



Higher Education: Current Status and Future Possibilities in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka

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South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries have common features, such as geographic and climatic conditions, and share issues concerning the socioeconomic, cultural, and educational advancement of their people. Higher education affects every area of national development and deserves requisite attention. This paper assesses higher education systems of SAARC countries in terms of structure, access, quality, equity, resources, and contribution of private enterprise. Such an assessment might help in promoting interstate cooperation and planning better strategies.

All SAARC countries have a similar higher education structure, including entry qualifications and age, duration of courses, and instructional management system. The pressing demand for higher education and a strong desire for foreign qualification by youth are common issues. Opportunities are limited, with gross enrollment ratios varying among SAARC countries from less than 5 percent to 10 percent. The participation of women is not more than 40 percent in any SAARC country, and the quality of education is substandard. Spending on education ranges from 2 percent to 4 percent of the gross national product (GNP), which is less than UNESCO standards for developing nations. Private enterprise, a recent phenomenon, limits its role market-oriented, professional, and technical education. It is high time for SAARC countries to evolve common educational forums and collaborative strategies to deal with the situation.

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Introduction

This article analyzes and assesses the current status of higher education in South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries and examines emerging trends. The discussion concentrates on structure, access, quality, funding patterns, private enterprise, and future prospects of higher education in each country.

Seven South Asian countries Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka—launched the economic and political organization SAARC on 8 December 1985. Afghanistan joined it in April 2007. SAARC provides a platform for working together in a spirit of friendship, trust, and understanding to accelerate economic and social development, including education, in South Asian countries. Human resource development is one of five areas of cooperation agreed on by the member countries.

In terms of population, the SAARC region covers nearly 1,500 million people, one of the largest such regional organizations. SAARC countries share certain common social and economic problems, including those related to education. Low literacy rates, poor infrastructure, substandard quality of education, heavy dropout rates, and inadequate funding are some problems countries of this region face. Higher education has strong bearing on the development of a nation. Regional cooperation in education would accelerate the pace of development.

India

The Republic of India is a vast state located in South Asia, surrounded by the Himalayas to the north and the Indian Ocean on the other three sides. It is the largest democracy in the world, with about 1,135 million people (2007 estimate), or about 18 percent of the total world population (over 6,451 million in 2006). It ranks second in the world in population and seventh in land area. According to the 2001 census, about 65 percent are literate (Manorama, 2008). The people of India profess four major religions—Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, and Christianity. Over 80 percent profess Hinduism.

Historically, India has been the land of teachers and learners. Knowledge has always been regarded as the highest virtue in Indian society. The concept of a university is close to that of the forest ashrams of the ancient Hindu tradition for adult learning. As far back as 1500 BC, teachers would retire to clearings in the forests, far from the noise of settlements, and attract a group of young men willing to join them in living a life of contemplation and philosophical discussion (Fletcher, 1968). The well-known Takshashila and Nalanda universities existed centuries before modern universities came into being in Europe and other parts of the world. In 1854 establishment of modern universities in India was first recommended by the British colonial administration; universities in Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras were set up in 1857. However, about 25 colleges had been established a little earlier. During the next 90 years, development of higher education was slow, and by Independence in 1947 only 20 universities and 500 colleges had been set up, enrolling about 230,000 students.

The six decades since Independence have witnessed tremendous expansion of higher education, and India's system is now one of the largest in the world. Currently, 367 universities and nearly 18,100 affiliated colleges have an estimated enrollment of over 11.2 million students (Thorat, 2007). The number of teachers engaged in these institutions has also increased, from only 21,000 in 1947 to about 500,000 now, including those in technical and professional institutions. A large majority of students, about 82 percent, account for enrollment in general education courses in the arts, science, and commerce. The open and distance learning (ODL) approach has had significant impact on higher education. The Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) at New Delhi, established in 1985, and 13 state-level open universities share about 25 percent of the total enrollment in higher education. Despite its large size, the system cannot meet the growing demand for higher education, especially from weaker sections of the society including culturally, economically, and educationally backward/deprived people. It caters to only about 10 percent of youth in the relevant age group (18–24 years), while corresponding figures are more than 50 percent for most developed countries and 20 to 30 percent for developing countries. This scenario illustrates the need for a massive expansion of higher education facilities in the near future.

For entry into higher education institutions in India a student must have passed the senior secondary or intermediate examination conducted by a state or central board of school education, after studying for 12 years in a school. The first university degree course in general education in arts, science, and commerce is of three years' duration, followed by two years of master's-level courses, and three to five years of research work leading to a doctorate degree in a field of interest. After senior secondary courses, a student may attend professional or technical courses lasting four to five years in law, engineering and technology, medicine, commerce, or business management.

The government funds higher education at the rate of 90 to 95 percent. As the system has expanded, the requirement for funds to maintain it has also increased, resulting in a heavy burden on the public exchequer. The government now spends about 4 percent of GNP on education, most of which is shared by elementary and adult-education programs. Only about 30 percent of all the 18,100 colleges receive government aid. Universities are being asked to generate their own funds and become largely self-supporting. Moreover, market forces are compelling higher education institutions to introduce job-oriented courses, which require higher investment than general education programs. This situation has led to increased privatization of higher education in India as well as other parts of the world. Some argue that the government should have the major role in funding primary education and literacy programs while encouraging higher education institutions to become self-supporting through privatization. The World Trade Organization (WTO) has come out with a General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) to ensure that cross-border transactions in higher education are covered like any other type of trade under its complex rules and legal arrangements. As soon as India signed GATS, foreign universities started entering the country. At present more than 100 foreign universities, mostly from

the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, operate in India. Some Indian universities are planning to set up study centers in other countries for their specialized fields.

