

IMPACT OF ECONOMIC CONDITIONS ON EDUCATION IN AJMER-MERWARA: A HISTORICAL STUDY

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Abstract

This paper explores the intricate relationship between economic conditions and educational development in the Ajmer-Merwara region of Rajputana during the colonial era. By examining historical data and records, this study aims to understand how economic factors influenced educational policies, access, and outcomes in this unique region administered directly by the British. The paper highlights the challenges and opportunities that arose from the economic environment and their lasting impact on the educational landscape.

Objectives

- To examine the historical economic conditions of Ajmer-Merwara.
- To analyse the impact of these conditions on the region's educational development.
- To identify key factors that facilitated or hindered educational progress in response to economic changes.

Introduction

The interplay between economic conditions and education is critical in understanding regional development. Due to the region's unique administrative setup and socio-economic context, this relationship was particularly significant in Ajmer-Merwara, a former province of British India. This paper seeks to analyse how economic conditions influenced educational opportunities, structures, and reforms in Ajmer-Merwara from the 19th century to the mid-20th century.

Economic Overview of Ajmer-Merwara: A Historical Background

Ajmer-Merwara (also known as Ajmer Province, and Ajmer-Merwara-Kekri) was a former province of British India in the historical Ajmer region. The territory was ceded to the British by Daulat Rao Sindhia by a treaty on 25 June 1818. It was under the Bengal Presidency until 1861 when it became part of the North-Western Provinces.ⁱ Finally, on 1 April 1871, it became a separate province from Ajmer-Merwara-Kekri. It became a part of independent India on 15 August 1947 when the British left India.

The province consisted of the districts of Ajmer and Merwar, which were physically separated from the rest of British India forming an enclave amidst the many princely states of Rajputana. Unlike these states, which were ruled by local nobles who acknowledged British suzerainty, Ajmer-Merwara was administered directly by the British. In 1842, the two districts were under a single commissioner. They were separated in 1856 and administered by the East India Company. Finally, after 1858, they were administered by a chief commissioner who was subordinate to the Governor-General of India's agent for the Rajputana Agency.

Ajmer-Merwara's economy during the colonial period was predominantly agrarian, with agriculture serving as the primary source of livelihood. The region's arid

climate and frequent droughts posed challenges to agricultural productivity and economic stability. The British administration implemented land revenue systems, infrastructure development, and trade facilitation to improve economic conditions. Ajmer played a pivotal role in commerce, which generally connected Northern India and the Bombay Presidency.ⁱⁱ In 1654, the East India Company established an agency under the Surat Factory, founded in 1614 by Mr. Aldworth. Thus, the city became extremely famous for purchasing and selling foreign goods.ⁱⁱⁱ The prominent economic activity for the residents here was banking, as they often dealt with the royal treasury. Out of a total of 29 business houses, in 1929-30, banking businesses were largely concentrated. They mainly focused on providing agricultural credit and facilitating grain availability in towns. Money could also be transferred to distant locations.^{iv} Before 1872, the privilege of providing credit to farmers and others was generally theirs, but later some acts, such as the Land Transfer Act of 1874 and the Occupancy Act of 1884-87, allowed for the remission of state taxes. Consequently, farmers benefited from this. Apart from this act, the Land Improvement Act of 1883 and the Agriculturists' Loans Act of 1884 enabled farmers to avail of loans at lower interest rates, causing banks in Ajmer and Merwara to face significant losses. Slowly, a new wave of commerce began in Ajmer and a new city, Beawar, developed.^v

Beawar was still growing as a new city, and the Canal Commission played a major role in its establishment. It was now considering water supply arrangements. Initially, Beawar was a small village with a reputation for housing criminals, often referred to as the Merwara Battalion.

Beawar emerged as a new commercial centre, where the distribution of cotton was organized. Additionally, it also supplied ghee and other commodities. From here, cotton was sent to Ajmer, and from there, foreign goods and other materials arrived. In this way, goods were transported throughout the year from Merwara to Beawar. The railways played a significant role in this distribution system, facilitating the transport of cotton, grains, and goods into Beawar. These continuous commercial activities positioned Beawar as a prominent centre of grain commerce.

Agrarian Economy

The introduction of new agricultural techniques and crops aimed to enhance productivity. However, these efforts were often limited by environmental constraints and socio-economic disparities. The economic condition of the majority of the population remained precarious, impacting their ability to access education. The primary crops grown in the region were^{vi} :

- Wheat and Barley: Key staple crops for sustenance.
- Millets (Bajra and Jowar): Grown due to their drought-resistant nature.
- Pulses: Pulses are a significant part of the agrarian economy, and pulses like moong and masoor were cultivated.
- Cash crops: Some areas of Ajmer produced cotton, oilseeds, and tobacco for trade.

