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## **Historical Differentiation of Educational Status among Socio-Religious Groups in India**

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**Abstract:** The modern system of education in India is a result of a complex process of evolution, the roots of which can be traced way back in the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when a distinct system of education was introduced apart from the indigenous system already in existence. The orientation of the new education system, which was essentially imported, incoherent and “disjointed” from the home-grown culture, was ingrained in the “class based conception of education” wherein education was to be restricted chiefly to the upper classes of the society and was to trickle down in time to the general masses. Thus, the education of the commoners was basically left untouched by this infamous ‘filtration theory’. This initial approach, although later on covered up by various policies of mass education, remained intrinsic and an inseparable part of the character of Indian education system, the vestige of which can be found even in the later years to come.

This paper deals with the issue of differentiation in educational status by region and various social groups – caste, class, gender and religious group wise differentiation, under the ‘modern system of education’ during the British rule in India and its continuity and change under the present scenario. The major sources of information have been the Quinquennial Reviews of Progress of Education held by the Government of British India from 1886-87 onwards and the Censuses of British India from 1881 onwards. In some cases, Reports of the Indian Education Commission and Reports of Calcutta University

Commission have been a useful help. For theoretical understanding of the entire history of Indian Education, the pioneer work by J.P. Naik and Syed Nurullah (Naik and Nurullah 1974) has been of utmost importance.

**Keywords:** Education, Modern system of education, Muslim education, Literacy rate, Religious communities

The present is but a vestige of the past. In order to understand the occurrence of any social phenomenon, the need is to absorb well the historicity of its evolution. The modern system of education in India is a result of a complex process of evolution, the roots of which can be traced way back in the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when a distinct system of education was introduced apart from the indigenous system which was already in existence. During those days there were basically two options available to “those who were officially responsible for education of the people,” either to reorganise the indigenous system and “infuse new life” into it or go for a completely new system of education which shall be basically imported and “disjointed” from the indigenous culture (Mookerjee 1944, 30). The reason behind selecting the second option is the ‘class based conception of education’. “The new education was to be confined to the upper classes and was to filter down in time to the masses. This was the famous ‘filtration theory’ on the basis of which the present system stands”. Thus, education was to be confined mainly to the upper classes of the society and the “education of the masses was left unheeded” upon (Mookerjee 1944, 31). This initial attitude, although later on covered up by various policies of mass education, remained inherent and as an inseparable part of the character of Indian education system, the vestige of which can be found even in the later years to come.

In the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the indigenous system of education held the field, soon after which the missionary propagation of western knowledge made an alien language the vehicle of new ideas.

The East India Company was mainly a “trading concern” and “a body of merchants cannot be expected to educate the people it trades with” (Naik and Nurullah 1974). Thus, it undertook no educational responsibilities for nearly a hundred years of its existence. The breakthrough however came with the Charter Act of 1813, which compelled the company to accept the responsibility for the education of the Indians and to legally admit the missionaries to its dominions. This marked the beginning of the State system of education in India under the British rule. The period 1813-1854, remained as a phase of controversies and experiments over the object of educational policy, medium of instruction, agency and method of spreading education. The dust finally settled with Wood’s Despatch of 1854 which declared the spread of western knowledge and science as the main object, English and spoken languages as the medium, private bodies as agency and educating the masses as the method to be adopted.

This paper deals with the issue of differentiation in educational status by region and various social groups – caste, class, gender and religious group wise differentiation, under the ‘modern system of education’ during the British rule in India and its continuity and change under the present scenario. The major sources of information have been the Quinquennial Reviews of Progress of Education held by the Government of British India from 1886-87 onwards and the Censuses of British India from 1881 onwards. In some cases, Reports of the Indian Education Commission and Reports of Calcutta University Commission have been a useful help. For theoretical understanding of the entire history of Indian Education, the pioneer work by J.P. Naik and Syed Nurullah (Naik and Nurullah 1974) has been of utmost importance.

### **Growth of modern system of Education (1854 – 1898):**

The modern Indian educational system took shape with the Wood’s Educational Despatch of 1854 which led to the opening of the first three universities at Calcutta, Bombay and Madras under the University Acts of 1857. The development of colleges was fairly rapid during 1857-1882 and led to a considerable increase in the number of colleges. This

unfolded an era of “rapid *Westernisation* of the educational system but of the *Indianisation* of its agencies” (Naik and Nurullah 1974).