Private education is not a new concept for India. In ancient times, each ashram was run by a guru, or teacher, and supported by voluntary gifts, known as *guru dakshina*, from students (Chauhan, 2004). Today's situation is completely different. Most private universities and institutions have been established by state governments under private university acts. The number of institutions deemed to be universities in specialized fields has grown sharply because of the number of students who pay for professional and technical courses out of their own pockets or take loans from banks has increased from less than 15 percent in the 1990s to about 50 percent today (Gupta, 2007). However, the quality of these technical courses is frequently questioned. Their main aim is to maximize profit with minimal financial input. Some have taken advantage of the mushrooming demand for skill-oriented courses in the employment market and are no more than degree and diploma mills.

For a country to achieve rapid socioeconomic advancement, a 20 to 25 percent participation rate of the relevant age group in higher education is a prerequisite. Therefore, India must expand its system of higher education further so as to accommodate at least 20 percent of eligible 18- to 24-year-olds. Future policies must capitalize on the ODL system and develop a network of open universities. The ODL system should account for at least 50 percent of total enrollment in higher education and provide a good quality education. The government must spend more on education by raising its budgetary allocation from 4 percent of GNP to 6 percent, as recommended by the Education Commission (1964–1966).

Pakistan

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan is bordered by Afghanistan in the northwest, Iran in the southwest, the former USSR and China in the north, India in the east, and the Arabian Sea in the south. It is a Muslim state formed after partition of India in 1947 into two separate parts—West Pakistan and East Pakistan. East Pakistan, which is now Bangladesh, included the eastern half of erstwhile Bengal and Assam provinces of British India. The erstwhile West Pakistan is today's Pakistan, with a population of about 166 million. Over 97 percent of the people are followers of Islam. About 56 percent aged 15 and older are literate—63 percent male and 36 percent female (Government of Pakistan, 2002).

Like India, Pakistan adopted the British pattern of education after independence. Here, also, students may proceed to a college or a university after 12 years of schooling and having passed a higher secondary examination. Higher education refers to all levels of education above grade 12, generally corresponding to those 17 to 23 years old. There are two types of bachelor degree courses in the university, pass courses and honors courses. A pass course (slowly being phased out) constitutes two years of study comprising a combination of three subjects (such as economics, sociology, and English), whereas an honors

course takes three or four years and a student normally specializes in a chosen field of study. Students may also, after higher secondary education, study for a bachelor degree in engineering, medicine, veterinary medicine, law, agriculture, architecture, or nursing, for example, which courses are of four to five years' duration.

At the time of its creation in 1947, Pakistan had only one university—the University of Punjab at Lahore. But now there are about 50 public and private universities and 18 other degree-awarding institutions. Most private universities and colleges offer professional courses in engineering and technology, medicine, law, and business management. The total enrollment in higher education is only about 4.6 percent of 17- to 23-year-olds in 2005. Public universities, which are state controlled and funded, enroll 85 percent of students in higher education. Colleges, of which 88 percent are publicly funded, enroll about 71 percent of all students in higher education. Colleges are affiliated to universities. All college students are included in the enrolment of affiliating university also. Thus, total enrollment of a university is affiliated colleges-enrollment plus enrollment in the university departments. This shows that 15% enrollment is in private universities and colleges affiliated to them and 29% of the total enrollment is in non-government colleges and university departments. Given the present rate of population growth, in 2010 Pakistan will have approximately 25 million students 17 to 23 years old, requiring a variety of institutions and courses to accommodate them. To develop the country's human resources, proposals have been made to enhance the access of higher education to at least 10 percent of this age group. For this purpose, massive expansion accompanied by diversification of courses needs to be undertaken, along with increasing the role of the private sector, as the state cannot provide sufficient funding. Realizing this, the government reconsidered its 1970 decision to nationalize educational institutions and allowed, in 1980, private institutions to operate.

General education courses, mostly run by public universities, are mainly funded by the government. Of the total funds available, about 75 percent goes toward salaries (Government of Pakistan 2002) of teachers and other employees. Most of the public higher education funding comes from federal grants made through the University Grants Commission (UGC), which was set up in the early 1950s to fund higher education. Most development money is spent on universities; about 700 undergraduate colleges receive little support. Even so, the state was unable to fully support higher education, and universities raised their self-generated funds to 49 percent of the total expenditure in 2000–2001. Public spending on education has been hovering around 2 percent of GNP for the past two decades, which is well behind the 4 percent of GNP recommended by UNESCO (Government of Pakistan (2001)) and the 3.4 percent of GNP averaged in 1995 by the South Asia region (World Bank–UNESCO, 2000). The share of higher education is only about 0.40 percent of GNP. It is not surprising that students in publicly funded institutions get an education of mediocre quality, one that does not prepare them to participate effectively in the economic, political, and social life of the country or face the challenges of a competitive global economy.

