

LESSONS FOR PAKISTAN'S EDUCATION SYSTEM FROM THE SOUTH ASIAN REGION

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Abstract

The foundation of a country's progress is based on the achievements attained in the education sector. The paper examines Pakistan's overall progress in the educational sector and its underlying factors. South Asia is one of the few regions marked among the illiterate of the world. Even among its peers within this illiterate region of the world, Pakistan lags behind in literacy despite its efforts. The paper analyses the causes and consequences of the poor education system in Pakistan. It also studies the impacts of educational shortcomings on the extremism landscape of the country. Best practices of Sri Lanka through a successful model of education to fight extremism and balanced religious education of the Maldives are examined for Pakistan to consider. Moreover, the study highlights Pakistan's education system's weaknesses and gives a detailed comparison of the educational achievements of all the regional countries over a period of time to bring forth the importance of education to the policymakers at home. The paper looks at the targets achieved and missed by Pakistan in light of the international standards set by MDG and SDG and also presents recommendations for the policymakers of Pakistan so that the country is able to compete with the international community in future.

Keywords: education, literacy, MDGs, SDGs, Vision 2030, gender parity, South Asia

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پاکستان کے نظام تعلیم کے لیے جنوبی ایشیاء سے اسباق حمیرا اقبال

خلاصہ

کسی ملک کی ترقی کی بنیاد تعلیمی میدان میں کامیابیاں حاصل کرنے پر مبنی ہے یہ تحریر تعلیمی شعبے میں پاکستان کی تمام تر پیش رفت اور اس کے تحت کارفرما عوامل کا جائزہ لیتی ہے۔ جنوبی ایشیاء دنیا کے ناخواندہ خطوں میں سے ایک ہے۔

اپنی تمام تر کوششوں کے باوجود، پاکستان دنیا کے اس ناخواندہ خطے میں بھی سب سے پیچھے ہے۔ اس مقالے میں پاکستان کے کمزور نظام تعلیم کی وجوہات اور اثرات کا تجزیہ کیا گیا ہے۔ اس امر کا بھی جائزہ لیا گیا ہے کہ کسی ملک کی تعلیمی خامیوں کے اس کی سرزمین پر انتہا پسندی پر کیا اثرات مرتب ہوتے ہیں۔

انتہا پسندی کے خلاف جنگ میں سری لنکا کے کامیاب تعلیمی نمونے اور تعلیم کے شعبے میں مالڈیب کی متوازن مذہبی تعلیم کو پاکستان کے لیے ایک مثال کے طور پر پرکھا گیا ہے۔ علاوہ ازیں یہ تحقیق پاکستان کے تعلیمی نظام کی کمزوریوں کو سامنے لاتی ہے اور اُن کا تمام علاقائی ممالک کی تعلیمی کامیابیوں کے ساتھ تفصیلی موازنہ کرتی ہے جو کہ ہمارے ملک کے پالیسی سازوں کو تعلیم کی اہمیت سے روشناس کرتی ہے۔

اس تحریر میں جائزہ لیا گیا ہے کہ پاکستان ایم ڈی جی اور ایس ڈی جی کے مقرر کردہ معیارات کے مطابق اپنے اہداف کے حصول میں کس حد تک ناکام یا کامیاب رہا ہے۔ پاکستان کے پالیسی سازوں کے لیے سفارشات بھی پیش کی گئی ہیں تاکہ ملک مستقبل میں بین الاقوامی برادری کے ساتھ مقابلے کے قابل ہو سکے۔

Education may be considered the 'new oil' of economic and social development. It improves the productive capacity of societies and strengthens their political, economic, and scientific institutions. Education raises overall levels of labour productivity and economic growth, ensuring an improved quality of life. Similarly, it contributes to reducing poverty by enabling the poor to participate in the growth and benefit from social welfare services. Thus, education has integrated instrumental, personal, social, and distributive roles for the foundation of modern civilised society.

The developed and the developing worlds are assessed on the basis of the level of advancement attained by some and by the remaining striving hard for more. Pakistan, classified as a developing country, is still struggling to find ways to become a developed nation by raising its literacy level. Sadly, many countries including Pakistan define literacy only as the ability to read and write. Despite the Constitutional right to education, Pakistan struggles to establish with its citizens the foundational significance of education as an investment linked directly to future socio-economic growth within and beyond its borders.

To contextualise Pakistan's literacy position within the globe and within South Asia, UNESCO figures show that over 75 per cent of the world's 781 million illiterate adults is found in South Asia, West Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa. Women represent almost two-thirds of all illiterate adults globally. South Asia is among the regions with the highest illiteracy rate.¹ By 2017, Afghanistan with 38 per cent was the lowest after Pakistan with 58 per cent in educational development while all the other South Asian states have made efforts to reach higher standing. The overall literacy rate of the Maldives is 99 per cent, Sri Lanka 93 per cent, India 71 per cent, Bhutan 65 per cent, Nepal 64 per cent, and Bangladesh 62 per cent.²

To look at the education system of South Asia would mean looking at one-fourth of the world's population. According to the

World Bank, South Asia is the fastest growing region in the world in demography. However, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, while progress is being achieved in many sectors including education, the *Human Development Report* has sadly marked South Asia as “the most illiterate region,” “the least gender-sensitive region” and “the region with the highest human deprivation” record.³ It viewed the region as “an anti-education society in the midst of a pro-education Asian culture”⁴ with a record of low progress. The overall sustainability of the region’s growth can only continue if the countries invest in their youth through education.

Methodology

This study examines Pakistan’s educational sector in comparison with other South Asian states. Review of a vast number of national and international papers, policy briefs, statistical reports, research findings, and news articles has been conducted in order to have an in-depth understanding of the education sector of Pakistan and other regional states of South Asia. The purpose of the paper is to bring forth the significance of education and its importance to the policy-makers for Pakistan’s future growth and international prestige. The aim is to highlight the weaknesses within and, based on a detailed comparison with the regional countries’ education systems, recommend ways to fill the gaps to develop a realisation among policy-makers about the foundational role quality education plays in shaping modern society.

The paper is broadly divided into two parts. The first part examines the present educational situation in Pakistan, outlines its national and international commitments to universal literacy, and the challenges faced by the country to meet the desired global criteria. The section also delves into the reasons why Pakistan is still lagging behind in spite of the efforts it has made in the field of basic education. The second part of the paper evaluates the South Asian countries’ education systems by highlighting the reasons behind their

struggle and the leading position they hold over Pakistan in educational development. To conclude, the paper presents recommendations for the country to overcome hurdles in the future to be able to compete in the global market.

Education in Pakistan

Pakistan belongs to a South Asian society, which inherited the societal and cultural complexities of backwardness from colonialism. It is a country with high rates of population growth, poor economic conditions, socio-economic inequalities, and gender disparity, where female education is neglected. The founders of Pakistan realised very early that the task of nation-building is only possible with education and skilled manpower. In 1947, the very year when the country was founded, they convened a National Education Conference that recommended achievement of universalisation of primary education within 20 years.

