International Journal of Social Impact
ISSN: 2455-670X
Volume 10, Issue 4, DIP: 18.02.006/20251004
DOI: 10.25215/2455/1004006
www.ijsi.in |October-December, 2025

Research Paper

The Evolution of Education in Murshidabad (WB): A Historical Study (c. 600 CE-1947 CE)

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ABSTRACT

This scholarly paper traces the educational history of Murshidabad district, West Bengal, from ancient times through British colonial rule, illustrating how the region became a microcosm of Bengal's educational evolution. Beginning with Karnasubarna under King Sasanka (7th century CE), the region emerged as a centre of learning, as noted by Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang, who observed that "the inhabitants of the country are patrons of learning." During the medieval period, Buddhist monastic universities flourished under the Palas, while Hindu pathshalas/tols and Muslim maktabs/madrasahs were introduced by Muslim rulers. These diverse systems coexisted through royal and local patronage, creating a decentralised yet dynamic educational landscape. William Adam's 19th-century reports revealed an extensive indigenous education system across Bengal, with numerous village schools that challenged colonial narratives of educational backwardness. Local rulers such as Rani Bhabani and the Royal Family of Kasimbazar supported both traditional and emerging forms of education, including early Western educational experiments. The British colonial era brought transformative changes through the Macaulay Minute (1835) and Wood's Despatch (1854), which prioritised English education while neglecting indigenous systems. Institutions like Krishnath College (1853) emerged, demonstrating both colonial influence and local agency. British policies cultivated an English-speaking middle class and introduced modern administrative systems, but simultaneously eroded traditional learning and widened social disparities. The paper examines how political power, patronage, and policy shaped Murshidabad's educational development. Indigenous systems persisted but were gradually supplanted by colonial structures, forging a complex legacy of cultural hybridity and socioeconomic transformation. This educational history reveals how education served as a tool for state-building and social engineering, shaped by the interplay between external imposition and local adaptation.

Keywords: *Murshidabad, Indigenous systems, social transformation, social engineering, Institutions, colonial systems*

Murshidabad, a district in West Bengal, holds significant historical importance as the former capital of Bengal during the Middle Ages, which established its cultural and industrial prominence in ancient times (Sen, 2019). Its ancient heritage is rooted in Karnasubarna, the capital of King Sasanka's domain in the 7th century

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Received: October 22, 2025; Revision Received: November 10, 2025; Accepted: November 14, 2025

CE, strategically situated on the banks of the Bhagirathi River (Chakraborty, 2018). This historical connection underscores Murshidabad's longstanding role as both a political centre and a seat of learning.

The present study aims to document the complex evolution of education in Murshidabad-from its ancient foundations under King Sasanka, through the flourishing of medieval Buddhist and Islamic institutions, the robust indigenous systems of the pre-colonial era, to the transformative impact of British colonial policy (Roy, 2021). This research critically examines how political changes, religious dynamics, socio-economic conditions, and local agency collectively shaped the district's unique education system over a millennium.

A central insight is that Murshidabad acted as a microcosm of Bengal's broader educational development. The region's progression from ancient scholastic and monastic Buddhist systems to Islamic educational institutions, resilient indigenous schools, and ultimately British-led reforms mirrors the overarching historical trajectory of education in Bengal (Mukherjee, 2020). Murshidabad's continued political and economic prominence, whether as a capital or major district, often made it an early site for, or direct subject of, wider educational trends and policies. Thus, the educational history of Murshidabad represents not an isolated narrative but a focused reflection of Bengal's larger educational transformation (Biswas, 2017).

Studying Murshidabad, therefore, provides a critical and representative case for understanding the multi-layered historical development of education in Bengal, demonstrating how macro-historical phenomena unfolded at the local level (Das, 2022).

Ancient Foundations: Education in Sasanka's Karnasubarna (7th Century CE)

Karnasubarna, located on the banks of the Bhagirathi River in present-day Murshidabad district, served as the capital of King Sasanka's Gaur Kingdom (Chakraborty, 2018). This establishes Murshidabad's historical significance as a centre of political power and intellectual activity. The Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Hiuen Tsang (Xuanzang), who travelled through India between 629 and 645 CE, provided invaluable documentation of the region (Sen, 2019). His accounts remain authoritative sources for understanding India's administrative, social, and cultural conditions during this period (Kumar, 2020).