Private universities generally pay much higher salaries to staff and offer quality libraries and research facilities in response to public demand for modern and practical training in business and technology. In 1983 Agha Khan University became the first private-sector university to be established in Pakistan, followed two years later by Lahore University of Management Sciences. The Education Sector Reforms Action Plan (2001–2004) of the government envisaged an enhancement of the proportional enrollment in private-sector universities from 15 percent to 40 percent by 2004 by encouraging the establishment of new institutions of higher education in the private sector. Thus the process of privatization picked up speed, and by 2003–2004, 53 degree-awarding institutions in Pakistan enrolled about 4.6 percent of the relevant age group. The National Education Policy (1998–2010) increased public funding from 2.2 percent to 4 percent of GNP, expanded facilities to enroll at least 5 percent of the relevant age group, and introduced a three-year bachelor (honors) degree, with honors students given preference in admissions and government recruitment. The universities were asked to generate their own funds and quotas were to be abolished. The Higher Education Commission (HEC) was established to facilitate the development of the universities into world-class centers of education and research. The mandate of the HEC encompasses all degree-granting universities and institutions, public and private, including degree-granting colleges. It supports the attainment of quality education in these institutions by facilitating and coordinating self-assessment of academic programs with an external review by national and international experts. The HEC also supervises the planning, development, and accreditation of public- and private-sector institutions of higher education.

Dissatisfied with the poor quality of higher education provided by public universities and colleges, the elite class in Pakistan developed a craze for foreign degrees. Foreign studies, especially American, are perceived as superior to all others, and those students who can afford it study in the United States, the United Kingdom, or Australia. But those who cannot afford such an education knock at the doors of local alternative schools claiming to be American institutions. In the last few years, many local institutions that award degrees have claimed to be full-fledged and accredited American universities or affiliated with American universities, underlining their “foreign-trained” faculty as a guarantee of quality. The majority of these claims are fraudulent (Coffman, 1997). The university system in Pakistan produces about 1.2 million skilled graduates every year. The government plans further expenditure during the next decade under the overall supervision of the HEC to create quality science and technology universities.

Bangladesh

Bangladesh began as East Pakistan, formed by the partition of the British Territory of India in 1947. It was one of five provinces into which Pakistan was divided at the time of its creation. East Pakistan was formed by adding the Sylhet district of Assam to the former province of East Bengal. Bangladesh achieved independence from Pakistan in 1971 and was renamed the People’s

Republic of Bangladesh. It has a population of over 150 million, of which about 43 percent are literate (Manorama Yearbook, 2008, p 307). The literacy rate for women is 36 percent. About 83 percent of the people are Muslims and 16 percent are Hindus. It is the second-largest Muslim country of the world.

Higher education in Bangladesh begins after passing the higher secondary certificate (HSC) examination after 12 years of schooling (Munir, 1999). Students enter colleges or universities for a first degree (bachelor) and can continue their studies up to master's and doctorate degrees. Universities and other tertiary institutions have their own entrance examinations. Most public universities follow the British system of a three-year bachelor (honors) program, though the new private universities have moved to the American model of four-year bachelor programs. Postgraduate education consists mostly of master's programs and very few doctoral programs. Religious education also occupies an important position in the education sector of Bangladesh. The presence of madrasahs (Islamic religious schools) is significant, but faces questions of quality and uniformity of standards. Hindus and Buddhists also receive religious education at institutes called *tol* and *chatuspathi*, respectively.

Until the early 1990s, university education was provided only by public universities, including the highly specialized medical colleges, engineering universities, and polytechnic institutes and colleges. Private universities were first allowed under the Private University Act of 1992. The Private University Act requires that at least 5 percent of the student body receive full tuition waivers (Encyclopedia of Modern Asia, 2002). This is intended to help poor students take advantage of these institutions. Additionally, it is believed that students from rich families who attend private universities create vacancies in public universities for other students. Private universities have a strong similarity to those in the higher education system in the United States in their curricula, books, and faculty training. There were 31 universities in 1997, of which 20 were private. The number of universities went up to 52, of which 31 were private, in 2003. Student enrollment in private universities has also increased rapidly, from 6,200 to 44,600 during the same period, compared to the corresponding figures of 74,000 to 104,700 for public universities. Although the number of students enrolled in public universities is higher, enrollment in private universities has accelerated. At present there are 75 universities, including 54 in the private sector, and 12 other equivalent medical and technical institutions, all granting diplomas in specific fields as well as bachelor and professional degrees (Kitamura, 2006). Specialized universities are Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), Bangladesh Agricultural University, and Bangabandhu Shaikh Mujib Medical University.

Bangladesh has two main, separate types of higher educational institutions: the highly competitive universities and a large number of degree-granting colleges affiliated with universities. To make higher education accessible to all, an Open University has also been set up in the country. In addition, a National University has been established to serve as an affiliating school for colleges across the country.

For most individuals in this developing nation, access to a university education has been limited, especially for girls. At degree and master's level, women account for about 36 and 26 percent, respectively, of total enrollment. Public higher education in Bangladesh is nearly free. Public expenditure on education has been low—only 2.4 percent of GNP. The distribution of the overall public-sector budget among the various educational schools has remained stable in recent years. Primary education has received roughly 45 percent, secondary education 22 percent, and higher education 33 percent of total government spending on education over the years.