The importance of education and the type of education cannot be over-emphasized... there is no doubt that the future of our State will and must greatly depend upon the type of education we give to our children, and the way in which we bring them up as future citizens of Pakistan... we should not forget that we have to compete with the world which is moving very fast in this direction.⁵

The question today is: has Pakistan reached Jinnah's visionary global status of competing with the world and securing the literacy future of its people? Following the first educational conference, much attention was paid to primary education and infrastructure building with necessary resources required for facilitation. Starting with the 1947 national conference, seven national educational policies, eleven Five-Year Plans, and numerous strategies have been proposed and launched on education. Nevertheless, the desired results in terms of

quantity and quality remain unsatisfactory.⁶ Pakistan is faced today with increasingly complex educational challenges to counter the needlessly divergent narratives of religious and modern education. It has failed to achieve greater literacy not because it lacks education planning but because it has done lots of planning without adequate implementation.

Pakistan is committed at both the national and international levels to promoting education and literacy via its education policies at the domestic level and by its involvement in the global visionary plans at the international level.

National Commitment to Education

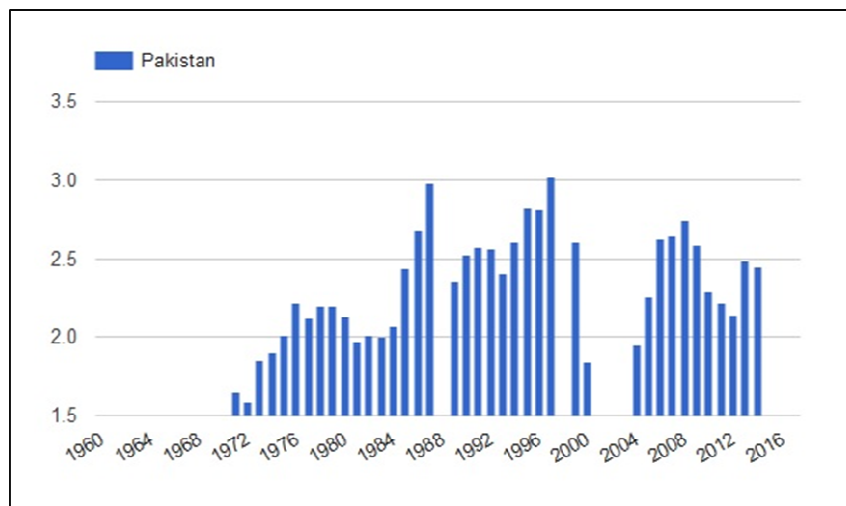
The most recent policy to improve education is a Constitutional Directive of Pakistan under Article 25-A that obligates provision of free and compulsory education to all between the ages of 5 and 16 years and enhancement of adult literacy. With the 18th Constitutional Amendment of 2010, the concurrent list of federal and provincial powers, consisting of 47 subjects, was abolished and these subjects were transferred to the federating units to ensure provincial autonomy, local ownership, and effective implementation. Education was one of the subjects transferred from the centre to the provinces. The decision was taken to hand over a large number of powers, responsibilities, and institutions to the provinces so that they could effectively and efficiently fulfil the educational needs of the people without approaching the federal government for approval.⁷ However, since 2010, the ground reality shows only a slight change in the schools of Pakistan. The pervasive problems of access to quality education, infrastructure, and equitable opportunities remain unresolved.⁸

The education system of Pakistan includes all institutions that are involved in delivering formal education, i.e., public and private, for-profit and not-for-profit, as well as onsite and virtual instruction. It includes faculties, students, physical infrastructure, resources and

rules. In broader terms, the system also includes institutions involved directly in funding, managing, operating or regulating such institutions (government ministries and regulatory bodies, central testing organisations, textbook boards, and accreditation boards).

The rules and regulations for supervising the individual and institutional interactions within the setup are also part of the education system. It comprises of about 260,903 institutions, 1,535,461 teachers, and 41,018,384 students. The system includes 180,846 public sector institutions and 80,057 private institutions.⁹ In Pakistan, there are 146,185 formal primary, 42,147 middle level (lower secondary), and 29,874 secondary schools. Among them, 75 per cent are public sector schools, 10 per cent private sector schools, and the remaining are almost equally divided between non-formal basic education schools and religious seminaries or madrassahs.¹⁰

At the national level, the majority of the population in Pakistan has limited access to education and, thus, literacy remains low. Rarely is it seen that the public and private sectors work together, in particular, in rural areas where there are hardly any facilities to avail education. According to the National Education Policy of 2009, public schools, private schools, and religious madrassah have created unequal opportunities for students. The system comprises of elite schools within the public and private sectors, which cater to a small minority, whereas the majority of the students attend lower quality public and private schools with poor curriculum, limited teaching materials, and untrained or at times absent teachers. The policy highlighted a lack of commitment to education at the state level with poor policy implementation, partly due to inadequate 2.7 per cent government spending on education.¹¹



Source: "Pakistan education spending, percent of GDP," *theGlobalEconomy.com*, http://m.theglobaleconomy.com/Pakistan/Education_spending/

Pakistan's public spending Gross Domestic Product (GDP) percentage on education from the period of 1971 to 2016 fluctuated from a minimum rate of 1.58 per cent in 1972 and a maximum of 3.02 per cent in 1997, with an overall average rate of 2.34. This is visible in the UNESCO graph reproduced above.¹² Pakistan's GDP spending on education is 2.65 per cent, lower than neighbouring war-torn Afghanistan's 3.24 per cent.¹³

Vision 2030

The federal Planning Commission of Pakistan undertook long-term planning in 2007 that resulted in its *Vision 2030* document.¹⁴ This Plan seeks an academic environment that promotes a thinking mind for building an innovative society. The Planning Commission believed that an innovative society based on universal education would nurture the development of technical skills, especially when fostered in an atmosphere of independent thinking among students for the future socio-economic growth of the country. The prime focus of vision 2030

was to succeed in creating a thinking mind for bringing an instrumental change in the society. It may be added here that Saudi Arabia, in 2016, came up with a similar plan titled *Saudi Vision 2030*.¹⁵ To meet Pakistan's developmental challenges, *Vision 2030* mentioned the following for the education sector:

- "Enhance the scale and quality of education in general and of scientific/technical education in Pakistan in particular.
- Increase public expenditure on education and skills generation from 2.7 per cent of GDP to 5 per cent by 2010 and at least 7 per cent by 2015.
- Generate an environment which encourages the thinking mind to emerge from our schools. Among other things, this would require qualified, and well-paid teachers, whether at the level of the school, the college or the university.
- Establish one curriculum and one standardised national examination system under state responsibility.
- Make employment and employability the central theme in economic and social policies. This will require a major investment in skill generation after 10 years of schooling, and social reforms to draw in women since labour markets are always socially embedded."¹⁶

To summarise these targets for the education section, one may state that the basic goal under *Vision 2030* was "one curriculum and one standardised national examination system under state responsibility."¹⁷

International Education Commitment

The global Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Sustainable Development Goal's (SDGs), and the Education for All

(EFA) movement have been Pakistan's international programme commitments for the promotion of literacy.