The economy of Merwara, however, remained more focused on subsistence agriculture, with limited access to irrigation facilities.

Infrastructure Development

The construction of roads and railways played an important role in economic development by improving connectivity and facilitating trade. Ajmer emerged as a

commercial hub, attracting traders and fostering economic activity. This infrastructural growth had implications for educational access and opportunities.

Ajmer-Merwara, being a British-administered region in colonial India, saw some strategic infrastructure developments aimed primarily at facilitating British control, trade, and administration. The region comprised the city of Ajmer and the rugged, hilly area of Merwara, which presented challenges for large-scale infrastructure development, particularly in the latter. Below is an overview of the key aspects of infrastructure development in the Ajmer-Merwara region.

The British government laid a network of roads in Ajmer-Merwara, primarily to facilitate administrative control and enhance connectivity between different regions of British India. Ajmer, being a centrally located city in Rajasthan, was a major junction point, and roads connecting Ajmer to other important cities, such as Jaipur, Jodhpur, Udaipur, and Delhi, were developed. These roads were used for the movement of goods and people, supporting trade, military logistics, and the transport of raw materials. They also helped boost pilgrimage tourism to the Ajmer Sharif Dargah, a major religious site. In the Merwara region, the difficult terrain and hills limited road construction. However, some basic routes were developed to improve connectivity between villages and towns. The railway network was a significant aspect of infrastructure development during British rule in Ajmer-Merwara. The development of railways had a lasting impact on the region's economy and trade. Ajmer became a critical railway junction as the British connected it to important cities like Delhi, Mumbai, and Ahmedabad. The Rajputana-Malwa Railway, established in the late 19th century, passed through Ajmer, enhancing the region's importance in the trade network. The railways facilitated the movement of agricultural goods, textiles, and other products from Ajmer to larger markets, as well as imports of British manufactured goods. The Ajmer railway station played a vital role in transporting pilgrims to the Ajmer Sharif Dargah, contributing to the city's status as a religious hub.

Ajmer, being a significant administrative center for the British, saw the construction of several public buildings and institutions that added to the city's infrastructure.

- **Mayo College:** Established in 1875, this prestigious educational institution was built by the British to educate the sons of Indian princes and noble families. The college's grand colonial architecture is a prominent feature of Ajmer's infrastructure.
- **Government Buildings:** British administrative offices, courts, post offices, and bungalows for British officials were constructed in Ajmer. These buildings not only reflected the British colonial style but also served the administrative needs of the region.
- **Hospitals and Schools:** Although limited in number, some hospitals and schools were established by the British in Ajmer, catering to the local population as well as British residents. In rural areas, especially in Merwara, these facilities were sparse.

The British also focused on developing communication infrastructure, which included:

- **Telegraph Lines:** Telegraph lines were laid to connect Ajmer with other important administrative centres in British India. This was important for the

fast transmission of messages, particularly for administrative and military purposes.

- **Postal Services:** Ajmer had a well-established postal service, which improved communication within the region and with the rest of British India.

By the early 20th century, some parts of Ajmer began receiving electricity, mainly to power British administrative offices, public buildings, and the homes of British officials. However, electrification was slow to reach the rural and hilly areas of Merwara, where development remained limited.

Educational Development in Ajmer-Merwara

Early Educational Initiatives

The British administration recognized the importance of education for governance and introduced several initiatives to establish schools and colleges. The establishment of Mayo College in 1875 marked a significant milestone, aiming to educate the sons of Indian nobility in Western-style education.^{vii}

Expansion of Educational Institutions

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, educational opportunities expanded beyond the elite. Efforts were made to establish schools for girls and increase literacy rates among the general population. However, access to education remained uneven, influenced by economic conditions and socio-cultural factors.^{viii}

Impact of Economic Conditions on Education

Economic conditions significantly impacted access to education in Ajmer-Merwara. Limited financial resources among the majority of the population restricted their ability to afford educational expenses, such as tuition fees, books, and transportation. This financial barrier was particularly pronounced in rural areas, where poverty levels were higher.

Infrastructure and Educational Access

The development of infrastructure, such as roads and railways, played a pivotal role in improving educational access. Improved connectivity allowed students from remote areas to reach educational institutions more easily. However, the uneven distribution of infrastructure development meant that certain areas remained underserved.^{ix}

Economic Priorities and Educational Investment

The colonial administration's economic priorities often influenced the level of investment in education. While there were efforts to expand educational opportunities, economic challenges, such as famines and budget constraints, limited the extent of these initiatives. Educational funding often took a backseat to economic development projects.

