections of the Indian community by demonstrating British respect and admiration for indigenous languages and culture. At the same time, progenitors in terms of language studies such as Rammohan Roy, expressed a view that the revival of Indian society could be enabled by schooling in English Literature on the basis of the necessity of what was termed ‘moral education’.
On a related point, Evans goes onto to argue that the ‘discursive field’ within which Macauley’s minute was actually located was far from uniform or without significant areas of conflict. Thus, Macauley’s statement concerning the enculturation of sections of the ‘educated elite’ of Indian society were as much a reflection of anxiety related to the status and long-term sustainability of colonial Governance as an expression of racial superiority. These ideas are not new, having stated by notable postcolonial theorists such as Homi K Bhabha in his (1995) volume of essays, *The Location of Culture*. A further noteworthy point concerns the fact that English had been a medium of instruction for some time before Macauley’s minute, indicating that its function could be viewed in terms of providing justification for the so-named status quo.

These criticisms have been picked up by Indian Cultural critics – Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi K Bhabha, Ranajit Guha, Gauri Visvanathan to name two as important components of Colonial Ideology – much of their work containing a Post-structuralist ontology centred on psychoanalytic formulations of the ‘anxiety’ of the Coloniser. Within contemporary Indian historiography, the work of writers such as Ranajit Guha and Gauri Visvanathan has been influential in recent years. Their status as two of the foremost scholars in the *Subaltern Studies* project was concerned with a sense of re-claiming Indian history from its Imperialist infections.

Viswanathan’s (1989) study *Masked Conquests: Literary Study and British Rule in India* is viewed by many as a classic in the field of Indian Colonial dynamics. Her overall thesis very persuasively draws attention to the uncertainties, divisions, inconsistencies and anomalies that characterised Educational policy in Colonial India to provide a comprehensive analysis of the emergence of English Literature in India. Her discussion of Macauley is fairly brief though and overall is focussed on contextual elements. One pertinent example concerns her discussion of the emergence of Orientalist Discourse in the late 18th century based on a perceived lack of understanding of the situation facing the mass of Indian population and with it, a significant chasm between ‘rulers and ruled’. This contrasts with the policy of ‘Anglicism’, (not to be confused with the religious movement of Anglicanism), a set of doctrines that emerged in the 1830s in order to promote British behavioural norms, laws and jurisprudence within Colonial contexts.  Viswanathan points
out that far from being diametrical opposites in terms of their ideologies, Anglicism depended upon Orientalist scholarship for its actual knowledge base.

The point concerning schisms within the ‘mission civiltrice’ is emphasised through reference to the significant divisions between conventional educational policy in Colonial India, contrasted with the objectives of Christian missionaries, a situation that brought about a number of significant divergences in policy and practice.

Viswanathan goes on to indicate potential barriers to the learning of English by the Indian population at large, noting the influence of the so-named ‘Maulvis’ and ‘Pundits’ in fostering a contempt for English owing to its threat to their own power base. This is a notable point insofar as it provides a further contextualisation of Macauley’s latter points in his 1835 Minute. He noted these are the systems of influence under which the population of India have become what they are.

One notable strength of Visvanathan’s argument is that it neglects the idea of a monolithic, unnuanced account of the issue that simply opposes ‘classical’ Indian languages with the promotion of English as the lingua franca within India. Conversely, her argument is concerned with the multifarious factors shaping how English was taught and the reasons/dynamics shaping this.