For want of proper linkages between public university programs (with the exception of a few departments like business administration and pharmacology) and the job market, higher education is not too relevant to the needs of the economy. Many graduates, produced at considerable cost to society, remain unemployed for long periods and sometimes have to work in areas outside their fields of study. Private universities do try to respond to market demands, providing a few professional courses having short-term relevance and neglecting long-term interests of the national economy. Quality is a serious concern in universities, and it is said that UGC has miserably failed in its role as a guardian of public universities and as a promoter of quality. It has also failed to institute a self-regulatory accreditation system for private universities (Andaleeb, 2003).

According to one estimate, in 1993 over 80,000 Bangladeshi students were sent by their parents to study in Indian colleges. This resulted in a huge loss of foreign exchange, and at the same time, there was a fear of indoctrination by a foreign culture. These were important concerns both for the people and the government. Access to private universities in Bangladesh is restricted to those who can pay extremely high tuition fees. Only children from affluent families can get admission to such universities. Gender inequity in access to higher education was revealed by data from the country's fifth Five-Year Plan; the system educated more than two males to every one female (69:31). An increasingly larger segment of the student population in the best public universities is coming from a small group of urban preparatory schools to which only the richest families can afford to send their children. It was believed that expansion of private education would provide healthy competition for public-sector institutions, satisfy the increasing demand by the middle class for quality higher education, and relieve the government of some financial burden. However, the main interest of most private universities is to earn a profit, leading them to narrow the scope of their educational programs and degrade quality.

Nepal

The Kingdom of Nepal is a landlocked Asian country in the Himalayas, bounded on the north by Tibet and on the other three sides, by India. Population is about 26 million people, of which approximately 54 percent are literate. The literacy rate among women is 42 percent. Followers of Hinduism constitute a large majority (about 81 percent). Nepal is the only official Hindu state in the world. Its monarchy of more than 100 years almost ended in 2006, when violent

protests by tens of thousands forced King Gyanendra to end over 15 years of absolute rule and hand over power to a seven-party alliance headed by G. P. Koirala (Manorama Yearbook, 2007).

In Nepal a student enters higher education after completing 12 years of schooling. During these 12 years, the first national-level school-leaving certificate (SLC) examination is conducted at the end of 10th grade, qualifying a student for entry into the higher secondary stage, consisting of 11th and 12th grades. The Higher Secondary Education Board (HSEB) supervises all the higher secondary schools, which are mostly under private management (Government of Nepal, 2006). Previously, the higher secondary stage was overseen by the university system, which awarded a proficiency certificate (equivalent to senior secondary) on the basis of an examination conducted at the end of 12th grade. Some universities still offer these programs. However, the policy now is to integrate 11th and 12th grades into the school system. Higher education consists of bachelor, master's, and doctoral levels. Depending on the stream (e.g., academic or professional) and subjects (e.g., arts, science, or commerce), bachelor degree level programs may be of three to five years' duration. The duration of master's degree level courses is generally two years. After master's level programs, some universities also offer master of philosophy (M. Phil) in a specialized field or postgraduate diploma courses. The language of instruction in most universities is English.

The higher education system in Nepal is less than 90 years old. Tri-Chandra College, the first higher education institution, was established in 1918. Before establishment of this college, higher education in Nepal was nonexistent. In the beginning, only some privileged families and members of the higher castes and wealthier economic strata had access to college education. Some parents of high-caste elite families sent their children to universities in India, such as Patna University and Banaras Hindu University, for a higher academic or technical education. Before the 1950–1951 revolution, Nepal had only two colleges, one school for teacher education and one special technical school. At the higher education level, there was only one doctoral degree-granting institution, Tribhuvan University (TU) at Kathmandu, which was chartered in 1959 (Wagley & Lamichhane, 2006). In the early 1960s, TU registered a few thousand students. While most students were at proficiency certificate level, a small number undertook bachelor level studies in a few disciplines of social and natural sciences. However, TU was not able to offer bachelor level programs in technical subjects, excluding agriculture, until 1975. TU has now grown into a complex school of higher education institutions and offers a wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate programs in many professional and technical areas, the social sciences, and business management (Lohani, 2001). This university enrolls more than 90 percent of the students who go on to higher learning in the country. All public colleges are affiliated with TU, while private colleges operate independently (although they are also required to meet the norms and standards set by TU). Until 1985 TU was the single university in Nepal. The total number of colleges and universities in Nepal increased significantly, from 8 in 1958 to 132 in 1988 (69 under the TU system and 63

private). In terms of subjects, these colleges covered a wide range of disciplines, such as natural science, social science, humanities, and commerce. Students enrolled in higher education institutions numbered around 83,000 in 1987.

In the early 1980s, the government developed the concept of a multi-university system for the country. The most important characteristic behind this concept was that each new university should have a distinctive nature, content, and function of its own. The first new university established under the multi-university system was Mahendra Sanskrit University. Soon it was followed by Kathmandu University, which is in the private sector. At present, Nepal has six universities: Tribhuvan, Kathmandu, Pokhara, Purwanchal Mahendra Sanskrit, and Siddhartha universities. Students enrolled at bachelor degree level and above number between 60,000 and 70,000. With the current multi-university system policy, expectations are to minimize TU's burden in the coming years. Mahendra Sanskrit University, established in 1986, offers academic programs in the Sanskrit language literature and in Vedic sciences. Kathmandu University, set up in 1991, is the first private university with focus on technical subjects. Purwanchal University and Pokhara University were chartered recently. The latter two regional universities were primarily intended to oversee the existing higher education campuses in the region and to develop their own programs in an environment of competitiveness within the system.