MDGs' Universal Primary Education Goal and Pakistan

The United Nations' Millennium Development Goals of 2000 recognised the global importance of universal education, in particular, primary education that was to have been achieved by the year 2015. The MDGs had laid down two goals for the education sector. Goal 2 was "Achieving Universal Primary Education" whose objective was to ensure that both girls and boys should fully complete primary schooling by the year 2015. The need for increasing students' enrolment was expected to be high to achieve the MDGs target. At the global level, the primary enrolment rate between 2000 and 2015 reportedly improved massively from 83 per cent to 91 per cent while the number of the out-of-school dropout rate of children decreased from 100 million to 57 million.¹⁸

In Pakistan, by 2014 the enrolment indicators for the age of 3- to 16-year students increased with a decreasing dropout rate. Achievements in the four main provinces were that Punjab led in the primary enrolment rate with 62 per cent enrolment by early 2015. The enrolment rate in Sindh was 52 per cent, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) 54 per cent, and in Balochistan, it was 45 per cent.¹⁹ In short, Pakistan moved forward but did not achieve full MDGs in education by 2015. To assess the overall progress and challenges for Pakistan to reach MDGs we may quote an observer:

To assess overall progress and challenges of Pakistan, the country has been severely lagging behind in Goal 2 of universal primary education and it remains behind in achieving the targets set for 2015 in all of its three indicators. Particularly, the completion and survival rate seems to have declined rapidly in recent years implying that more than a quarter of the students enrolled in primary schools do not complete their education. Pakistan's literacy

rate, though having improved marginally over the years remains considerably short of the MDG target of 88 percent by 2015 at 58 percent, and closer inspection reveals large gender and rural-urban disparities.²⁰

Goal 3 of the MDGs was to “Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women.” The aim of this goal was to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education possibly by 2005, and in all the levels of education till 2015.²¹ However, there has been an explicit inequality between male and female literacy rates. As per 2012-13 estimates:

The national literacy rate of males was 71 percent and females was 48 percent. At the provincial level, in Punjab literacy rate of males was 71 percent and for females it was 54 percent, in Sindh for male it was 72 percent and females 47 percent, in KPK males had 70 percent while females 35 percent, and in Balochistan males 62 percent and females 23 percent.²²

Thus, gender equality in basic education remained an elusive goal in Pakistan.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The MDGs were followed by SDGs which had expired at the end of 2015. Therefore, the member states of the United Nations converged in New York for the United Nations (UN) Summit on Sustainable Development during 25-27 September 2015 and adopted the new global goals for sustainable development. The world leaders pledged their commitment to the new ‘2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’, covering 17 universal and transformative SDGs.²³ Goal 4 aims to “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning.” The addition of quality along with school

enrolment indicates a consideration and future target of giving importance to:

What the child will actually learn. Furthermore, there is an understanding that education is not restricted to literacy and numerical skills. Education includes learning about all the essential knowledge and skills to know the context of what is being taught regarding worldwide views. It is imperative to face global challenges such as extremism. Education has a significant role in positive contribution towards diminishing violence and extremism in the long-term.²⁴

The urgent need for Pakistan is to commit itself to the implementation of this goal to tackle growing extremism and intolerance among its people.

Goal 5 aims to "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls."²⁵ In South Asia, generally, an imbalanced trend regarding the education of girls endures. In Pakistan, girls continue to have lower access to primary education. The enrolment rate of girls at the primary level is 4 per cent points lower than the rate for boys at 84 per cent. At the secondary level, the difference widens with an enrolment rate for girls at 68 per cent and boys at 75 per cent.²⁶ The key reason behind this divergence is societal barriers that favour males at the expense of females and misguided religious views.

The Education for All (EFA) Movement

At the World Education Forum held in Dakar, in the year 2000, 164 governments pledged to achieve EFA and identified six goals to be met by 2015. Governments, development agencies, civil society, and the private sector are working together to reach the EFA goals. Pakistan, as a member of the UN, took part in this UNESCO-sponsored EFA movement. This is a global commitment to provide quality-based basic education for all children, youth, and adults.²⁷

The EFA goals emphasise early childhood care and education that includes pre-schooling, universal primary education, and secondary education to youth, adult literacy along with gender parity and the quality of education as crosscutting thematic and program priorities.²⁸ "The overall progress of Pakistan under the EFA program, the EFA Review Report October 2014 outlined that despite repeated policy assurances, primary education in Pakistan is far behind the estimated target of universal primary education."²⁹

As of 2015, the primary gross enrolment rate stands at 85.9 per cent while Pakistan had to raise it up to 100 per cent by 2015-16 to fulfil EFA goals. According to estimates of total primary school-going children of ages 5-9 years, 21.4 million, i.e., 68.5 per cent, are enrolled in schools, of which 8.2 million or 56 per cent are boys and 6.5 million or 44 per cent are girls.³⁰ The *Economic Survey of Pakistan* recognised that during the year 2013-14 higher literacy rate in urban areas was recorded compared to rural areas and higher among males.³¹

Recent investments in education, research, and infrastructure improved the education environment in Pakistan, though not much has been done at the school and college levels. Statistics to evaluate progress made by Pakistan in achieving targets set in the *Vision 2030* show that Pakistan lagged behind in EFA targets and MDGs for education. The situation compels one to analyse the reasons of Pakistan's failure in achieving these objectives. A suitable recommendation must be made to overcome the reasons for failure.³²

Reasons Why Pakistan Lags Behind

The major causes of Pakistan's low level of educational progress during the past 70 years have persisted. These are listed below:

- The leading and constant reason is the lack of continuity in government policies;

- Centralised implementation, ending in a defective and uneven application;
- Insufficient budget and non-implementation of policy;
- The education imparted is directionless and not aligned with national needs, causing unemployment;
- Insufficient quality teacher training causing teachers' qualifications, experience, training, and aptitude to lack professionalism;
- Antiquated curriculum and rote learning;
- One big unaddressed area is lack of a uniform education system, causing a wide schism among students and, on a larger front, a nationwide division of society;³³ and
- No official check and no expert observance on madrassah education.

Since the last factor gets the greatest media attention, its discussion is taken first. South Asia is not new to the traditional religious madrassah system of learning. While madrassahs are an important social institution not only in Pakistan but across the Muslim world, it is imperative to understand that there are immense differences between madrassahs. Because of their diverse nature, it is difficult and unfair to brand them all as extremist. Different madrassahs teach differently and the theological approach and content also varies. Not all madrassahs play a negative role.