Hiuen Tsang noted that Karnasubarna's inhabitants were "of high character and patrons of education," indicating a strong cultural emphasis on learning (Sen, 2019). More broadly, he described Indians as "lovers of education, literature and fine arts" (Kumar, 2020). Education was primarily religious and oral, with debates and discussions serving as key methods of intellectual exchange (Kumar, 2020). Indians typically studied from ages nine to thirty, sometimes throughout their entire lives, with Sanskrit serving as the primary scholarly language (Sen, 2019).

While specific educational institutions in Karnasubarna are not documented, Hiuen Tsang's travels revealed major Buddhist centres elsewhere, including Nalanda and Valabhi, where he studied for five years (Kumar, 2020). These universities offered comprehensive curricula encompassing Buddhist philosophy (Madhyamaka, Yogachara, Sarvastivada), Vedas, grammar, medicine, logic, mathematics, astronomy, and alchemy-suggesting a sophisticated intellectual environment that likely influenced regional learning traditions (Roy, 2021).

Hiuen Tsang's characterisation of Karnasubarna's people as education patrons suggests that learning, whether informal, household-based, or community-led, enjoyed cultural and financial support (Sen, 2019). This indicates a decentralised, community-driven system rather than a strictly state-centred model. This foundational value for education established a cultural predisposition toward learning that persisted through subsequent historical periods in Murshidabad (Mukherjee, 2020).

Medieval Period: Buddhist and Early Hindu/Islamic Learning (8th-18th Century)

Buddhist Monastic Education Under the Pala Dynasty

The Pala dynasty (8th-12th century CE) was a significant patron of Buddhist monastic education in Bengal and Bihar. They established and supported prominent monasteries functioning as residential universities, including Somapura Mahavihara, Vikramashila Mahavihara, Odantapuri Mahavihara, and Jagaddala Mahavihara (Biswas, 2017). These institutions attracted students and scholars from across Asia, including Tibetan monks studying Buddhism, Sanskrit, and grammar (Das, 2022). The Pala kings provided endowments covering food, clothing, and shelter, enabling scholars to pursue higher education (Biswas, 2017).

The curriculum was extensive and interdisciplinary, encompassing grammar, metaphysics, ritual, logic, Tantra (particularly Vajrayana Buddhism), Vedas, Ayurveda, history, science, and medicine, with instruction in Sanskrit and Pali (Biswas, 2017). Jagaddala Mahavihara, established by King Ramapala (c. 1077-1120), exemplified this state-sponsored system of higher education (Das, 2022). The flourishing of these monastic universities under Pala patronage marked a golden era of intellectual advancement in Bengal, profoundly influencing the broader region, including Murshidabad, and fostering a culture of advanced scholarship (Roy, 2021).

Development and Features of Hindu Pathsalas and Tols

During the medieval period, Hindu boys received primary instruction in pathsalas, often housed in temples or under trees, where priests or scholars taught reading, writing, arithmetic (e.g., Subhankar), and religious epics free of charge (Chakraborty, 2018). Pathsalas were typically co-educational and lasted about six years (Roy, 2021). For advanced study, students attended tols (chatuspathis), where Sanskrit was the medium and instruction covered poetic criticism (kāvya), logic, Smriti, and Nyāya. Tols attracted learners from across Bengal and were sustained by land grants from rulers, zamindars, and private patrons, with students offering gifts upon completion (Biswas, 2017). Although Brahmins largely controlled access to Sanskrit in tols, pathsalas remained accessible to lower socioeconomic groups, reflecting a decentralized yet deeply Brahmanical system (Mukherjee, 2020).

Maktabs and Madrasahs under Early Muslim Rule

Following Bengal’s conquest in 1204 CE, maktabs and madrasahs emerged to serve diverse populations regardless of status (Sen, 2019). Maktabs, usually in mosques or homes, taught reading, writing, basic prayers, Arabic, and Persian, with enrollment beginning around age five (Das, 2022). Madrasahs offered secondary and tertiary education in Quranic exegesis (tafsīr), ḥadīth, fiqh, and secular sciences such as logic, arithmetic, medicine, chemistry, geometry, astronomy, history, and politics (Kumar, 2020). Many institutions provided free boarding funded by waqf lands and state or elite donations, while private tutoring for women was confined to aristocratic families (Biswas, 2017).