In recent years the number of private schools, currently about 200, has grown significantly. Most of them occupy rented houses and employ part-time teachers conducting classes without adequate learning facilities. These are more coaching institutions, with few or no standardized academic exercises, than schools and provide little scope for innovative or creative activities (Lohani, 2001). Present policies are aimed at facilitating private-sector participation in higher education to help meet the increasing demand and relieve pressure on the government exchequer for financing public education. There is, however, a public discontent about commercialization and the higher cost of private education. Allaying this discontent will require a strong and well-designed mechanism for monitoring private schools and overseeing their fees. The need for standardization of higher education led to the recent launching of the Higher Education Project with assistance from the World Bank. The components of the project are (1) revamping undergraduate and postgraduate courses, (2) development of physical and teaching-learning facilities, (3) staff development, and (4) phase out of the proficiency certificate from the university. While phase out of the proficiency certificate remains largely unsettled, some progress has been made in the other areas.

Bhutan

The Kingdom of Bhutan is a small state located in the eastern Himalayas bordered on the north by China and on all other sides by India. Its population is about 2.28 million, and the literacy rate is about 47 percent. About 75 percent of the people follow the Buddhist religion, and the remaining 25 percent follow Hinduism. A negligible number are Muslims. There is a large population of immigrants, most of them having no official status. There is a continuous inflow

and outflow of immigrants from Nepal and India. The government is trying to regulate this in-and-out flow in order to control future immigration effectively. It is basically a rural state, with only 13 percent living in urban areas.

The government, from the very beginning, has been in the hands of people of Tibetan origin, the people studying in the monasteries and spending most of their lives as monks. The Buddhist religious class has a major say in all matters, including education. The United Nations has listed Bhutan as one of the least developed countries. Traditionally, monastic education in the indigenous Dzongkha language was available primarily for boys. Some prominent families sent their children to Christian schools in northern India to prepare them for secondary-school education abroad. In the 1980s the government realized that a modernized and improved system of education was needed, from a universal primary education to decreasing dependency on other countries. Still, a sizable portion of teachers at secondary and higher levels are from neighboring countries, especially India. In the new system, the medium of instruction at all stages is English as it is considered preparatory for secondary and higher education abroad. The national policy on education published in 1984 stated that secondary and higher education will be selective. A two-year precollege course is offered at one academic college, but there are plans to expand the system (Manorama Yearbook, 2007).

Higher education in Bhutan in its early years was provided by Royal Bhutan Polytechnic and Kharbandi Technical School in Kharbandi, Chhukha District. Founded in 1973 Royal Bhutan Polytechnic offered courses in civil, mechanical, and electrical engineering; surveying; and drafting. The Kharbandi Technical School, established in the 1970s with assistance from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the International Labor Organization (ILO), offered similar courses. Bhutan's only junior college—Sherubtse College in Kanglung, Tashigang District—was established in 1983 as a three-year degree-granting college affiliated with the University of Delhi. In the year it was established, with UNDP assistance, the college had 278 students and 17 faculty members for teaching courses in the arts, the sciences, and commerce leading to a bachelor degree. Starting in 1990, junior college classes also were taught at the Yanchenphug High School in Thimphu with the intent of extending this to other high schools.

Education programs were given a boost in 1990 when the Asian Development Bank granted a loan for staff training and development, specialist and expert services, equipment and furniture purchases, salaries and other recurrent costs, and facility rehabilitation and construction at Royal Bhutan Polytechnic. The Department of Education and its Technical and Vocational Education Division were given an Asian Development Bank grant for improving the technical, vocational, and training sectors. The New Approach to Primary Education, started in 1985, was extended to all primary and junior high schools in 1990, stressing self-reliance and awareness of Bhutan's unique national culture and environment (University of Calgary, 1995).

Bhutan also has only one university, Royal University of Bhutan, which is a much newer institution and is conducting a more cautious appraisal of the role

of technology to support their form of distributed learning within the university network. Most Bhutanese students being educated abroad receive technical training in India, Singapore, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Britain, Germany, and the United States. English-speaking countries attract the majority of Bhutanese students. The vast majority, however, return to their homeland. The use of open and distance learning in education is almost nonexistent because of limited technology and a strong tradition of face-to-face teaching, usually with long tutor-student contact hours.

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is an island in the Indian Ocean located 80 kilometers east of the southern tip of India. Its population is over 20 million. About 69 percent of the people are Buddhist, 15 percent are Hindus, and the rest are of other religions. Sri Lanka's population is highly educated, with a literacy rate of 92 percent, one of the highest among South Asia countries. The literacy rate of women is 90 percent. Education is free at all levels, from primary on up, and is funded and administered by the government.