Some madrassahs take care of unruly children through strict discipline in Quranic learning. Others give succour to poor or orphan children, still others promote peaceful and/or Sufi mysticism, while some madrassahs provide religious and vocational training simultaneously. The traditional Islamic mosque in the entire Muslim world was a whole complex with poor-houses and soup kitchens, *serais* (inns) for travellers, rooms for training in the Islamic rituals of birth, marriage and death, Quran reading rooms, charity outlets for

distribution of Islamic taxes or tributes like *zakat* and *fitrana*, arrangements for marriage, and more. It is, thus, erroneous to stereotype the mosque-madrassah complex.

The actual number of madrassahs in Pakistan remains unknown. Estimates about registered madrassahs range from ten to twenty thousand.³⁴ A decade-old estimated count about registered and unregistered madrassahs placed the total figure at around 35,000 religious Islamic seminaries all across the country.³⁵ It may be recalled that Pakistan also has a large number of Christian seminaries. The number of madrassahs has increased to around 45,000 and range in size according to the numbers of students.³⁶ Overall, however, madrassahs comprise as low as 1 per cent of the education market.³⁷

Under the madrassah reform process sanctioned by President General Pervez Musharraf's government (2001-2008), religious seminaries were required to register with the government and make their financial records public.³⁸ However, only a fraction of madrassahs agreed to be registered while the majority simply ignored the ruling. There was no punishment imposed in case of noncompliance.³⁹ Unfortunately, little has been done by successive governments to implement these reforms.

The government and Pakistan's military received a huge jolt when seven foreign terrorists (Afghan, Chechen, and Arabs) carried out a concentrated attack on 16 December 2014 on the prestigious and well-protected Army Public School in the heart of the Peshawar cantonment. Nine teachers and staff and 132 schoolchildren between ages eight to eighteen died while the Army rescued 960 others.⁴⁰ This led to Pakistan formulating the National Action Plan (NAP), the country's 20-point strategy to combat extremism.⁴¹

Previous educational reform plans include the National Education Policy (NEP) of 2009 that pointed out a lack of state commitment to educational development and failure of policy implementation. Government spending on education has hovered

around 2.7 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP), which is very much on the low side.⁴²

Lessons from South Asia

Religious Extremism in Sri Lanka

To avoid such negativity, Pakistan must learn from the experience and struggle of Sri Lanka, the way it overcame and transformed the extremist mindset. Sri Lanka effectively dealt with the misled and propagandised education in the underdeveloped areas where the less educated people became prone to violence. Despite many challenges, Sri Lanka was successful in rehabilitating an impressive number of leaders and members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), one of the most ruthless insurgent and terrorist organisations in the world. Sri Lankan armed forces not only defeated the insurgents but the state also developed a multifaceted program to rehabilitate a large number of surrendered or captive Tigers. The post-conflict strategy adopted by Sri Lanka can be followed by Pakistan in its National Action Plan (NAP) to prevent recidivists from radicalising young generations.⁴³

Rehabilitation and community engagement is a new global frontier against ideological extremism and its vicious manifestation. Sri Lanka built working partnerships with communities, media, academia, and government to mainstream those who had deviated into ideological extremism due to varied reasons. Sri Lanka has the most developed program to facilitate this transformation of thinking referred to as the '6+1 model'. The first mode of this model focused on education and then other significant modes came in focusing on vocational, psychological, and creative therapies as well as social, cultural, family, spiritual, religious, recreational, and community rehabilitation.⁴⁴

Sri Lanka judiciously embraced a well-crafted legal framework for rehabilitation based on its own rich traditions of tolerance,

moderation, and coexistence with communities the country had lived together for centuries similar to what Pakistan had been historically. The recruited Tamil Tigers were mainly from poor and under-aged groups who had either not completed their education or failed to achieve the country's national standard of completing the General Certificate of Education, Ordinary Level Examination, which requires ten years of study. Hence, the main aim of the rehabilitation program was promoting education. The programme provided linguistic education in terms of both reading and writing, formal education to beneficiaries less than 18 years of age within a residential school environment, numerical skills, as well as informal education within each rehabilitation centre. Through education, Sri Lanka engendered the realisation among recipients that growth and development of society among multi-ethnic and multi-religious culture is individual and community strength and is only possible in the absence of extremism.⁴⁵

Religious Extremism in the Maldives

The remit of the Ministry of Education is clear: to create a population with deep spiritual and cultural connections to Islam and an appreciation of the history and heritage of the Maldives; a population equipped with the social skills to function as productive and engaged citizens; trained as independent thinkers; and with the ability to lead dignified and compassionate lives as responsible members of a global society.⁴⁶

The Maldives has, thus, taken head-on the possible problem of religious extremism and successfully nipped this evil in the bud. The Maldives is an archipelago of 1,190 coral islands in the Indian Ocean with geographic and demographic challenges. These serious challenges did not impede the high-value the Maldivians attached to the significance of education by investing in people, which it believes

is a preeminent method of promoting human rights and a brighter future for generations by ensuring consolidation of the democratic gains achieved. The country has instituted educational reforms that focus primarily on the people. The main motor for reform in the Maldives was its first written Constitution of 1932 and its strict compliance.⁴⁷

By endorsing education as a universal human right, the Maldives became the first country in the region to provide 12 years of compulsory education and 14 years of free schooling to all students. The central goals of education are the empowerment of children, empowerment of youth, and empowerment of women. The free education for all children in the Maldives offered by the government is from the age of 4 to 18. With remarkable progress in education, the adult literacy rate has reached over 98 per cent. Early childhood education is not only compulsory but free of charge as well, ensuring net enrolment increase from 51.2 per cent in 2001 to 99.6 per cent in 2016. Higher secondary enrolment has considerably increased over the period of 2013 to 2016 after the successful implementation of 'No Child Left Behind Policy'. Within South Asia, the Maldives has attained the status of 'MDG Plus' country by achieving five of the eight United Nations Millennium Development Goals well ahead of the decided timeline of 2015, successfully possible only with the educational achievements.⁴⁸

The Maldives' exceptional progress is due to the fact that it spends 5.7 per cent of its GDP on education. The 98 per cent literacy rate of the Maldives is the highest in South Asia and in the Indian Ocean region. About 35 per cent of the population in the Maldives is under 18 years of age and the government is seriously investing in the education of its young population. Schools are divided into three types: the English language for primary and secondary, Quranic schools, and Dhivehi language primary schools. The Ministry of Education manages colleges and universities in the country.⁴⁹

Traditionally, religious leaders and institutions were responsible for education in the Maldives. The Quranic or religious pattern schools were called 'edhuruge', and today even though the British educational system is followed there are several modern schools that continue to teach Arabic and Islamic education. The educational curriculum is designed to balance both the cultural and religious values in students as well as acquire skill-based learning to compete in the global market.⁵⁰

