

Determinants of Primary Schooling in British India

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August 2, 2007

Abstract

This paper explores the provision of schooling in colonial India when British administrators dictated education policy. Although public and private funds were used to expand and improve the public education system, there were fewer than 3 primary schools for every 10 villages as late as 1911. To explore the impact of the funding system on the provision of schools, I empirically analyze the links between local factors and schooling using a new historical dataset. I find that districts with higher levels of caste and religious diversity had fewer privately managed primary schools and fewer total primary schools. Heterogeneous preferences across groups, unequal political power in more diverse districts and low demand for education by lower castes are all potential explanations for this pattern. Broadly, the results highlight the challenges involved in the provision of primary education in the presence of numerous and perhaps unequal groups.

Keywords: Education; Institutions; Colonialism; Development.

JEL Classification Numbers: N30, I21.

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1 Introduction

In the 19th century, the East India Company and later the British Crown introduced a new state system of education in British India.¹ Beginning in 1858 the Crown controlled education policy until 1919 when education was transferred to the control of Indian ministers at the province-level.² Over this period, numerous acts were passed, various recommendations were made and both public and private funds were used to expand and improve the public education system. However, the new system was unable to achieve mass literacy—there were fewer than 3 primary schools for every 10 villages and less than 10% of the population was able to read and write by 1911.

Although historians have put forward several explanations for British India’s limited achievement in basic primary education, they have largely been qualitative studies and there has been limited quantitative research on this topic.³ This paper fills the void by empirically exploring the links between local district characteristics and the provision of schools, particularly primary schools, in 1901 and 1911 when the Crown directly controlled education policy. For this purpose, I have constructed a new historical district-level dataset from district gazetteers and colonial censuses to analyze the effects of various economic and social factors on the provision of schools.

A better understanding of the determinants of schooling in colonial India is extremely important for three reasons. First, British India’s poor schooling and literacy record has strong

¹British India refers to approximately two-thirds of the Indian sub-continent that was under direct colonial control. The remaining one-third of the territories were under the rule of various native kings who deferred to the British with regard to defense and foreign policy, but had the autonomy to manage their local affairs including education. These territories were referred to as ‘Native States’ or ‘Princely States’.

²The East India Company controlled the Indian sub-continent until the Revolt of 1857. After the Revolt, the British Crown took over control from the Company with the Government of India Act of 1858 and controlled policy via the India Office in London and the Government of India. The Crown handed over provision of education to Indian ministers at the province-level with the Government of India Act of 1919.

³Some of the traditional explanations emphasize the role of colonial policy, the undue public and private emphasis on secondary education as compared to primary education, limited public funds, and low demand for education. Despite the importance of the topic, the literature on education in British India is relatively modest. Nurullah and Naik (1951) offer the most detailed history of education in the colonial period. See also Basu (1974), Basu (1982) and Ghosh (2000). Whitehead (2005) discusses the historiography of research on colonial Indian education, provides an overview of the literature to date and emphasizes the need for more empirical research.

implications for India's growth path in the colonial and post-independence era. Theodore Schultz has written extensively on the importance of primary education to economic growth, specifically for a traditional agricultural economy, and suggests that more literate farmers are quicker to adopt superior inputs, engage in greater information sharing and thereby increase agricultural production.⁴ Drèze and Sen (1998) also emphasize the substantially high social returns to primary education in India because greater literacy promotes public discourse, increases accountability of elected leaders and generally improves democratic governance.⁵ Second, this is a particularly interesting setting given the high degree of diversity in Indian society that has significant consequences for public and private provision of schools. Indian society was divided along both caste and religious lines, and in addition there was also substantial inequality between castes whereby higher castes, at least in this period, enjoyed far greater economic and educational standing as compared to lower castes. Third, stronger insight of the historical circumstances can potentially guide current educational policies as India strives to achieve universal literacy.

Although British India was among the largest colonies of the British Empire, public investments on human capital were among the lowest in the world and lagged behind other colonies of the British Empire and even the Indian Princely States that were not under direct colonial authority. Moreover, less than 40% of public education expenditures were targeted to primary education. Due to the low level of public funding, private revenues became critical for the development of schooling and local district characteristics such as population shares of different social groups, the level of diversity and income strongly influenced private provision. The main empirical results in this paper show that districts with higher levels of caste and religious diversity (as measured by a Herfindahl index) had fewer total primary

⁴See Schultz (1962), Schultz (1963), Schultz (1971) and Schultz (1983). More generally, education has been linked to greater worker productivity and a faster ability to adopt new and existing technology. See Becker (1964), Mincer (1974), Easterlin (1981), Romer (1990) and Benhabib and Spiegel (1994) among others who have emphasized the importance of education as human capital.

⁵They also suggest that primary education has the potential to reduce long standing gender and caste inequities in India because it affords socially disadvantaged groups the "ability to resist oppression, to organize politically and to get a fairer deal."