Higher education in Sri Lanka begins after completing senior secondary education (grades 10 and 11) and passing a public examination called General Certificate of Education (GCE)–Ordinary Level. College education lasts for two years (grades 12–13), and is followed by another examination called GCE–Advanced Level. Passing this examination qualifies a candidate for pursuing university education and beyond. By this time most students are 18 years old or more. Entry into a university is highly selective, which accommodates only the brightest students. Consequently, most students who do not get admission into a publicly funded institution either go abroad or into a private institution which also awards degrees. Those going abroad prefer universities in the United Kingdom, Australia, Malaysia, the United States, and Singapore. Some of them continue their studies as external students in conventional universities or in Sri Lankan Open University. Approximately 4,200,000 students are enrolled in educational institutions at all levels. Although upper secondary education is centered on university entrance, the number of places available for students who wish to pursue higher education is limited. That is why there is a strong need for establishment of private universities, so that many students do not have to go abroad for higher education and can study in their own country at a lower cost.

In general, arts and sciences three-year bachelor degrees are awarded by the universities. In addition, four-year bachelor degrees designated as Special are also offered in the arts and sciences. Postgraduate education of one to two years is also offered in addition to master's degrees of two years' duration and doctorate degrees of two to five years' duration. In the universities, the study of medicine and engineering is in English; in other schools it can be Sinhala, Tamil, or English, depending on the university. Some universities have postgraduate studies and confer graduate degrees, for example, Post Graduate Institute of Medicine attached to the University of Colombo. In addition to this system, many private schools are coming into being.

Currently 15 major state-funded universities are in Sri Lanka, the most prominent being the University of Colombo, the University of Kelaniya, the University of Sri Jayawardhenapura, the University of Moratuwa, the University of Peradeniya, the University of Jaffna, the University of Ruhuna, and the Eastern University of Sri Lanka (Department of Census and Statistics, 2007). Several other schools and institutes are affiliated with these 15 universities. Some vocational and technical colleges that specialize in mechanical and electronic subjects also exist. In recent years some institutes, like Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology, have been permitted to award degrees. In addition, the system of higher education includes 1 Open University, 1 medical college, 10 higher education institutes running undergraduate and postgraduate programs, and 10 colleges affiliated with universities offering degrees. There is a strong system of teacher education also with colleges of education for academic degrees and colleges of teacher education for pre-service and in-service teacher education courses. The National Institute of Education grants academic distinctions and professional degrees in the field of education.

The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL), established in the early 1980s, meets the lifelong and continuing education requirements of the working population, who can study only part-time. The OUSL has no specific entry qualifications (except specific basic qualification like GCE–Advanced Level) for enrollment, as any person who is above 18 years can be registered as a student (Open University of Sri Lanka, 2004). This is the only recognized university in Sri Lanka where students are able to pursue further education by distance learning. Several types of degree programs are offered at the university.

An apex body, the University Grants Commission (UGC) established in 1978, allocates funds to universities, coordinates teaching and research programs, and supervises implementation of national policies in matters related to admission and medium of instruction. It has wide powers over university education, including establishment of postgraduate institutions and selection of students for admission to undergraduate courses. Approximately 3 percent of GNP is allocated to education. University education is free. This is noteworthy because Sri Lanka is considered a third-world country.

Maldives

The Republic of Maldives is situated on the equator in the Indian Ocean southwest of Sri Lanka. It consists of more than 1,200 small coral islands of which only about 200 are inhabited and another 88 have been adapted as exclusive resort islands. The sea forms over 99 percent of the Maldives. Most of the islands can be walked across in 10 minutes; only a few are longer than two kilometers. The total population in the country is about 369,000 (Manorama Yearbook, 2008), of which over 98 percent are literate. This literacy rate is the highest of all countries in South Asia and the Indian Ocean. Most of the inhabitants are Sunni Muslims.

The Maldives had no university or any other institution providing higher education as late as 1998. As is common in developing nations, students seeking higher education had to travel abroad (Huda, 1999). About 1,000 to 1,500

Maldivian students pursued degree, diploma, and certificate courses abroad at any given time, many of them funding their own education, which is significant in view of the size of the total population of the country (Mohamed, 2005). The most popular study destinations abroad were Malaysia, India, Sri Lanka, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Egypt.

In its continuing efforts to upgrade educational standards, the Maldives government maintains education as a priority. Until recently, only primary and secondary education, neither of which was compulsory, was offered in Maldives. International organizations enabled the creation of the Science Education Center in 1979 and an Arabic Islamic Education Center opened in 1989. Japanese aid enabled the founding of the Maldives Center for Social Education in 1991. In the latter half of 1993 work began on the Maldives Institute of Technical Education, a school to help eliminate the shortage of skilled labor. In the 1990s the government began making large investments in secondary, vocational, and postsecondary education. Currently the Science Education Center in Malé provides pre-university courses, and it may evolve eventually into a university. As of 1999 public expenditure on education was estimated at 3.9 percent of GNP. With the number of students leaving school increasing and the number of oversea scholarships decreasing, there was an urgent need to provide higher education in the country as well as provide an increase in the provision of training at all levels.