Table 1: Growth of Colleges between 1857 and 1882

Provinces	Number of Colleges	
	1857	1882
Bengal	15	27
Bombay	3	6
N.W. Province	5	11
Madras	4	25
Punjab	-	2
Central Provinces	-	1
Total	27	72

Source: Naik, J.P. and Syed Nurullah. 1974, 186

Tables 1 and 2 clearly depicts the development of English education at the secondary stage, being tilted towards the province of Bengal, which had the maximum share of schools and corresponding number of pupils during this period. While Bombay and Madras had similar conditions regarding the number of schools, the corresponding proportion of pupils was better off in case of Madras as compared to Bombay. The development started quite late in the United Provinces, and thus the situation was quite backward and nowhere comparable to the Presidencies.

Table 2: Growth of Education in India, 1896-7 to 1916-17:  
Percentage of English secondary schools and Pupils

Provinces	Schools / Pupils	1896-7	1901-2	1906-7	1911-12	1916-17
Madras	Schools	14.28	20.92	14.12	10.21	8.44
	Pupils	17.80	17.65	18.89	15.42	16.01
Bombay	Schools	14.60	13.79	13.55	13.06	8.69
	Pupils	9.68	10.28	11.05	10.13	7.09
Bengal	Schools	48.37	47.82	31.90	32.50	51.89
	Pupils	44.83	45.39	26.62	25.87	43.81
United Province	Schools	6.12	6.26	6.03	5.14	5.11
	Pupils	7.19	6.29	7.16	6.74	6.39

Source: Basu 1974, 105

## Growth of education in Indian by socio-religious groups:

A major characteristic of educational development in India is the differential development by socio-religious groups. While considering the religious communities in India, the recent picture of Census 2001 witnesses a distinct pattern of development.

Table 3: Literacy rate by Religious Communities, 2001

Religious communities	Literacy rate (%)	Male literacy (%)	Female literacy (%)
Hindus	65.1	76.2	53.2
Muslims	59.1	67.6	50.1
Christians	80.3	84.4	76.2
Sikhs	69.4	75.2	63.1
Buddhists	72.7	83.1	61.7
Jains	94.1	97.4	90.6
Others	47	60.8	33.2
All religious communities	64.8	75.3	53.7

Source: Census of India, 2001

Almost all religious communities have performed much better as compared to the national average, with a constant exception of Muslims and “other religions & Persuasions” returning lower than the national average. Focusing primarily on the Muslim community, which forms a sizeable chunk of India’s population, the low literacy rates overall as well as both male and female literacy rates taken separately, is an issue of concern here. An effort to trace back the causal relations and an enquiry into the historicity of such a pattern is worth attempting.

## Hindu-Muslim gap and Muslim Education in British India:

One of the reasons usually assigned for the growth of Muslim separatism ever since the British Indian history, has been their educational backwardness. The general acceptance regarding the “time-lag” in the educational development of Muslims has been about their conservatism. “They were less ready to seize the opportunities offered by Western education and less quick to adapt themselves to changing conditions under the British rule.” This ‘time-lag’ theory, which is said

to be central to the Muslim problem in India, however requires a sort of reconsideration and “regional redefinition” (Basu 1974, 147). Regionally speaking, the share of Muslim population, taken as early as 1881 census, has remained around one-fourth in Bengal and Assam provinces and almost half in case of Punjab province. The all India picture returns nearly 20% share of the Muslim population.

Table 4: Distribution of Hindu-Muslim population in British India, 1881

Provinces	Hindus (%)	Muslims (%)
Bengal	65.4	31.2
Bombay	74.8	18.4
Madras	91.4	6.2
N.W. Provinces & Oudh	86.3	13.4
Punjab	40.7	51.4
Central Province	75.4	2.5
Assam	62.7	27.0
All India (includes native states)	74.0	19.7

Source: Shah, S.Y. (1996): Higher Education and Politics in Colonial India: A Study of Aligarh Muslim University, 1875-1920, (Delhi: Renaissance), Table 2

Table 5: Growth of Muslim population, 1881 – 1921

Provinces	% of Muslim population to total population	
	1881	1921
Madras	6.2	6.7
Bombay	18.4	19.6
<b>Bengal</b>	<b>31.2</b>	<b>54.0</b>
United Province	13.4	14.3
Punjab	51.4	55.3
Central Province	2.5	4.1
Assam	27.0	29.0

Source: Compiled from Census of India, 1881 and 1921.

