Since the inception of the British Rule, there had been witnessed a gradual change in the attitude of the British Government towards education. Initially, the East India Company was unwilling to assume any direct responsibility for education. There is considerable evidence of the existence of a widespread system of Indigenous education in almost all parts of the country prior to the establishment of British rule. Learning in pre-British India was not designed to investigate the natural world through scientific methods, nor to record historical events, nor yet to experiment with social innovation. The chief functions of traditional learning appears to have been to conserve customs, to organize and sanction the existing political and economic order to provide philosophical and religious enlightenment to the ruling class. But due to the degeneration of old economic order and apathetic attitude of the East India Company led to the decline of indigenous education.

The Charter Act of 1813 contained the first legislative admission of the claim of education to a share of income of the state. The official sanction of one lakh of rupees per year on education, according to the
provisions of the Act of 1813, also caused violent controversies in educational matters, for the amount was small and court of directors did not express their views definitely on the matter and controversies centered round, whom to educate, what to import, through which language should we teach, should we emphasise on higher education or education of masses. Thus till 1854, the British Government adopted a perplexed attitude towards education.

The need for an uniform policy for the whole country was felt by now. The dispatch of 1854 suggested a scheme of education covering all aspects of Indian education, right from the primary to the university stages. It declared that the education of masses cannot be ignored. It suggested several measures not only for spreading mass education but also for preserving and encouraging indigenous education. It also declared the advancement of Western knowledge as its avowed object, although it considered it desirable to grant some encouragement to oriental learning at the collegiate state. Further, it laid down that both English as well as the local language, should be used as the media of instruction at the secondary stage. No doubt, it declared that the education of the whole population was a definite responsibility of the state, yet it pointed out that the education system could not be built single handed. It needed the cooperation of private agencies whether
missionary or Indian. It also decided to set up a state machinery for administering education, for an unofficial agency was not found able to shoulder such a great responsibility. The government could not have acted properly on the recommendations of the Despatch, as system of grant-in-aid did not come into force, mass education remained neglected too. The attitude of the government officials agency towards the missionaries changed gradually. Till 1813, the missionaries were treated quite contemptuously, and the relations between them and the government were strained then for twenty years, officials showed a lukewarm attitude but afterward relations became quite cordial.

In 1858, the Government of India was transferred from the East India Company to the British crown. The Lord Ellenborough Despatch of 1858 was a panicky document, which tried to the policies laid down by the 1854 Despatch on the ground that they had led to the events of 1857. however, its recommendations were acted upon. Again, in 1859, Lord Stanley, the secretary of State for India reiterated the educational policy laid down in Wood's Despatch and reviewed the progress made since.

The most notable feature was the success of the universities and impetus which they gave to secondary education. The establishment of
Universities in 1857 had far reaching consequences especially on the content, range and scope of secondary education. The universities dominated secondary schools in every respect. Secondary education, instead of providing self-sufficient course preparing students to enter life after completing it, became merely step towards the universities, with the result that the schools could not function with an independent programme of their own.

The Indian Universities Commission (1882) examined the conditions of education in each province, identified the defects, and recommended the principles of the Despatch of 1854 should be further developed. They felt that primary education had not received due attention and asked for a proper share of public funds when the department of education came into existence. Primary schools were now opened and at some places a few indigenous schools were incorporated into the new system. The proposals of the commission were accepted by the Government of India by resolution of 1884. The proposals which had the most direct affect on subsequent government policy were those relating to the expansion of primary education and its management by the local bodies set up under the local self government acts of Lord Ripon's government in 1883-85, the development of the grant-in-aid system, and the encouragement of private enterprise. The
government’s policy of gradually withdrawing from higher education and the approval of lower fees in private institutions, helped the establishment of a number of colleges and high schools to rise almost immediately.

The earliest phase of the British educational policy in India was a period of non-involvement. It gradually changed into a slight involvement and finally into a phase of greater involvement. The British Government laid down the principle of secular education in government and aided institutions. The mother tongue as a medium of instruction was completely neglected. Course of study became too academic and unrelated to life, mainly because there was no provision for vocational or technical education. The matriculation examination began to dominate not only secondary education but even the education imparted in primary schools.

The first efforts in the field of female education were made by the missionaries and enlightened Indians. The establishment of a girls’ (Bethune) school in Calcutta, by the Hon’ble J.E.D. Bethune in May 1849, may be regarded as the turning point in the annals of female education. By the 1850s, Lord Dalhosie’s government also took a more active interest and directed that girls school should be established and
help given to spread education among girls in all possible ways. The Indian education commission of 1882 made several important recommendations for the spread of education among women and this policy was reiterated by successive government resolutions. The increase in women's education began at primary stage and expansion at the secondary level was much slower. Higher education of women began even later but it made slow progress.

The idea of providing technical education to the people of India by the Government was first mentioned in Sir Charles Wood's Education Despatch of 1854. Both Railways and electric telegraph created a demand for technical hands masons, carpenters, smiths, signalers. The demand for civil engineer was so great that Dalhousie transferred his earlier idea of establishing a civil engineering class to that of a civil engineering college in each of the three Presidencies of Bengal, Bombay and Madras. The Indian Education Commission of 1882 advised the introduction of a "modern" side into High Schools and suggested the starting of industrial schools. After that few Industrial schools were opened in different parts of India. Progress of Technical education, despite all reports and resolutions remained slow.
The Laissez-faire policy adopted in 1854 and more vigorously applied since 1884, was formally abandoned by Lord Curzon, as its results were considered both educationally and politically dangerous. The principle aims of his policy were to bring the entire educational structure under government control and thereby improve quality while at the same time restricting the growth of higher education. It was also a part of official policy to give a new direction to the growth of education by emphasizing primary instead of higher, vernacular instead of English and Technical instead of literary education. Encouragement of Technical studies was undertaken in a half-hearted manner in the hope that it would produce few lawyers and Arts graduate and thus fewer critics of British rule in India. It is however, true that Lord Curzon's schemes of introducing improvement in Indian education created a new awakening and inspiration in educational field.