**Petitioning the Imperial Government: Deaf Education in Nineteenth-Century India**

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In July 1897, a petition was addressed to Queen Victoria about the condition of the deaf in India, drawn up by a teacher of the Deaf, Dr David Buxton of Manchester, and signed by over six hundred British and American Deaf people. The petition explained that ‘[to] all proceeding generations of the deaf, until a century ago, education was non-existent or unattainable. We have now been happily brought by the education we have received to enjoy the blessings of civilisation and religion and earnestly desire that the same blessings should be extended to the 150,000 living sufferers from life-long deafness among the population of India.’ This letter, which was widely circulated in the British press, raises important questions about deaf education in the nineteenth-century, the relationship between Britain and India and the role of the deaf community in Britain and the US in advocating for the extension of deaf education overseas.

The fact that, in the nineteenth century, India was a colony of the British Empire and ruled by white British people, was important in shaping these demands. In the early nineteenth century, India had been governed by the East India Company, a commercial organisation. Under its rule, Britain had expanded its influence in South Asia throughout the nineteenth century. The Indian Rebellion of 1857, which saw large scale resistance to colonisation, put an end to East India Company power and after that, India was directly ruled by the British state. Both East India Company and direct British rule were marked by violence and exploitation. Some people argued that with British control came certain responsibilities, that Britain should extend ‘civilisation’ and Christianisation to the indigenous population. For those deaf petitioners it was essential that deaf education was a part of this.

Furthermore, the censuses of the Indian population conducted by the British had revealed that there were, as the petitioners noted, in the 1890s there were 150, 000 deaf people living in India in the 1890s and these figures are likely to be a significant underestimate. Nonetheless, these were large numbers, particularly compared with the deaf population back in the UK. And the idea that they were not being educated was clearly upsetting though we should be wary of assuming, as did many people at the time, that the absence of European involvement meant that deaf people were simply left without the ‘blessings of civilisation and religion’ or education of any sort. There were, for example, early schools in Calcutta and Bombay run both by Europeans and by Indians that the petitions did not know about. Using only English-language sources, however, indigenous Indian practices of deaf education are beyond the scope of this article.

Perhaps the most significant European group interested in Deaf education were missionaries. Although they had an uneasy relationship with the British state, by the 1890s, missionaries had a long history of working in British India. Over the course of the nineteenth century they had started paying more and more attention to their physical as well as their spiritual wellbeing. For example, there was a large increase in medical missions which hoped to ‘heal’ those they encountered. Other missionaries were particularly interested in converting women or seeking to educate children. The cause of deaf education seemed to pull some of these concerns together. The Church of England Zenana Missionary Society (CEZMS) was a particularly active organisation in this regard opening schools for the deaf in Palamcottah, India (opened 1897), Madras, India (opened 1913) and Mount Lavinia, Sri Lanka (opened 1912).

Florence Swainson was a key player in these developments. Swainson travelled to India in the 1880s and was affiliated with the Sarah Tucker College. Having been presented with a ‘poor deaf girl’ and attempting to educate her, Swainson attracted the attention of the parents of other deaf children. Writing to the Government Inspector to enquire where these children might be educated, Swainson later recalled being told that ‘despite the 30,000 deaf mutes in the Madras Presidency and 200,000 in India, there was at present no school in Madras where they could be educated’. Along with the reply, the inspector enclosed a copy of the aforementioned petition by deaf people to Queen Victoria as well as Victoria’s response in which she promised to help anyone who would take up this work. Swainson then attempted to ascertain the spread, or rather the limits, of deaf education in South Asia, writing to missionaries across India to enquire about the number and condition of the deaf in each district. According to the CEZMS, Swainson found the ‘same sad story’ all over India: ‘so many children afflicted in this way, but no one to teach or train them!’ As such, she set up the first CEZMS school for the deaf in Palmacottah. Soon attracting the Palmacottah School was attracting large numbers as was a second school established in Madras.

The Palmacottah school started using the manual system and recorded having ‘services for the Deaf’ that were ‘chiefly in the sign language in which all can join alike, whether learning Tamil, as those do who belong to the Madras Presidency, or English, which is taught to those coming from other parts’. It maintained this system substantially after other schools had switched to oralism, though by 1914 Swainson was apologising for its continued use after her conversion to oralism. Such a move demonstrates the continuing influence of the Congress of Milan on Deaf Education.

Alongside language acquisition (Sign Language, Tamil and Malayalam in Palmacotta, English in Madras), the participation in ‘industrial activities’ (sewing, embroidery and knitting for the girls and weaving and tailoring for the boys) was emphasised as was religious education. Significantly the schools were open for all religious communities and those across the caste hierarchy, as such representing what one author described as ‘a strange family all under one roof... united in a bond of affliction, yet truly happy and joyful’. Whilst Hindu dietary laws were strictly adhered to, there was nonetheless a proselytising element as ‘Every child, whether Hindu, Mohammedan, or Christian, is expected to attend morning and evening prayers, and the daily Bible classes – the *raison d’etre* of the school being that the children may learn of a Saviour who loves them’. Also in keeping with the development of such schools in Britain physical drills were an important part of the daily routine, and it was, observers declared, ‘ intensely interesting to watch the deaf children, as they take their part in the daily exercise keeping perfect time with the rhythm of the music’.

The petition that deaf people wrote to the imperial government thus provides a fascinating insight into the development of deaf education in India. Their petition was inspiration to Swainson and others and helped the urgency of the need for deaf education be more widely known. The school set up in Palmacottah still exists today and has been renamed the Florence Swainson School for the Deaf.

Sources used:

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