The story of growth of Muslim population in these provinces over a period of four decades (1881-1921) reveals a substantial increase in the share of Muslim population in Bengal province from 31.2% in 1881 to 54% in 1921. Taking this enormous increase as the key, irrespective of the reason behind it, I would like to narrow down the research in this section to Muslim education in Bengal province.

## Muslim education in Bengal province:

“When in 1882 the National Mohammedan Association complained in a memorial presented to Lord Rippon that ‘whilst every community had thrived and flourished under British rule, the Mohammedans alone have declined and decayed’, the Home Department called for reports from the local governments to ascertain how far the grievances of the Muslims were justified” (Basu 1974, 147). “It was mainly in Bengal that Muslims had some reason for complaining of being backward and underprivileged, for this was the province where they were hardest hit by British rule” (Basu 1974, 150). The commonly established premise regarding the Muslim education in early years of British Indian history follows the rationalization presented by Hunter. The supposition that Muslims remained ‘detached from the new system of education’ because it was ‘disparate to their conventions’, ‘incompatible to their needs’ and ‘detestable to their religion’ was believed as a fact. The suggestions of the Hunter Commission Report, (Hunter 1883) which were echoed by the Sadler Commission, (Sadler 1919, 146) stated the ‘pride of race’, memory of superiority, ‘religious fear’ and ‘attachment to learning of Islam’ (Basu 1974, 151) as the deterrents to Muslim education and as major causes for educational backwardness of the Muslims.

Although the issue of “religious prejudice” and “fear of conversion” (Basu 1974, 151) remained as one of the causes for their backwardness, it seemed to be highly exaggerated in the official reports. There was a sprouting aspiration for English education among the upper and more reputable classes of Muslims and they were “not so much prejudiced against receiving English education as they were limited in their opportunities of receiving it” (Basu 1974, 152). Schools and colleges, in the early years, were opened in Calcutta which was predominantly a Hindu sub-region. The north and east Bengal, which was rather a Muslim-majority sub-region, received little attention of the government, the reason being the majority of them were peasants and low-caste Hindu converts. In the words of Hunter, “the low-class Mohammedans have never been reached by our system of Public Instruction” (quoted in Basu 1974, 152).



Ever since the 1880s, the British government undertook exceptional endeavours to support Muslim education. The partition of Bengal marked 1905 as a watershed year and drastic improvements were easily noticeable in Muslim education in the new provinces of East Bengal and Assam. The following tables give the whole story of improvement in a nutshell. The Quinquennial increase in number of Muslim pupils in East Bengal and Assam from 1901-02 to 1906-07 was about 28.3 % but the next Quinquennial period of 1906-07 to 1911-12 which is post Bengal partition returns a high increase of 35.1% in the number of Muslim pupils in this region.

Table 6: Quinquennial increase in Muslims under instruction in Public & Private Institutions in East Bengal and Assam, 1901-02 to 1911-12

Year	No. of Muslim pupils	Quinquennial % increase
1901-02	331,900	-
1906-07	425,840	28.3
1911-12	575,663	35.1

Source: Basu 1974, 157-158

One may name it as the political diplomacy of the British, but ‘reserved scholarships’ were instituted for Muslims at all educational levels – ‘liberal grants in aid’, ‘free studentships’, ‘extended hostel accommodations’ etc for the Muslim pupils, went a long way in resulting marvellous rise in number of Muslim students especially in primary and secondary school levels in East Bengal during 1907 to 1912. Even after the reversal of partition of Bengal in 1912, the particular measures continued in favour of Muslim pupils and “every effort was made to stress the separateness of Muslims in educational institutions...” (Basu 1974, 159)

Table 7: Growth of Muslim students in Public Institutions in East Bengal and Assam, 1906-07 to 1911-12

Stages	1906-07	1911-12
Arts Colleges	71	360
Secondary Schools	22,978	59,480
Primary Schools	317,699	451,157