Socio-Economic Disparities and Educational Inequality

Socio-economic disparities, rooted in economic conditions, contributed to educational inequality in Ajmer-Merwara. Access to education was often limited to higher socio-economic classes, leaving marginalized communities with fewer opportunities. This inequality was further exacerbated by the rigid caste system and gender biases prevalent in the region.^x

Case Studies

Mayo College: An Elite Educational Institution

Mayo College, established in 1875, was designed to educate the sons of Indian nobility and prepare them for leadership roles. The institution followed a curriculum

modelled after British public schools, emphasizing the English language and Western education. While Mayo College provided high-quality education, it was accessible only to a privileged few, reflecting the socio-economic disparities of the time.

Economic Influence on Curriculum and Student Demographics

The economic background of students at Mayo College significantly influenced the curriculum and opportunities available to them. The focus on Western education and English language skills was intended to equip students for administrative and leadership roles within the colonial framework. The economic conditions of students' families determined their ability to access and benefit from this elite education.^{xi}

Government Schools: Expanding Access to Education

Efforts to establish government schools aimed to broaden access to education beyond the elite. These schools catered to a more diverse student population, including those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. However, financial constraints and resource limitations affected the quality of education provided.

Economic Barriers and School Attendance

Economic conditions played a crucial role in determining school attendance rates. Families facing financial hardships often prioritise immediate economic needs over education, resulting in lower enrollment and attendance rates. Children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds faced challenges in accessing quality education due to limited resources and support.

Policy Initiatives and Reforms

Land Revenue Reforms and Educational Funding

The British administration's land revenue reforms aimed to increase agricultural productivity and economic stability. Revenue generated from these reforms was used to fund various development projects, including education. However, the allocation of funds for education often depended on the prevailing economic conditions and priorities.

Educational Reforms and Economic Considerations

Educational reforms in Ajmer-Merwara were influenced by economic considerations. The introduction of scholarships and financial assistance aimed to alleviate some of the economic barriers to education. However, these measures were often limited in scope and impact, as economic challenges persisted.

Challenges and Opportunities

Challenges

Economic Vulnerability and Educational Disparities

Economic vulnerability remained a significant challenge for educational development in Ajmer-Merwara. The reliance on agriculture and the region's susceptibility to droughts and famines affected families' ability to invest in education. This economic instability contributed to persistent educational disparities among different socio-economic groups.^{xii}

Gender and Caste-Based Inequalities

Gender and caste-based inequalities further compounded the challenges faced by marginalized communities. Economic conditions often intersected with these social factors, limiting access to education for girls and individuals from lower castes.

Addressing these intersecting challenges required targeted policies and interventions.

Opportunities

Infrastructure Development and Educational Access

The development of infrastructure, such as roads and railways, provided opportunities to improve educational access. Enhanced connectivity allowed students from remote areas to attend schools and colleges more easily. Leveraging infrastructure development for educational purposes offered a pathway to address some of the access challenges.

Community Engagement and Local Initiatives

Community engagement and local initiatives played an important role in promoting education in Ajmer-Merwara. Local leaders and organizations worked to raise awareness about the importance of education and mobilize resources to support educational initiatives. These grassroots efforts complemented formal government policies and contributed to positive outcomes.^{xiii}

Conclusion

The impact of economic conditions on education in Ajmer-Merwara reflects the intricate and often interdependent relationship between financial stability and educational progress. Situated within a geographically diverse and administratively unique region during British India, Ajmer-Merwara's socio-economic landscape significantly influenced the accessibility, quality, and structure of its educational institutions. Throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, economic challenges ranging from agrarian distress and inadequate industrial development to recurring droughts and limited state revenues posed formidable barriers to expanding educational infrastructure. Poor families, particularly from marginalized communities, struggled to afford school fees, uniforms, or the opportunity cost of removing a working child from labor. As a result, school enrollment remained skewed toward urban elites and dominant caste groups, while rural and tribal populations continued to face exclusion.

However, despite these constraints, colonial and local administrators did implement targeted reforms and interventions, especially from the early 1900s onwards. The introduction of government-aided schools, teacher training institutions, and scholarships for economically backward students signaled a policy shift aimed at expanding access. Infrastructure development—such as the construction of roads, railways, and administrative centers—also played a catalytic role in making educational facilities more reachable for remote communities. Notably, missionary and philanthropic institutions contributed significantly to educational efforts, particularly in areas where the government lagged. Understanding the historical evolution of economic and educational development in Ajmer-Merwara provides valuable lessons for present-day policymakers. It illustrates how structural inequalities can hinder progress, and how even modest economic investments—when coupled with inclusive policies—can generate long-term educational benefits. The region's experience underscores the importance of addressing deep-rooted socio-economic disparities while simultaneously investing in physical and institutional infrastructure. In today's context, the legacy of this development trajectory suggests that a multifaceted strategy—integrating economic upliftment with targeted educational reforms—is essential for fostering inclusive and equitable

growth. For regions with similar historical and economic profiles, such insights from Ajmer-Merwara serve as a compelling model for bridging the gap between policy intentions and on-the-ground realities in education.

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