Despite distinct religious curricula and languages (Sanskrit/vernacular vs. Arabic/Persian), some madrasahs admitted both Hindu and Muslim pupils for secular subjects, illustrating coexistence and shared intellectual interests (Roy, 2021). Patronage determined institutional scale and access: Muslim sultans and nobles supported large madrasahs with extensive endowments, whereas zamindars and wealthy individuals maintained smaller Hindu schools. Shifts in political authority-from Pala to Sultanate-thus redirected resources and priorities, driving dynamic transformations in medieval Bengal's educational landscape (Mukherjee, 2020).

Table 1. Key Educational Institutions and Their Characteristics (Ancient to Medieval Bengal)

Period / Dynasty	Institution Type	Examples	Curriculum Focus	Patronage / Funding	Accessibility
Pala (8th–12th CE)	Mahavihara (residential university)	Nalanda, Vikramashila, Somapura, Jagaddala	Buddhist philosophy (Vajrayāna), Vedas, grammar, medicine, logic, mathematics, astronomy, tantra, history, science (Biswas, 2017; Das, 2022)	Royal endowments, state supervision, land grants (Biswas, 2017)	Monks and scholars from across Asia (Das, 2022)
Medieval Hindu	Pathśālā (primary)	Village-based schools	Reading, writing, arithmetic (Subhankar), Rāmāyaṇa, Mahābhārata, basic religious narratives (Chakraborty, 2018)	Temple priests, hired pundits, Jain scholars, community contributions (Chakraborty, 2018)	Hindu children; co-educational; accessible to lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Roy, 2021)
Medieval Hindu	Tol / Chatuśpathī (higher)	Regional Sanskrit centers	Sanskrit poetry (kāvya), logic, Smṛti, Nyāya (Biswas, 2017)	Land grants from state, zamindars, wealthy patrons; voluntary student gifts (Roy, 2021)	Hindu children and scholars—often Brahmins but not exclusively (Roy, 2021)
Early Muslim Rule (13th–18th CE)	Maktab (primary)	Mosque-attached or private-home schools	Reading, writing, basic Islamic prayers, Arabic script, Persian language (Das, 2022)	Rulers, nobles, philanthropists; waqf endowments (Das, 2022)	All social groups regardless of religion (Sen, 2019)

Period / Dynasty	Institution Type	Examples	Curriculum Focus	Patronage / Funding	Accessibility
Early Muslim Rule (13th–18th CE)	Madrasah (secondary / higher)	Urban centers	Qurʾān exegesis (tafsīr), ḥadīth, fiqh, logic, arithmetic, medicine, chemistry, geometry, astronomy, history, politics (Kumar, 2020)	State officials, high-ranking nobles, Sufis, ulamās; waqf lands, donations (Kumar, 2020)	Hindu and Muslim pupils in secular subjects; elite women via private arrangements (Roy, 2021)
Early Muslim Rule (13th–18th CE)	Majlis (specialized study groups)	Around prominent scholars	Advanced Islamic sciences (ḥadīth, fiqh, uṣūl al-fiqh), natural sciences, logic, mathematics, medicine, astronomy, history (Sen, 2019)	Rulers, nobles, philanthropists; waqf endowments (Sen, 2019)	Advanced scholars seeking specialized training (Sen, 2019)

Pre-Colonial Landscape: Indigenous Education and Local Patronage (18th Century)

In 18th-century Bengal, a vast network of decentralized village schools-often linked to temples, mosques, or standing alone-served roughly one school per 400 residents, totalling over 100,000 institutions (Adam, 1838). These schools operated independently, with no central oversight, offering practical curricula in reading, writing, arithmetic (e.g., Subhankar), theology, law, astronomy, ethics, and medicine. Pathshalas favoured Bengali over Sanskrit manuscripts, highlighting vernacular emphasis, and many instructors and pupils came from low castes, contradicting notions of Brahminical monopoly (Adam, 1838; Mukherjee, 2020). Female education remained scarce and largely confined to affluent households (Adam, 1838).

Local elites were pivotal patrons. Rani Bhabani (c. 1716–1803) endowed temples, schools, and rent-free lands for Brahmins, and provided famine relief (Chakraborty, 2018). The Kasimbazar Royal Family spearheaded educational innovation: Raja Harinath established a Sanskrit chatuspathi and planned an English school at Saidabad (inaugurated posthumously in 1837) (Roy, 2021); Raja Krishnath Roy championed Western education and envisioned a university with medical facilities (Roy, 2021); Maharani Swarnamoyee, despite purdah, founded Berhampore College (Krishnath College) in 1853 and later managed its school (Das, 2022).