Source: Basu 1974, 158

In the history of Indian education, the year 1921 is marked as yet another great divide, when the Department of Education was transferred to the control of Indian Ministers. The transfer of education to Indian control and power being given to each province to organize its own educational services resulted in exceptional growth of education in almost all stages. “The Muslims, long backward in education, now made up for their deficiencies in the past and, in some respects, even marched ahead of the other communities” (Naik and Nurullah 1974, 361-2)

The following two tables (table 8 and 9) prove it beyond doubt that in the era of Education under Diarchy when control and power regarding educational development came with the Indian ministers, Muslim education flourished and marked this era with drastic developments. The total share of Muslim pupils rose from 48.65% to 51.67 % in between 1926-27 and 1931-32. The corresponding share of Muslims to total population was 54.8% in 1931 Census. Thus, the proportion of Muslim pupils was in fair balance. Improvements in the share of Muslim pupils in case of primary, middle and in special schools including the Madrasas is worth mentioning.

Table 8: Share of Muslim pupils in different stages in Bengal, 1926-27 to 1931-32

Stages	All Pupils		Muslim Pupils		% of Muslim pupils	
	1926-27	1931-32	1926-27	1931-32	1926-27	1931-32
Collegiate	30456	26832	4305	3559	14.14	13.26
High	104633	128323	16058	24152	15.35	18.82
Middle	97569	123467	18574	30344	<b>19.04</b>	<b>24.58</b>
Primary	1942742	2316160	<b>995030</b>	<b>1258746</b>	<b>51.22</b>	<b>54.35</b>
Special(+Madrasas)	114476	125279	75270	89578	<b>65.75</b>	<b>71.50</b>
Unrecognised	53504	63164	30903	31599	57.76	50.03
Total	2343380	2783225	1140140	1437978	<b>48.65</b>	<b>51.67</b>

Source: compiled from 8<sup>th</sup> Quin. Review of the Progress of Education in Bengal, 1926-27 to 1931-32

Table 9: Growth of Muslim pupils in different stages in Bengal, 1926-27 to 1931-32

Stages	% Growth of pupils		
	All Pupils	Muslim Pupils	Non-Muslim
Collegiate	-11.90	-17.33	-11.01
High	22.64	<b>50.40</b>	17.61
Middle	26.54	<b>63.37</b>	17.88
Primary	19.22	<b>26.50</b>	11.58
Special(+Madrasas)	9.44	19.01	-8.94
Unrecognised	18.05	2.25	39.66
Total	18.77	26.12	11.80

Source: compiled from 8<sup>th</sup> Quin. Review of the Progress of Education in Bengal, 1926-27 to 1931-32

Table 10: Progress of different communities in Bengal, 1921-22 to 1931-32

Communities	% of Pupils by caste or creed		
	1921-22	1926-27	1931-32
Europeans	0.50	0.41	0.35
Indian Christians	0.71	0.58	0.57
Hindus : educationally advanced	46.64	35.13	30.94
Hindus : educationally backward	<b>4.38</b>	<b>14.69</b>	<b>15.81</b>
Muslims	<b>46.54</b>	<b>48.65</b>	<b>51.67</b>
Buddhists	0.51	0.43	0.47
Others	0.72	0.11	0.19

Source: compiled from 8<sup>th</sup> Quin. Review of the Progress of Education in Bengal, 1926-27 to 1931-32

A comparison of development of Muslim Education with that of Non-Muslims during this era shows quite clearly that not only did they improve over their past performance, but in some cases, the Muslims even outshone the other communities. The growth of Muslim pupils during this period was far better as compared to non-Muslims when it comes to primary, middle and high school stages. It was more than double as compared to non-Muslim performance.

An overall picture of progress of different communities in education during this period reflects a decline in case of all other communities including the educationally advanced Hindus in this region. The main reason was that the Christians and the educationally advanced Hindus have for long been the educationally forward community; and thus a stage of near saturation was reached by these two, while the backward Hindus and Muslims, who have remained backward all these years,

were by now fully awake to the need of education (8<sup>th</sup> Quin Review of the Progress of Education in Bengal, 1926-27 to 1931-32). Thus, the future prospects for spread of education in Bengal shall mainly move around these two communities. Also, the rise of the Muslim scholars, chiefly in the primary stage, proves an educational awakening of the Muslim community.

