UNIVERSAL EDUCATION IN PAKISTAN:
A PERPETUALLY ELUSIVE GOAL?

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Abstract – The achievement of universal primary education has been an official objective in Pakistan almost since the country was founded in 1947. Since that time, however, the date for the realization of that goal has had continually to be postponed. The most recent policy document aspires to achieve universal enrolment of male children by 1986–1987 and of female by 1992. This paper surveys current trends in the primary sector and includes discussion of the mosque and mohallah schools through which it is planned to increase coverage. Obstacles to educational expansion are examined before an opinion is finally expressed on whether the present target dates are likely to prove realistic. In this last, the article is not optimistic.


Introduction

In the domain of official policy, the universalization of primary education has been a fundamental objective almost since Pakistan was founded. In November 1947, a conference of leading educationists was convened in Karachi 'to survey the existing and future opportunities in the education field', and shortly afterwards the government accepted that it was responsible for providing five years' free, universal and compulsory education. In some provinces, it was suggested, education would become universal within a decade. And for the remainder, universality was envisaged within two decades.¹

As time progressed, it became increasingly clear that these targets had been unrealistic. According to official figures, the 1970 enrolment rate was only 47.4 per cent of the 5–10 age group, and in that year a new policy aimed to achieve universal education by 1980.² Only two years later, a new government revised the targets. In its policy document, the stated objective was to achieve universal enrolment of males by 1979, but the goal for females would be 1984.³ Yet these objectives were also short-lived, for only four years later, the male and female targets were reset at 1983 and 1987.⁴ Finally, the most recent statement, produced in 1979, advanced the dates yet further to 1986–1987 and 1992, respectively.⁵

In view of this ever-receding target, even a casual observer might be tempted to view the latest statement with some cynicism. The temptation might become particularly strong if he ventured beyond the orbit of government offices into even a few rural primary schools. However, a thorough analyst would also note that the primary sector is now being given much greater official attention than in the past, and that several important schemes have been initiated which should not be dismissed without scrutiny. It is, therefore, worth examining current trends to determine whether official statements are mainly rhetorical or whether we can indeed envisage universal education within a decade.

The Present Situation

The official picture of the growth of primary education is shown in Table 1. It is immediately apparent that the education system has expanded dramatically since 1947. According to these official figures, the number of schools increased seven-fold between that date and 1979–1980 and enrolments increased nine-fold.

Table 2, however, which shows proportionate enrolment rates, indicates how much remains to be done. One reason why enrolment rates have remained relatively low is that the population has grown much faster than had been anticipated. Indeed, although the last few decades have witnessed