Subsequently, in 1999, Maldives College of Higher Education (MCHE) was established under the aegis of the Department of Higher Education and Training by renaming the existing Faculty of Health Sciences. At present, in addition to MCHE, higher education is provided by College of Islamic Studies (CIS), Center for Continuing Education (CCE), and a number of private institutions (Mohamed, 2005). But the MCHE is the only public degree-awarding institution in the country offering a range of degrees, diplomas, and certificates in the fields of engineering, health science, education, tourism, and business management. It has five campuses spread over the whole country. The other institutions mentioned above conduct diploma and certificate-level courses. Private-sector participation in higher and continuing education is growing, with 86 private institutions registered with the government. Most of these private institutions offer diploma and certificate courses in computer studies, information technology, and management and business studies and each enrolls approximately 3,000 students at a given time. In 2005 MCHE enrolled 4,000 students in long-term courses and about 2,000 students in short-term courses (MCHE, 2007). MCHE was to be raised to the level of a university by 2007, but no such development seems to have happened so far. However, as a degree-awarding institution, it is discharging the functions of a university.

Afghanistan

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is a landlocked country in central Asia bordering Pakistan in the east; Iran in the west; Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan in the north; and China in the northeast. It has a population of about 32 million people. A large majority of the people (about 99 percent) practice Islam.

The literacy rate in this land is very low—only about 36 percent. At 21 percent, the literacy rate for women is still lower (UNESCO, 1999). This country has two different systems of education. An older, religious one is conducted by mullahs (Vising Arts, 2006) who run schools in the village mosques and teach the religious precepts of the Koran, reading, writing, and arithmetic. A newer one, introduced by Afghanistan's 1964 constitution, provides free compulsory education at all levels. In 2000 only about 32 percent of school-age children were enrolled in school, and an overwhelming 97 percent of the country's girls did not attend school at all. By the end of Taliban rule in December 2001, over 80 percent of the country's schools were either destroyed or severely damaged. Higher education had been forbidden for girls in the Taliban-controlled areas. It was not until February 2002, with the assistance of UNESCO, that more than 1,000 female students took the university entrance examination for the first time after Taliban rule. Children's numbers in school increased almost fourfold from 2002 to 2004. From 2001 to 2003 girls' numbers in school increased from around 3 percent to around 30 percent (UNICEF, 2005).

A student can enter higher education after completing 12 years of elementary education and passing the Baccaluria examination. Higher education is provided by mainly six universities in Afghanistan—Kabul University, the American University of Afghanistan, the University of Islamic Studies, Balk University, an agricultural institute and polytechnic, and a state medical institute—and two teacher training institutes. The present government has made some attempts to renew the higher education system in the state and the Ministry of Higher Education has placed emphasis on establishing more colleges and universities. The number of institutions—currently 19 four-year institutions and 18 two-year institutions (which are equivalent to teacher-training institutes)—has continued to expand, resulting in considerable discussion about inefficiencies within the system. Some institutions are quite small, with fewer than 500 students, and their capacity to grow is limited, due to their geographic isolation.

Currently, Afghanistan has less than 0.15 percent of its population pursuing higher education, which is among the lowest rates in the world. Of about 36,000 undergraduate students, 17 percent are women. It is estimated that within five years over 100,000 students will pass their secondary school examination and will have to be given opportunity for higher education. Accommodating this influx of students is the biggest challenge for the country's higher education system over the next decade. Issues to be resolved include method of instruction, curriculum renewal, and quality of education. For this purpose, increased funding to support institutions must be procured. The faculty must be reoriented and enabled to respond to the demands of students, as well as those of the society at large. At present, the postsecondary system has approximately 2,200 of its faculty in four-year institutions. Slightly more than 50 percent have a bachelor degree, less than 6 percent hold a doctorate, and 12 percent are female. No university offers a master's or doctoral degree. The system is not well positioned to deal with rapid expansion.

Afghan higher education is undergoing enormous changes after a generation fraught with conflict, university closures, and severe damage to the infrastructure

of its universities. Postsecondary institutions have suffered from several significant problems over the last quarter century. Many of the most talented faculty have fled the country—first during the Soviet invasion, then during the years of fighting by the mujahedeen, and most recently during the era of the Taliban. Many of the faculty were killed or exiled; others were driven underground. Higher education became highly politicized, ideologized, and sectarianized. Postsecondary campuses became war zones. The result was that the infrastructure was damaged, looted, or destroyed (Tierney, 2005).

In addition to the physical devastation suffered by many campuses, after the fall of the Taliban in December 2001 hundreds of thousands of books were destroyed. No university presently has what might be considered a minimally acceptable number of books for a postsecondary library. Buildings remain in serious need of repair. No institution has more than 100 computers.

Before the civil war the respected Kabul University (founded in 1932) was a major place of learning and offered free tuition. Nine other colleges were established within it from 1938 through 1967, each with assistance from such countries as France, Germany, the United States, Egypt, and the USSR. Before 1961 only men could receive a higher education; that year all schools were made coeducational. University of Nangarhar (1962) in Jalalabad was established to teach medicine and other disciplines.

Access to education is inadequate and there are also gender and rural-urban imbalances, both in the availability and quality of education. Education remains inequitably distributed among the various regions and income groups in the country. Literacy and participation rates are lower than those of other countries with similar levels of economic development. The target of at least a minimal essential requirement for a quality education has not yet been achieved. There are shortages of trained and qualified teachers, especially female teachers. Educational institutions also lack proper physical infrastructure, and some are underutilized. Teachers lack training, dedication, motivation, and interest in their profession. Curricula too, are mostly not relevant to present-day requirements.