These two examples of successful South Asian literary efforts to thwart extremism came from predominantly Buddhist and Islamic countries. With the assistance of UNICEF, the Sri Lankan government promoted 'Education for Conflict Resolution (ECR)' programme in the syllabus with methods designed to suit the cultural requirements of Sri Lanka. It trained not only the teachers and students in the methods of articulating but also integrated the parents as a part of the community. Lessons that Pakistan can draw from Sri Lankan ECR are to incorporate such programmes in the national curriculum to learn the way communication between teachers and students could be built up to create an understanding of how a community deals with conflictual situations and functions as a whole in planning out solutions from very early ages.⁵¹ Similarly, to counter the aggressive religious approach, in 2015-16, the Maldives government supported numerous workshops around teaching 'moderate Islam' to religious scholars to counterbalance extremist narrative. A religious discourse was established by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs for different groups of students. Hence, Pakistan has a proficient example of the Maldives in controlling extremist religious notion among the young minds through establishing an official channel of religious education to impart rightest Islamic teachings and dialogue among the scholars and students.⁵²

Other Lessons from South Asia

Maldives

The Maldives also achieved gender parity by 2008 at different levels of education. Since 2010, higher secondary enrolment for both females and males has increased significantly. While sustaining this level of progress is a challenge, especially due to heavy reliance on expatriate teachers and lack of physical space caused by geographic dispersion, the reforms initiated in this respect are committed to the implementation of a new school curriculum with a distinctive focus on skill development, enactment of school-based management and monitoring systems, diploma requirement as a minimum qualification for teachers, etc. Furthermore, the education system has been looking into strategies to improve utilisation of enabling platforms like e-learning in schools and children's health and protection.⁵³

Teacher training is further responsible for the Maldives' high literacy rate of 98 per cent. 'Peer-to-peer' training of teachers is carried out with a high-tech information sharing system. Teacher Resource Centres have also been established in the country. Child-friendly teaching methods based on a self-sustaining and participatory network to build educational collaboration in the Maldives have been so effective that many communities have joined voluntarily.⁵⁴ Programmes encouraging the active involvement of caregivers in children's learning, revision of curriculum to reflect national development precedence and inventive knowledge-sharing at both national and local levels have been carried out.⁵⁵

Several vocational training centres and schools are founded throughout the islands. For instance, a centre in Male offers training in technical subjects. The Maldivian government maintains a Rural Youth Vocational Training Program and provides training in atoll localities. Other schools in the country include the Maldives Centre for Social Education, Maldives Institute of Technical Education, Science Education Centre, and Arabic Islamic Education Centre.⁵⁶

Due to the geographical nature of environmental disasters, UNICEF and the Ministry of Education created tsunami recovery programs that have boosted development, elevated the educational standards nationally and assimilated schools in dispersed areas of the islands.⁵⁷ Key achievements of the system by the end of 2004 were that within a month of a disastrous tsunami, all students in the Maldives were back to school. Children in IDP camps and tsunami affected schools even received school supplies, and more than 400 educators along with parents were trained in child-friendly education.⁵⁸ In short, the Maldives turned a national emergency into a huge successful educational achievement.

The lessons Pakistan can draw from the Maldives are their successful implementation of 'No Child Left Behind Policy'. This policy placed a special emphasis on gender parity. Pakistan should have such innovative policies for every citizen by focusing on empowering children, youth, and women. The Maldives, despite ecological and natural calamities and vulnerabilities, managed to have higher budgetary spending, which is the key to its achievement of universal literacy.

Sri Lanka

The reasons behind Sri Lanka's achievement in reaching literacy goals by bringing down illiteracy figures from about 43 per cent to less than eight per cent are due to consistent policy priorities dedicated to education. The country-wide reforms and political will at the topmost level is precisely what the international community urges countries to exhibit. This was observed when, in 1997, the Sri Lankan General Education Reforms were introduced in basic education designed mainly to benefit all children and political entrepreneurship at the Presidential level. The international development community hailed Sri Lanka's literacy achievements, educational enrolment, and equality of educational opportunity. Sri Lanka introduced major policies of EFA periodically under different terms. During the 1940s,

the Free Education Bill was promulgated based on the right to education and decreed tuition-free education from basic education to university. From the 1980s, policies of free textbooks, school uniforms, meals, and transport made Sri Lankan education one of the most accessible among the developing nations.⁵⁹

In 1946, when Sri Lanka became independent from Britain, the literacy rate stood at 57.8 per cent, with female literacy rate at 43.8 per cent and male literacy at 70.1 per cent. Within 60 years, Sri Lanka had achieved a literacy rate of 92 per cent even though the development of the country suffered due to nearly three decades of civil war and insurgencies. Access to education remained high in comparison with other regional countries. The education of children in the country was not cut off. The C.W.W. Kannangara reforms of 1943, which introduced a free education system played a significant role in building the education system of Sri Lanka. These reforms established a system of education based on merit and opened education to every Sri Lankan child irrespective of race, caste, gender, or religion.⁶⁰

While a fee-levying system of education was implemented nearly four decades ago by President Jayawardene's government, the free education policy in the country via fully government-run schools called 'government schools' continues till today. According to the World Bank statistics, the budgetary allocation in Sri Lanka dropped between 2009 and 2014 from 2.054 per cent of the GDP to a low of 1.497 per cent in 2012, but it once again increased in 2015 to 2.17 per cent of the GDP. The development of a private education system in recent times has not impacted adversely on the system of free education.⁶¹

Sri Lanka has been instrumental in coming up with an idea of establishing the Open School Programme which is a product of the National Institute of Education based in Colombo (Maharagama), functioning since 2007. The National Institute of Education was one of the winners of the 2015 UNESCO King Sejong Literacy Prize. The

program runs nationwide access to sustainable and learner-led quality education that targets poor and marginalised children who drop out of formal schooling and fills other gaps too. The aim was to include groups such as women, the mentally and physically disabled, prisoners, indigenous people, and minorities, and also ensured to include the environmental lessons of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).⁶²

The Open School Programme works at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels mainly with farming and working communities providing different options to those who lack recognised basic qualifications. The program follows a very informal system to learning with flexible working routine and no classroom conditions, teachers meet with learners at a convenient time around their work times and the study is supported by work plans and self-learning materials. The program basically focuses on literacy and livelihood to empower learners to not only complete vocational courses and programs but also to become part of work with sustainable development knowledge. The Open School Programme was nominated for the UNESCO Japan Prize on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in 2017.⁶³

The focus on education in Sri Lanka has transformed its people into law-abiding citizens, women empowerment, and social and cultural inclusiveness, where all beliefs and ethnicities communicate in a modest way. The youth in Sri Lanka will be replacing the elderly labour force while women empowerment in the government and economic sectors is highly visible. This prosperity is all because of education. Sri Lanka has invested in the Education for All policy with persistent commitments towards achieving a high literacy ratio uncompromisingly despite a long-running civil war. Pakistan can learn from Sri Lanka's compelling policy examples and implement them to similarly achieve universal literacy.⁶⁴

Sri Lanka's successful example for the rise in its literacy levels was based upon its innovative venture of the Open School Programme. In addition, its remarkable rehabilitation of insurgents is a role model for Pakistan to learn from, adapt, and adopt. The efforts made in the transformation of extremist mindsets in Sri Lanka is a laudable achievement reached through establishing high-level educational programmes in rehabilitation centres.

