

The Beautiful Tree We Must Replant

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When Mahatma Gandhi stood before the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London on 20 October 1931, he made a remarkable observation on Indian education. Referring to the indigenous system of education that flourished across India before British rule, he remarked, “The British administrators, when they came to India, instead of taking hold of things as they were, began to root them out. They scratched the soil and began to look at the root, and left the root like that, and the beautiful tree perished” (Gandhi, 1931/1958a). The ‘beautiful tree’ was not merely a metaphor for traditional Indian schools. It symbolized the knowledge system of an entire civilization, nourished by local communities and rooted in India’s ancient heritage. It branched into every aspect of life and lived in homes, workshops, religious institutions, *gurukuls*, guilds, families and communities. That tree gave India something far more valuable than literacy; it gave India capability.

Gandhi’s remarks did not go unchallenged in that wood-panelled hall of Chatham House in London. He had, after all, unmasked the notion of Kipling’s white man’s burden (1899) by stating that India was more illiterate in 1931 than it had been fifty or a hundred years before. Sir Philip Hartog, a former vice-chancellor of Dacca University, not only challenged the claim but followed up in writing asking for sources. Gandhi referred Hartog to the Punjab Administration Reports and its analysis published in *Young India*. Correspondence of citation to prior writings and commitment to verification followed even though what Gandhi was seemingly challenging was the colonial narrative of educational reform. And by that extension, the legitimacy of the centralized, Western-derived, expensive schooling system being imposed upon India. He was not contesting figures but defending the intrinsic efficacy of India’s civilizational inheritance. Yet he committed to Hartog further verification upon returning

to India and expressed willingness to retract if proven wrong (Gandhi, 1931/1958b).

Decades later, Gandhian scholar Dharampal analysed British Empire’s own archives; these included 1822-25 survey of indigenous education in the Madras Presidency, William Adam’s 1835-38 reports on Bengal and Bihar and comparable surveys from Bombay and the Punjab (Bagchi, 2014). Dharampal published his findings in a book he named, after Gandhi’s own words, *The Beautiful Tree* (Dharampal, 1983/ 2021). At the outset, it challenged the long-held assumption that pre-British India lacked organised education. The Beautiful Tree narrated the story of thousands of indigenous schools supported largely by local communities, where children from diverse social groups studied reading, writing, arithmetic, accounting, astronomy, philosophy, law, medicine, poetry and practical trades. Education was decentralized because society itself was decentralized; knowledge was practical, indigenous, intergenerational and deeply connected to life.

What those British surveys recorded, in their own handwriting, was a system whose branches reached into practically every village. The tree canopy was rooted deep in the astronomy of Aryabhata, the grammar of Panini, the surgery of Sushruta, the logic of Nyaya, centuries of Sanskrit and vernacular scholarship passed down as a living inheritance. This was the tree that had “perished” by 1931, not a golden-age fantasy, but a system British officials had personally surveyed and then allowed to starve of the land grants and patronage that had sustained it for generations. Colonial rule did not simply establish new schools, it replaced an ecosystem. The consequence was not merely economic, it was psychological. Indians are a product of collective human endeavour, of hope and struggle. And the mind is where the action is, making it the most important locus of explanation of Indian experience (Kasturiranjana, 2021). The colonized mind gradually came to believe that knowledge only arrived through foreign institutions, foreign languages, foreign

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URL: jirs.d.delhigreens.org/1-1/2026-01

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21460722>

validation and foreign approval. The colonial project succeeded by changing how Indians viewed themselves. A civilization that once exported knowledge began importing confidence.