Adam's 1838 survey of Murshidabad documented 67 indigenous schools under 14 police stations, educating 1,082 students with predominantly Hindu teachers (Adam, 1838). These

findings refute colonial claims of pre-colonial educational backwardness, demonstrating a robust, community-driven system. Indigenous patronage not only sustained traditional learning but also facilitated the local adoption and adaptation of Western education, revealing that "modernization" in Murshidabad was as much an indigenous initiative as a colonial import (Sen, 2019; Kumar, 2020).

Table 2: William Adam's Survey of Indigenous Education in Bengal (1838)

Characteristic	Data from Adam's Reports (Early 19th Century)
Report Year	1838 (Third Report) (Gyansanchay, 2021)
District/Area Surveyed	Murshidabad, Rajshahi, Vardhaman, Tirhut, Virbhume, South Bihar (Gyansanchay, 2021)
Number of Schools (approx.)	67 schools in 14 police stations of Murshidabad; 2,567 schools across surveyed areas; >100,000 across Bengal/Bihar (Gyansanchay, 2021)
Number of Students (approx.)	1,082 in Murshidabad; 30,900 across surveyed areas; 1 school per 400 persons in Bengal/Bihar (Gyansanchay, 2021)
Teacher Demographics	Predominantly Hindu in Murshidabad (1 Muslim teacher noted); Majority non-Brahmins, Kayastha caste prominent in vernacular instruction in South Bihar (Gyansanchay, 2021)
Student Demographics	Significant percentage from low castes (Malo, Chandal, Kahar, Luniar, Dhoba, Kalu) (Gyansanchay, 2021)
Curriculum Highlights	Reading, Writing, Arithmetic (Subhankar), Theology, Law, Astronomy, Metaphysics, Ethics, Medical Science, Religion (Hossain, 2023); More Bengali manuscripts than Sanskrit in pathshalas (StudySmarter, n.d.)
Funding/Structure	Donations from wealthy families, fund collection, teacher's expenses (no dedicated buildings) (Research Guru, n.d.); Decentralized, no government oversight (StudySmarter, n.d.); Largely informal, vocational, fragmented (ISCA, n.d.)
Female Education	Limited, mainly in wealthy/progressive homes due to superstitions (Gyansanchay, 2021)

The British Transformation: Colonial Policies and Modern Education (19th Century-1947)

The 1757 British conquest of Bengal introduced an education system designed to produce low-paid English-educated clerks and "civilize" Indian society (Metcalf, 1995). Early policy was divided between Anglicists, who promoted English and European sciences, and Orientalists, who supported Sanskrit, Arabic, and Persian instruction (Stokes, 1980).

Key Policies

- Charter Act of 1813: Allocated ₹100,000 annually to "revival and promotion of literature" and indigenous scholarship, but implementation faltered amid the Anglicist-Orientalist dispute (Bayly, 1983).
- Macaulay's Minute (1835): Endorsed English-medium instruction exclusively, dismissed Sanskrit and Arabic as inferior, and aimed to create "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste" (Macaulay, 1835). His "downward filtration" theory restricted education to elites, widening social gaps (Metcalf, 1995).
- Wood's Despatch (1854): Established a graded system of vernacular primary schools, bilingual secondary schools, and English colleges-advocated women's education, teacher training, secular curricula, and created universities in Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras (Stokes, 1980). This laid the foundation for modern education but accelerated the decline of indigenous institutions (Chakrabarty, 2004).

Expansion of Formal Institutions in Murshidabad

- Nijamat College (1815): Initially for Nawab heirs, teaching Arabic, Persian, and later English, it opened to Hindus in 1831 (Roy, 2021).
- Krishnath Collegiate School & College (1853): Founded by Maharani Swarnamoyee, it introduced Arts, Science, and Commerce streams; Swarnamoyee assumed administration in 1887 (Das, 2022).
- New Government Schools (1846–1866): English-medium schools at Saidabad, Jangipur, Kandi, and eight Indian schools funded by the government and local patrons (Mukherjee, 2020).
- Women's Education: Missionaries opened girls' schools in the 1830s; the Berhampore Girls' College began in 1946 under missionary and colonial support (Sen, 2019).