India

Similar to the youth boom in Pakistan, more than 100 million young people in India are expected to enter the workforce by 2022.⁶⁵ Lately, India under the Modi government saw less budgetary allocations for education which raised critical voices from within the country. The budget estimates dropped from one per cent of the country's income in the government's first Budget in 2014-15 to 0.62 per cent in 2017-18. The share of education in the budget has also been slashed from 6.15 per cent to 3.7 per cent. The New Delhi-based think tank Centre for Policy Research (CPR) reports that the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, a national program for universal elementary education, saw its total allocation dropping to 29 per cent in 2017-18 from 31 per cent in 2016-17, two per cent less than the previous year.⁶⁶

However, despite budgetary cuts, India is far ahead of Pakistan in every field of education. Notable reasons are the streamlined efforts of the previous Indian government, which increased the higher education budget five-fold by allocating more than one thousand billion rupees for the year 2012-13. In comparison to Pakistan's spending on education, Indian monetary allocation was 40 times more than what Pakistan allocated for the education sector in the last decade. Higher education enrolment in Pakistan is eight per cent whereas in India it is 18 per cent. Research in India has acquired central prominence in all the public and private universities and the government has extended its assistance in this regard. The federal universities have even allocated monthly stipends to PhD scholars.

Both the official and private level support of various organisations is there, like the Indian Council for Social Sciences and Research (ICSSR) where the Indian prime minister is the council chairman,⁶⁷ All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), Science and Technology for Weaker Section (STAWS). STAWS aims at promoting research and development knowledge expertise based on science and technology in improving the life quality of weaker communities.⁶⁸ It also provides financial support for promoting excellence in research development at higher education levels in various disciplines.

In 2015, the UN reported that seven out of every 10 Indians, 15 years and above, could read and write short sentences with understanding related to their daily routine. The literacy figure has risen 30 per cent since 1980 when, according to the available data, four of every 10 Indians were literate. Back in 1950, only two in every 10 Indians, five years and above were literate according to the first independent Indian Census where literacy was defined in terms of anyone who could write a letter and read the reply. India made more progress between 1980 and 2015 according to the data from UNESCO. The gap between India and Pakistan has increased with time.⁶⁹

Indian think tanks have promoted education and academic analysis in general. The seventh annual *2013 Global Go-To Think Tanks Report*, ranked six Indian think tanks among its 150 top global think tanks. India was reported to have the fourth largest number of think tanks after the US, China, and the UK. This index helped India to be recognised as one of the leading centres of excellence in public policy research across the world. India's Centre for Civil Society (CCS) ranked at 50th on the list, followed by the Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis (IDSA) on 102, the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER) on 105, The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI) on 107, Observer Research Foundation at

114, and Development Alternatives at 140.⁷⁰ Numerous other think tanks help raise educational standards in India.

Think tanks for research and education need not be a financial burden on the government. Everywhere in the world, think tanks are funded and supported by different groups ranging from influential political circles, economic, ecological, rightist and leftist lobbies, etc. In terms of foreign affairs, the Indian government has utilised policy-making think tanks as a productive source of diplomacy to reach out effectively to the world. Institutions like the Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis (IDSA) and the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA) have government backing.⁷¹ India made inroads through soft power diplomacy with the utilisation of these academic platforms to overcome diplomatic hiccups between states to benefit from the energy, economic, and security partnership cooperation.

The informal diplomatic space Indians received because exchanges between think tanks of ideas and policy preferences with area experts, analysts, and leaders at multilateral conferences have been an excellent tool to devise like-minded strategies and solutions to common challenges, including in the field of literacy, basic schooling and higher education. Even for long-standing conflicts, think-tanks are facilitating dialogues and conflict-management discourse to generate a cooperative environment at both the state and national levels. Prominent dialogues where top Indian policy-makers have taken part are Raisina Dialogue, Gateway of India Dialogue to have multilateral geo-economic talks, India-China Think Tank Forum between Indian and Chinese think tanks for discussing regular exchange of science and technology and cooperation on cyber-security issues, Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM), etc.⁷² Leading academics at these think tanks do research, conduct dialogues, and help form policy that raises overall education levels.

In India, when government support is lacking, there is an emerging role of business houses supporting think tanks like The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI), Observer Research Foundation (ORF), etc.⁷³ The ORF is supported by the Reliance business group and the Atlanta Aspen Centre is funded by a group of business leaders. By going global, foreign think-tanks of the highest ranking have also started setting up their houses in India. Brookings have their India office supported by rich Indian business leaders and Carnegie India⁷⁴ is founded as well. The ORF led Indian think-tanks in Asia in the Global Go-To Think Tank Index Report and became the largest ranked institution from Asia with 25 appearances in various categories in 2017.⁷⁵ Indian intellectuals are globally recognised as they emerge from the sound educational setup at the basic and higher education levels.

The image building and seriousness of India to advance its aspirations of being a leading power by engaging with foreign influential leaders and policy-makers through education and think tanks is noteworthy. Pakistan, on the other hand, is far behind in this race to challenge India and to put its own point of views across. Among 211 South Asian think-tanks mentioned in the "2014 Global Go-To Think-Tank Index," only two think tanks from Pakistan, the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) and Pakistan Institute of International Affairs, made it to the top 20. India had 192 think-tanks and Pakistan only 19 which made it to the index. SDPI was ranked at 38 for being trans-disciplinary and 55 in the list of think-tanks to be watched in the future for policy analyses.⁷⁶

Lessons for Pakistan from Indian educational strategy is their smart tapping of resources in presenting themselves as an idyllic global partner to the world. India, similar to Pakistan, has a fluctuating political will as far as spending more on education sector is concerned. Nevertheless, it remained consistent in funding and supporting the research side of the field. Research, covering economic, scientific,

space, geopolitics, strategic and security fields secured eminence for India from the start in the field of education. In modern times, it has become a lucrative policy tool for New Delhi to partake in global competitiveness with its expertise in its skill-based industry. This has made the country a policy hub for the world at large. India's lessons for Pakistan may be summarised in the words of Dr Nizam, Vice Chancellor of the University of Gujrat, Pakistan:

India is far ahead of us because it invested in Engineering, IT, and Social Sciences sectors long ago. Both the states and central government spend funds on education. They do not have a trend to have PhDs from abroad because they have dozens of PhDs in every university. Pakistan has more youth and if no investment is done on them, an unskilled nation would be left after 30 years which will be a burden on the economy. So Pakistan has to invest in them through education. At the moment Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan are spending much more on education as compared with Pakistan. The only way out is that Islamabad has to understand that spending on education is an investment and not an expense. So we should spend 4 percent of the GDP on education.⁷⁷