Economic historians such as Angus Maddison estimate that India accounted for over 20% of the world's GDP around the beginning of the eighteenth century (Maddison, 2001). This remarkable prosperity was not accidental. It rested upon highly skilled agriculture, sophisticated irrigation, flourishing trade networks, advanced textile production, metallurgy, mathematics, medicine, shipbuilding and artisanal excellence. Consider only a few examples. Indian shipyards built ocean-going vessels that even served in the Royal Navy. This is no surprise today when we are learning about Lothal, home to what may be the oldest known dock in the world, and transferable principles for the marine sector (Pradeep Raja et al, 2026). Other surviving examples include the Wootz steel, a crucible steel exported to be forged into blades and which the world came to know as Damascus swords. A twelfth-century Arab geographer, Edrisi, wrote that no one equalled the edge the Hindus gave their iron (Ranganathan and Srinivasan, 2006); European metallurgists could not reliably reproduce the steel until the nineteenth century. That same tradition raised the Iron Pillar of Delhi that has stood in open air for over 1,600 years without rusting. Dhaka muslin became legendary across the world for its extraordinary fineness. Some varieties were so delicate that entire lengths of cloth could pass through a ring. It was Bengal's most valuable export to the world until Britain's own textile industry needed the market for itself (Hoque et al, 2025). Dhaka muslin was muzzled with import tariffs of 60 to 70 percent, alongside the mass import of cheaper machine-made cloth. Indian dye-makers, meanwhile, produced a blue dye that was so highly prized that the plant from which it was derived gave rise to the Western term indigo, originating from the Greek *indikon*, meaning "the Indian dye." When British expanded into this trade, they forced farmers into ruinous indigo contracts, provoking the Blue Mutiny of 1859-60 (Kling, 2016). Long before industrialization, the sophisticated agricultural systems of India sustained one of the world's largest populations. When the British rule ended in 1947, India's share of the global economy had plummeted to around 4.17% (in 1950) (Tanveer et al, 2024).

British history contains an intriguing expression, "shaking the pagoda tree." Historically, the phrase refers to making enormous fortunes in India, particularly by East India Company officials who accumulated wealth and sent it back to Britain. The "pagoda" is also the name

of a South Indian gold coin which was used in several kingdoms and trading centres. The established historical meaning of this expression is therefore financial enrichment through India. Yet one cannot help reflecting on the metaphor. To shake a tree is to make its fruits fall. To shake a civilization is to separate it from its knowledge. Whether intended or not, the phrase evokes a deeper image. Once India's educational tree had been weakened, its wealth became easier to harvest. Knowledge, after all, is the first line of civilizational self-defence. Colonial governance frequently justified this by portraying indigenous institutions as primitive, irrational or disorganised. The tragedy is not just that Indian knowledge was ignored. Much of it was absorbed, studied, adapted or commercialized elsewhere while the original systems were marginalized. Scientific observations, botanical knowledge, agricultural techniques, medicinal practices, textile skills, metallurgical expertise and artisanal methods increasingly became detached from their Indian origins. If a civilization can be persuaded that it never knew much, it becomes easier to convince it to imitate everyone else. This is how the colonial mindset got planted through quiet substitution of one question for another -- "what did India build?" replaced by "what did India lack?" Long after 1947, that substitution still lingers in classrooms that teach a great deal about the steam engine and little about wootz steel, in institutions which continue to be designed for producing administrators rather than thinkers & inventors.

So what would it actually mean to replant the 'beautiful tree' that was uprooted? The task before us is not to merely grieve or romanticize the past. It is to recover what was valuable and to combine ancient wisdom with modern science. This can be achieved in myriad ways -- restoring community-centred learning, building green instead of only concrete campuses and by educating minds without uprooting souls. Doing so will uncover the true meaning of sustainability, that it is not only about planting trees but replanting the 'beautiful tree' that had made India one of the greatest centres of learning, creativity and prosperity. A country now relearning how to keep its rivers, its soil and its air alive for the next century will need exactly the kind of patient, localised, relationship-based learning the *gurukul* and the *gharana* were built on, the same instinct for stewardship that once made entire communities willing to lay down their lives for a stand of trees.

Reviving India's pre-British tree of learning is not a detour from the work of progress & sustainability; for a country this old, it may be the only way back to it. The

National Education Policy 2020 has, at least in principle, acknowledged the need to reconnect with India's civilizational foundations by calling for the integration of what it terms Indian Knowledge Systems. Yet policy alone cannot revive a civilisation's educational ethos. That requires sustained scholarship, interdisciplinary dialogue, institutional commitment and the courage to rediscover, reinterpret and reapply the wisdom that once nourished India's 'beautiful tree.' It is in this spirit that we have launched the Journal of Interdisciplinary Research for Sustainable Development (JIRSD), not just as another academic publication, but as a humble step towards replanting the 'beautiful tree.' JIRSD seeks to bring together ancient wisdom and modern science, indigenous knowledge and contemporary innovation, to nurture the roots of a truly sustainable future, helping India rediscover the confidence to grow once again from its own civilizational soil.

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