Conclusion: Reflective Assessment

The countries of the SAARC region share many things, including geographic boundaries and climatic conditions, a dense (with exception of Afghanistan) and growing population, low per capita income, low literacy rates (with the exception of Sri Lanka and Maldives), low participation of women in any developmental process, and underdevelopment. Mutual cooperation is a key factor in dealing with these problems, especially in higher education. SAARC aims to accelerate economic and social development in member states, which requires optimal utilization of human resources. It has, therefore, emphasized the importance of promoting education. At SAARC's ninth summit at Malé in 1997, it was acknowledged that illiteracy was a major factor impeding development of human resources of South Asia and contributed significantly to the region's socioeconomic backwardness. Higher education is of utmost significance for modernization of an economy and creation of a knowledge-based society. The

member countries, therefore, must assess the progress of higher education, both in quantity and quality, and take corrective measures.

The foregoing review reveals that, in the entire SAARC region, enrollment in higher education as a proportion of the eligible age group is low. The first and foremost task is to increase opportunities for access to higher education to meet the educational needs of various sections of groups, including women. The gross enrollment ratio for those 17 to 23 years old varies in SAARC countries from less than 1 percent in Afghanistan to about 10 percent in India, while it is very high—from 50 percent to more than 90 percent—for some developed countries. Thus, large-scale expansion of higher education facilities has to be undertaken in the entire region. Perhaps the ODL system is the best option to cover the maximal number of learners with minimal financial and physical costs. India has already taken a lead by diverting 25 percent of the enrollment in postsecondary education to the ODL model and is planning to raise the figure to 50 percent within a decade. Other SAARC nations should also strengthen this efficient mode of learning.

Improvement in the quality of education is another aspect requiring urgent attention. Establishing world-class schools of higher education will prevent youth being lured away by foreign institutions. Unconditional cooperation in curriculum development, preparation of instructional material, implementation of innovative practices, use of new technologies, exchange of experts, and promotion of collaborative research are the needs of the hour. SAARC should promote and finance regional conferences on various issues on higher education, including those related to quality improvement. For improving quality, universities in the region need to learn to utilize available resources in a more effective manner by evolving transparent systems of recruitment and promotion of teachers, introducing interactive teaching methods, and reducing political activities on the campuses.

So far, almost all SAARC countries have been financing their education systems out of public funds. But allocation of public funds for education is very low—between 2 percent and 4 percent of GNP. Keeping in view the degree of underdevelopment, all governments must consider devoting more funds for education. For example, in India public funding of education, in the form of subsidies, has been to the extent of 90 to 95 percent of total expenditure. And still universities are short on funds. The government has proposed to increase public funding on education from the present 3.9 percent to 6 percent of GNP in due course. Other countries of the region should also work on similar strategies. Because of large-scale expansion of higher education accompanied by increased financial burden on the public exchequer, the government of India has encouraged the private sector to establish and manage higher education institutions. Similarly, other countries of the region have also welcomed private for-profit investment in the higher education sector. It has been observed that the impact of private higher education in the region has been positive, because private universities generally pay higher salaries to teachers, offer a good curriculum, and provide high-quality libraries and research facilities. Thus,

privatization tends to respond to the popular demand for modern, job-oriented, and practical training in technology and business.

Privatization of higher education is a relatively new phenomenon and is due to both a social need and a financial compulsion. But most private universities and colleges are providing professional education and are functioning on commercial lines. Opening private universities and colleges is a lucrative business in India these days. Privatization and commercialization of higher education are two faces of the same coin, and hence, commercialization must be accepted. All governments must monitor institutions so that privatization combined with commercialization does not lower the quality of education. Private universities and colleges have to be kept under strict vigilance to guard against excessive profiteering and be subjected to stringent administrative and financial regulations. A thoughtful debate toward a collaborative regional strategy needs to be planned in this regard. To attract the brightest students to social subjects and research, increased funds have to be allocated for the higher education sector. This emerging scenario has given birth to some new issues. The brightest students are attracted by medical, engineering, and similar professional programs. Some of them enter technical or business-management programs like Master of Computer Applications (MCA) and Master of Business Administration (MBA) after graduation. Others join postgraduate courses in arts, sciences, and commerce. It is difficult to find good researchers among a group that lacks requisite research aptitude and motivation.

The phenomenon of privatization has initiated debate on some social issues also. With private professional higher education gaining strength, a market-oriented value system is likely to dominate future policy-planning strategies, not only in SAARC countries but also all other parts of the world. The business-based and profit-oriented education system is likely to inculcate and perpetuate competitiveness, self-centeredness, and related materialistic values among youth. In the long run, the system's impact would be seen in society at large when values of the market place dominate social behavior. Some joint international strategies have to be devised to face these challenges.

Cooperation in the field of education has been an important item on SAARC's agenda since 1989, when a Technical Committee on Education was established. A few positive steps have been taken such as institution of a SAARC chair, formulation of a fellowship and scholarship scheme, creation of the SAARC Consortium of Open and Distance Learning (SACODL), establishment of a SAARC teachers forum, and establishment of a South Asian university in India. But before concrete results will be observed, all the member countries must work together, setting aside all bilateral economic, political, and territorial disputes. Sometimes bilateral territorial issues dominate discussions in SAARC meetings and socioeconomic matters of common interest take a back seat. SAARC should be a platform for discussing common socioeconomic problems and devising collaborative strategies to deal with them.

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