Nepal

A World Bank study carried out on Nepal's education system showed that there is a strong correlation between educational attainment and individual earnings and between mothers' education and fertility rates, child nutritional status, and morbidity.⁷⁸ This is all due to the major educational reforms Nepal commenced after 1990, which largely focused on basic and primary education. The autocratic regime of the Rana dynasty in Nepal (1846-1951) had discouraged education and by the time it ended in the 1950s, there were only 9,000 students enrolled in 321 primary schools. In 1953, the National

Education Planning Commission (NEPC) was formed, which led to the founding of a number of boards, commissions, committees, and plans for the reforms and development of the national education structure. This brought a progressive shift in the evolution of the education system. The significance of promoting educational access to all Nepali citizens was evident by the genuine efforts of NEPC for introducing reforms based on the gathering of public opinion. Representation of different ethnic communities in the Commission and the sending of missions to eight different regions in order to supervise the public discussions proved its dedication towards education development.⁷⁹

In 1992, the National Commission recommended five years of primary education, at least one female teacher in primary school, primary education to be imparted in the mother tongue, and private sector education. Moreover, the issue of equity in education was explicitly mentioned by the Higher Level National Education Commission in 1998. It recommended special treatment for socially, economically, and geographically backward people. Emphasis was placed on special and non-formal education and an effective regulatory framework for private boarding schools. In 2001, three core issue areas were identified by the high-level working committee, i.e., low quality of public schools, poor implementation of free primary education, and the lack of an effective regulatory private schools framework. The education reforms are largely based on centralised top-down management and the commission model of public sector reforms. It has not only created an expansion of basic and primary education but over the past years' impressive progress has been achieved in increasing the literacy rate. From 321 primary schools in 1951 to 24,943 in 2001, and literacy rate from less than five per cent in 1951 to 54 per cent in 2002.⁸⁰ around 65 per cent in 2015.⁸¹

The 7th amendment of the Education Act in 2001 has been a major breakthrough for education reforms in Nepal. The reforms in the Act included free education limited to primary education sub-sector,

teacher licensing system, cost sharing in secondary education, empowerment of school management committee, parental direct involvement in school management committee, discouraging teachers' involvement in direct politics, regulatory framework for private institutions, establishment of rural education fund (resources raised from private schools), and provision of village committee for regular monitoring.⁸²

Nepal has gone through a decade-long conflict and other political challenges, though it made remarkable progress in education opportunities for children and adults. Since 1990, net primary school enrolment rates have increased from 64 to 96 per cent, with near gender parity. The government of Nepal with the assistance of development partners developed the School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) for 2016 to 2023 in line with Nepal's vision of upgrading its status from the least developed country by 2022. The SSDP supports Nepal's international commitment to achieve SDGs, in particular, the SDG 4 to ensure equitable and inclusive quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all.⁸³

Keeping pace with the economic and global commitments for spending 20 per cent of a nation's budget on education, the government of Nepal laid a prominent focus on education. The new budget for the Fiscal Year (FY) 2018-2019, has allocated 10.19 per cent (Rs. 134.5 billion) of the total budget to the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology. The previous year, the budget was 10.09 per cent. The budget foresees the development of a technical school across all local bodies along with goals of free and compulsory school education gradually, access to faster internet across every public school, and achieving 100 per cent literacy rate in two years.⁸⁴

Pakistan must learn and consider the smart policy initiative taken by Nepal while outlining educational reforms on the basis of its public demands in education. Reaching a consensual education policy ensures progress, specifically through community involvement and

high budget allocations. It also ensures ownership as people become involved through their opinion in the policy-making process, actively oversee the programs and ensure effective implementation.

Bangladesh

Over the past few decades, economic growth, poverty reduction, and human resource development have been basic priorities of the Government of Bangladesh. These priorities are only achievable with educational development. The government focused on basic education covering primary education (grades 1-5) and non-formal education, extended later to cover secondary education (grades 6-8). During the early 1990s, only 35 per cent of the adult population in Bangladesh was literate with a disparity between males and females, as well as between urban and rural areas. Bangladesh experienced a high dropout rate as well.⁸⁵

The poor education system transformed with the implementation of the 2004 Dakar EFA during the early 1990s, which provided assistance from various development partners. In 2003, Bangladesh upgraded EFA to a national action plan, part of which aimed at eradicating illiteracy by 2000 (subsequently altered to 2006 and then to 2015). This program was consistent with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which had intended to halve poverty and achieve Human Resources Development (HRD) improvements by 2015. With continued efforts by both the government and development partners, Bangladesh's universal Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) has almost been achieved, including gender balance, though the institutional capacity and quality aspects still remain fragile.⁸⁶

With respect to the EFA program, Bangladesh saw a significant improvement in all of the six EFA goals despite many challenges. Bangladesh has an enormous education system to cater to its huge population "comprising some 150,000 institutions, about 40 million students and more than one million teachers."⁸⁷ The primary and secondary level institutions along with the state recognised

madrassahs are also there.⁸⁸ Bangladesh's Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MoPME) is responsible for primary education (grades 1 to 5), and the Ministry of Education (MoE) supervises secondary and post-secondary education.⁸⁹ As found by Choudhary and Rahaman,

Basic education development in Bangladesh is governed by the Compulsory Primary Education Act 1990, EFA National Plan of Action (NPA) I and II, National Non-Formal Education Policy 2006, National Education Policy 2010, National Skills Development Policy 2011, The Sixth Five Year Plan (2011–2015) including Vision 2021/Perspective Plan 2011–21. Various initiatives in basic education like Primary Education Development Program (PEDP) 1 and PEDP 2 were implemented and PEDP 3 has been under implementation to fulfill the relevant EFA Goals and NPA II objectives.⁹⁰

The Dakar Framework for Action with six main goals put forward twelve major strategies towards achieving EFA which Bangladesh endeavoured to accomplish in line with the country's constitutional compulsions and the commitments made in international forums. As a result, Bangladesh has been commendably successful in expanding education opportunities including increased enrolment, reduction in gender parity, and dropouts with a focus on poverty alleviation, though many challenges for achieving a knowledge-based society and becoming a middle-income country still remains to be addressed.⁹¹ To quote Choudhary once again:

Over the last few years, Bangladesh has made significant progress in early childhood education. The "Pre-Primary Education Operational Framework" was approved by the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MoPME) in 2008, to effectively implement one-year pre-primary education for all children of five to six years of age. The database of the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE) reflected that

2,002,624 children were enrolled in pre-primary classes in 2012, 3,141,104 in 2013 and 3,088,460 in 2014. Among the children enrolled in 2014, 1,581,605 were boys and 1,506,855 were girls. These were in line with the EFA target of achieving pre-school participation by 55 percent of the target group by the year 2015. ... In order to ensure that all children receive universal education i.e. access to free and compulsory quality-based primary education, particularly girls, children from difficult situations and belonging to ethnic minorities.⁹²