### Muslim education in other provinces:

Table 11: Muslim pupils and population, 1927

Provinces	% of Muslim population to total population	% of Muslim pupils to total pupils
Madras	6.7	11.0
Bombay	19.6	18.1
Bengal	54.0	51.3
United Province	14.3	18.1
Punjab	55.3	50.0
Bihar & Orissa	10.9	13.1
Central Province	4.1	9.5
Assam	29.0	25.9

Source: Census of India, 1921 and Progress of Education in India 1926-27 to 1931-32

i) Madras Province – The “Muslims were not an educationally backward community everywhere.” In Madras, as early as in 1882 the Muslim community was more advanced as compared to its Hindu counterpart (Basu 1974, 148).

% of Muslim boys in school to Muslim boys of school going age	15.1 %
% of Hindu boys in school to Hindu boys of school going age	13.7%

At 1901 Census, the share of Muslim population in Madras was 6.5 % while the proportion of Muslim pupils to the total in public institutions was around 9.7%. Thus, the educational development and population proportion were found to be reasonably balanced. By 1921 census, the share of Muslim students increased far more in comparison to its corresponding proportion in total population. Thus, the Muslims were educationally quite developed in Madras Province in this phase during the British rule.

Table 12: Muslim pupils and population in Madras, 1901-1921

Year	% of Muslim pop to total pop.	% of Muslim pupils to total pupils
1901	6.5	9.7
1921	6.7	11.0

Source: 4<sup>th</sup> Quin Review of Education in India, 1897-1902, vol I, pp 128-9; Census of India, 1901 and 1921; and Progress of Education in India 1926-27 to 1931-32

Table 13: Muslim pupils and population in Bombay, 1881-1921

Year	Divisions	% of Muslim pop to total pop.	% of Muslim pupils to total pupils
1881	Gujarat	10	12
	Deccan	5.4	6.5
1921	Bombay City	8.3	14.5
	Central Division	6.1	10.5
	Northern Division	10.8	14.1
	Southern Division	10.8	14.7
	Sind	73.3	49.01

Source: Basu 1974, 148-149

ii) Bombay Province – Bombay province also reflected the same situation as Madras. The share of Muslims to that of the total population in Bombay Presidency had a huge variation ranging from as low as 3% in Satara to as high as 78% in Sind. A sort of anomaly was witnessed in the proportion of Muslims under instruction in Gujarat and Maharashtra which stood as surplus to the Muslim population. In every other division, the share of Muslim pupils has surpassed their corresponding proportion in total population, the only exception being that of Sind Division. The apparent scenario of Muslim education in Bombay province remained heavily affected by the figures of literacy for Muslims in the Sind sub-region. The obvious reason generally stated is that the Sind sub-region comprised of those Muslims, a majority of who belonged to the cultivating classes, among whom literacy was very low.

iii) Punjab Province – In Punjab, the picture was rather different, even though the central reason was invariably similar. The sub-regions lying to the north of Sutlej had lower proportion of Muslims in schools as

compared to proportionate Muslim population, the rationale being, yet again, the preponderance of agricultural community amongst the Muslims, to whom English education was not a necessity. Another principal reason behind such a gloomy picture was wherever there was predominance of Muslim population there were hardly any English schools (Basu 1974, 149-50).

iv) United Provinces of Agra and Oudh – This region depicts a discrete scenario, with the Muslims largely belonging to urbanised, non-agricultural community, and relatively well to do, which kept them at a much advanced footing as compared to their Hindu counterparts. By the 1870s the Muslims of United Provinces were to a large extent successful in overwhelming their initial repugnance to English education so far so that English schools flourished far more easily in conventional Muslim towns as compared to the Hindu towns like Ayodhya. (Report on the Progress of Education in Oudh, 1875-76, 8-10). The share of Muslims in the total population was 14.3 % while that of Muslim students was 18.1 %. In this region, the Muslims fared well in higher education as well. Their proportion in population and analogous share in college stage is given below.