Socio-Economic Impact: Rise of the English-Educated Middle Class

Western education created a bilingual elite that spearheaded the Bengal Renaissance, enriched Bengali literature, and occupied colonial bureaucracy (Chatterjee, 1993). Land revenue reforms and English schooling produced a middle class from zamindars to clerks (Guha, 1983). However, privileging English-educated elites undermined indigenous Pathshalas and Tols, eroded vernacular scholarship, and entrenched social inequality (Chakrabarty, 2004).

Women's education transitioned from rare private tutoring to formal institutions, driven by missionary zeal, Wood's Despatch recommendations, and elite patronage, marking the beginning of broader gender inclusion in Bengal's educational landscape (Sen, 2019).

Table 3: Major British Educational Policies and Their Impact on Murshidabad/Bengal

Policy/Event	Key Objectives/Recommendations	Immediate Impact/Consequences	Long-term Implications
Charter Act of 1813	Allocate ₹100,000 annually for the "revival and promotion of literature," encouragement of learned natives, and introduction of sciences (Bayly, 1983).	Implementation hampered by the Orientalist–Anglicist dispute over medium and content (Bayly, 1983).	Marked the first legislative endorsement of British involvement in Indian education, setting a precedent for subsequent policies.
Macaulay's Minute (1835)	Advocate exclusively English-medium instruction, European science, and literature; withdraw stipends for Sanskrit and Arabic; create English-speaking intermediaries (Macaulay, 1835).	Secured Anglicist victory; established English as the language of administration and higher courts; de-recognized indigenous systems; "downward filtration" initiated (Metcalf, 1995).	Laid the foundation for an English-educated elite; accelerated cultural shifts and social disparities; provided Indian nationalists access to Western texts (Metcalf, 1995).
Wood's Despatch (1854)	Propose a graded system: vernacular primary schools, bilingual secondary schools,	Led to the establishment of universities in Calcutta, Bombay, and	Institutionalized modern education; further

Policy/Event	Key Objectives/Recommendations	Immediate Impact/Consequences	Long-term Implications
	English colleges; promote women's education, teacher training, and secular curricula; establish universities and provincial education departments (Stokes, 1980).	Madras (1857); created education departments in provinces; increased English proficiency; influenced the founding of institutions in Murshidabad such as Krishnath College (Das, 2022).	marginalized indigenous Pathshalas and Tols; fostered the rise of an English-educated middle class and expanded women's education (Chakrabarty, 2004).

CONCLUSION

The educational history of Murshidabad reflects continuous adaptation amid shifting political and cultural paradigms. From King Sasanka's Karnasubarna-celebrated by Hiuen Tsang as a hub of learning (Sen, 2019), to Pala-sponsored Buddhist mahaviharas, Hindu pathsalas and tols, and Muslim maktabs and madrasahs, medieval education was community-driven and supported by diverse patronage (Chakraborty, 2018; Biswas, 2017). William Adam's early 19th-century survey documented over 100,000 decentralized village schools serving all castes, disproving colonial claims of pre-colonial backwardness (Adam, 1838).

British rule reoriented this pluralistic system through the Charter Act of 1813, Macaulay's Minute (1835), and Wood's Despatch (1854), privileging English-medium instruction and creating graded, secular schools and universities (Bayly, 1983; Macaulay, 1835; Stokes, 1980). Formal institutions in Murshidabad-Nijamat College (1815), Krishnath College (1853), and numerous government and missionary schools produced an English-educated middle class but also marginalised indigenous learning (Roy, 2021; Das, 2022).

Despite colonial de-recognition, traditional forms endured informally, even as local elites like Rani Bhabani and Maharani Swarnamoyee championed both vernacular and Western education (Mukherjee, 2020; Kumar, 2020). This dual agency demonstrates that Murshidabad's "modernization" was neither wholly imposed nor entirely resisted but shaped through a dynamic interplay between colonial policies and indigenous initiatives. Ultimately, its educational evolution underscores how power, patronage, and social ambition have continually forged new hybrid models of learning.

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Acknowledgment
The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest
The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Chatterjee, S. & Panda, A.R. (2025). The Evolution of Education in Murshidabad (WB): A Historical Study (c. 600 CE-1947 CE). *International Journal of Social Impact*, *10*(4), 59-67. DIP: 18.02.006/20251004, DOI: 10.25215/2455/1004006