In 2003, the gross enrolment rate was 108.4 per cent (112.3 per cent girls) and the net enrolment rate was 97.7 (98.8 per cent girls) in 2013.⁹³ Choudhary and Rahaman are worth quoting yet once again:

The number and proportion of out-of-school children reduced significantly over the past decades. The dropout rate has been reduced from 47.2 percent in 2005 to 20.9 percent (girls 17.5 %) in 2013.⁹⁴ "The net enrolment rate in primary education for both the genders reached 97.3 percent in 2013 with 96.2 percent for boys and 98.4 percent for girls. While in secondary education, the net enrolment rate reached 49.72 percent with 54.44 percent for girls and 45.25 percent for boys in 2012. Secondary education enrolment in Bangladesh has more than tripled and the number of institutions has more than doubled since 1980. The growth of girls' enrolment, stimulated by social mobilisation (often initiated by NGOs) and incentives, offered by the government such as stipends and tuition waivers for rural girls, has been spectacular. Data show that girls have outnumbered boys in secondary schools to 95 percent compared to 84 percent in the case of boys."⁹⁵

Bangladesh at present is in the process of implementing a comprehensive National Education Policy of 2010 to achieve its

committed objectives.⁹⁶ We may continue with the analysis provided by Choudhary and Rahaman:

NGOs have been contributing to Bangladesh's education sector.... Community-based NGOs are giving early childhood education to the underprivileged and disadvantaged children. The Government is also administering mosque and temple based early childhood education for the three to five-year age group. The Ministry of Religious Affairs (2010) claimed that in a two-year course they provided pre-primary education to 161,220 children through 2,687 centers. In addition, the Ministry also introduced and managed 24,000 mosque-based early learning centers for four to five-year-old children serving some 700,000 children of that age each year.⁹⁷

To compete with the global innovative market, skilled-based education has become a focal area. By the end of 2016, according to a World Bank report:

345 academic grants had been awarded to 27 public and nine private universities, 10 university-industry collaboration grants had been awarded to boost innovation. The Bangladesh Research and Education Network, a dedicated high-speed connectivity for the purpose of education and research, was made functional at the University Grants Commission (UGC) and in 35 public and private universities. The UGC digital library also became operational, providing 42 member universities and two research institutions access to over 30,000 e-resources. A mechanism for quality assurance in education was also introduced through the setting up of Institutional Quality Assurance Cells in 61 public and private universities.⁹⁸

With regard to budgetary allocations, Bangladesh was neglecting educational requirements. However, it has been changing with the government's vision of prioritising the up-gradation of the education and technology sector for higher literary development. According to another report:

The proposed budget for the 2017-18 fiscal year allocated Tk 65,444 crore (approximately US \$8.23 billion) as compared with the previous year's 11.6 percent of the total budget for education. The total allocation for the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education and the Ministry of Education alone has been Tk 50,432 crore (approximately US \$6.34 billion), which makes 12.59 percent of the total budget. The government allocated, Tk 22,022 crore (approximately US \$2.77 billion) for the ministry of primary and mass education, Tk 23,141 crore (approximately US \$2.91 billion) for the secondary and higher education division, and Tk 5,269 crore (approximately US \$0.66 billion) for the technical and madrasah education division under the education ministry. While objections over budgetary allocation had been raised among the experts and called for at least 20 percent education sector allocation in the national budget, the government introduced plans for building interactive classrooms in 503 model primary schools to enhance both capacity and quality in the primary education sector. Plans for the expansion of science-based higher education and research had been focused with considerations of providing fellowships to scientists, technologists and researchers under the Bangabandhu Science and Technology Fellowship Trust. A special allocation for expanding research opportunities, Tk 200 crore (approximately US \$0.25 billion) was proposed as well.⁹⁹

Pakistan is not ignorant of the population boom in Bangladesh and the frequent pressures it experiences due to ecological

misfortunes that absorb the country's finances. However, the lesson for Pakistan is that despite domestic pressures, by 2003 Dhaka integrated the EFA with its National Action Plan, and made improvement in all six EFA goals. There is a willingness in Bangladesh to focus on the research sector and at higher levels of education. The education budget has been increased and quality mechanism cells have been set up at both public and private universities to ensure quality education.

Overall, therefore, not disregarding the efforts of Pakistan's HEC in trying to increase the number of skilled persons in the country, the attention given to and amount spent on education in the neighbouring South Asian countries of Pakistan should not be ignored. Hence, the persistent rational approach adopted by the South Asian countries to make themselves valuable to the international community is a good reason for Pakistan to observe and step in while developing its education sector.

Policy Recommendations

Pakistan has a strong policy framework in the education sector, though, an all-inclusive and wide-ranging action plan is required to be implemented. Some policy recommendations are suggested below. These are based on the current status of Pakistan's education system. They are also made in the context of lessons learnt from its South Asian regional neighbours.

1. The government must introduce a uniform curriculum in all schools as a first step towards implementing a uniform education system in the country where no areas are left behind. This will provide equal opportunity for students residing in rural areas to compete with urban areas' students on an equal basis.
2. Community involvement in policy making (as in Nepal) will rectify poor policy implementation. When policy-makers and its implementers participate together in and after the planning

process, they would collectively ensure meeting targets through individual and institutional collaboration, including parliamentarians, NGOs (as in Bangladesh), and (as in India) independent research think-tanks.

3. Teaching must be developed as a dignified profession where the role of teachers as moulders of heart and mind must be established and teacher absenteeism eliminated. Teachers should have similar training programs, improved teaching materials, and skill development exposure as in various corporate fields, including upgrading of the basic services for both teachers and students, particularly in the public sector.
4. An increase in budget allocation for educational developmental projects is imperative. This would achieve the MDG of 'no child left behind'. South Asian examples, as mentioned earlier, are the Maldives with its 5.7 per cent budget allocation, India with its previous 6.5 per cent, Nepal's present 10.19 per cent, and its hi-tech teacher training.
5. The government must create public and private schools focusing on delivering quality education to become an alternative to madrassahs cultivating extremism. Like Sri Lanka's 6+1 model became a successful alternative against extremism.
6. Balancing growth at the primary level with growth at the higher levels of education should be the priority.
7. The National Education Policy of 2009 may be implemented to arrest falling education standards because of the private sector's commercialisation of schools into money generating businesses. Its main propositions were increasing education spending to 7 per cent of GDP; increase public-private partnerships; introduce subjects taught in regular schools also in madrassahs; increase teacher training, enact curriculum reform, and improve teaching aid materials; introduce food-

based incentives to increase enrolment and improve maintenance, especially for girls.

8. Diverse educational platforms can be utilised to develop skills needed to compete in the global knowledge economy. Pakistan could learn from Sri Lanka's Open School Programme for vocational training.
9. While following global trends in education, cultural factors must be recognised as an asset and preserved to strengthen a strong national identity. As in the Maldives, the focus must be based on knowing and consolidating the inherited multi-religious, multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, and multi-cultural heritage to regenerate pride in national diversity.

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