Table 14: Muslim pupils and population in College, in United Province

Years	% of Muslim pop to total pop	% of Muslim pupils in colleges
1896-97	14.1	18.6
1901-02	14.7	19.7
1916-17	14.9	20.8

Source: Basu 1974, 150

The “class based conception” of education has been haunting the Indian Education system ever since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The initial approach of the British towards education of upper classes have gone a long way in depriving the other lower and depressed castes/classes and other minority communities. While in Bengal the *Bhadralok* castes had predominance over English education; in Madras the Brahmins had an upper hand.

Table 15: Literacy Rate in 1911 (in percentages)

Groups	Bengal		Bombay		Madras		United Province	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Hindu(all)	21	2	12	1	14	1	6	0.4
Brahman	64	11	61	9	55	11	22	1
Other high castes	48	10	31	4	31	3	<u>22</u>	2
Middle castes	23	2	11	0	11	1	<u>3</u>	0
Lower castes	6	0.2	2	0.1	2	0.1	<u>0.5</u>	0
Muslims	<u>8</u>	0.2	<u>7</u>	1	<u>17</u>	1	6	1
Tribes	1	0.0	-	-	0.4	0.0	-	-
Christians	52	40	41	24	23	11	35	23
Buddhist	17	1	-	-	75	31	17	5
Jains	77	11	53	7	46	3	47	5
Sikhs	53	8	-	-	-	-	37	7
Total	14	1.1	12	1.4	14	1.3	6	0.5

Source: Chaudhary 2009, 277

Table 15 narrates the entire story about the plight of education among the socio-religious groups in 1911 during the British period in the major provinces. Taking the genders separately, as female education was hardly comparable to its male counterpart during this period of Indian history, the overall performance of the males of Bengal and Madras province outshone the rest of the provinces with 14 % literacy, closely followed by Bombay with 12 % male literacy. The condition in the United Province was much backward, the reason being the late start of educational development in this part of the country as compared to the other three presidencies. The performance of Bengal outshone all other areas in all aspects. The conditions of literacy in case of the Hindus was much better in Bengal, both in case of higher as well as lower castes as compared to Madras and Bombay provinces which had almost similar levels of literacy in almost all social groups.

The scenario is quite reversed in case of Muslim education, where Madras performed much better as compared to Bengal and Bombay, the reason for which have already been discussed in the earlier sections. In case of Female education, the performance of Brahmin and other high caste females of Bengal is most commendable, followed by Brahmin females of Madras province. The condition of lower caste females was

deplorable. In case of Muslim females, Madras and Bombay performed much better as compared to Bengal. The most outstanding performance was of Christians both in case of males and females, especially in Bengal. The most sharp gradient in case of education of higher and lower Hindu castes is found in the United Province. The male literacy among Brahmans and other high castes have been around 11 % but middle and lower castes have been 3 and 0.5 % in this area which is quite a noticeable discrimination.

### **Analysis:**

From the above analysis, one thing that clearly comes out is that all that beholds at the first sight about Muslim education is not true. The condition of Muslim education was not pathetic everywhere and in all parts of history. Wherever there was predominance of agricultural, low-class Hindu-converts, rural peasant-class Muslims, their educational development has not been up to mark. Examples are Punjab Province, Sind division of Bombay Province, north and east of Bengal Province. But wherever there was non-agricultural, upper-class, urbanised community, developments have been quite remarkable and in some places much better than their Hindu counterparts – United Province and Oudh, Madras Province, rest of Bombay Province.

The investigation into the caste based differentiation brings out clear cut discrimination between the higher and lower caste Hindus, almost in all areas equally and most distinctively in the Hindu Heartland of United Province where rigidity of the caste system cannot be denied.

### **Conclusion:**

The study of the historical differentiation brings out some interesting points of conclusion which are worth pondering upon.

- Although the Hindu-Muslim gap in education existed from historical times, condition of Muslims was not equally bad in all regions and in all parts of modern history. While the Muslims in peasant class suffered deprivation in all areas equally, they were no worse than



lower class Hindus in those corresponding areas. At the same time the urbanised well to do Muslims out-performed the other communities in most parts as well.

- The differentiation that we talk of is not much on the religious lines as much as it is on Caste-Class lines. It is the “class based conception” of education that has been dominating the Indian education system.

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*The Quinquennial Reviews of the Progress of Education in India, 1<sup>st</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> (1884 to 1927-32)*.