

Education in Burma (1945-2000)

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Abstract: This paper embodies a documentary analysis of the Burmese education system within the historical context. It provides an overview of the Burmese historical background, education before independence (1945-1948), after independence (1948-1962), under the military rule (1962-1988) and on the wave of democratisation (1988-2000). The study significantly found that Burmese schools have predominantly performed teacher-centred and subject-oriented teaching and learning with a lack of teacher training and a weak curriculum. Furthermore, indigenous people have little chance to promote their language and culture given the supremacy of the Burmese language. Although Burma has been on the wave of democratisation since 1988, the education system does not appear to be leading to a democracy.

1. Historical Background

Colonial History

In the 19th century, disputes with the British about commercial and diplomatic relations resulted in three Anglo-Burmese wars (1824-26, 1852 and 1885), as a result of which the British took over Burma in three stages: Rakhine (Arakan) and Tenasserim provinces in 1826, Lower Burma in 1852 and the remaining kingdom of Upper Burma in 1885. King Thibaw, the last king of Burma was deposed in 1885 and exiled to India. Burma was then ruled as a province of British India. From the beginning of British rule, the indigenous minorities such as the Shans, Kachins and Chins (see Appendix 1, map of Burma), who collectively occupied approximately 45 per cent of the country's area, were administered under the direct authority of the governor separately from the rest of Burma (Silverstein, 1977). Ethnic nationalities such as the Karens, who lived amongst the Burmans, were given reserved seats in the legislature to protect their interest (ibid.).

The roots of 20th-century Burmese nationalism lay in growing Burmese perceptions that they were second-class citizens in their own country, in British 'divide and rule' policies and the loss of traditional authority structures and in the exploitation by the British and other foreigners of Burma's rich natural resources (Herbert, 1991). In 1920, the university students called for a national strike to protest against the education plans. The strike marked the entry of students into national politics.

In the 1920s nationalist politics were led by the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA), which had evolved from the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA). The 1930s saw the rise of the *Do-Bama Asi-Ayon* (We Burmans Association) of the *Thahkin*¹ nationalists who, taking inspiration from the failed peasant uprising of Hsaya San in 1930-32, resolved that military training and organisation was necessary to defeat the British and regain Burma's independence (Herbert, 1991). In 1937, the administration of

¹ Master, the term by which the British in Burma insisted upon being addressed (like Sahib in India). The student revolutionaries of the 1930s appropriated the term and employed it as a prefix to their names showing 'we are not slaves'.

Burma was separated from India and a bicameral legislature was introduced under the premiership of Dr. Ba Maw.

World War II and the Japanese invasion of Burma brought British rule to an abrupt end. Defeated by the invaders, the British, together with many of the Burmese civil servants and political leaders, accompanied the government into exile at Simla in India. During the four years of occupation, the Japanese tried to gain support from the Burmese by promises of freedom and the creation of an indigenous army commanded by the Burmese. Led by Aung San, who had received secret army training along with twenty-nine other 'comrades' in Japanese-occupied Hainan Island, the Burmese Independence Army followed the invading Japanese from Thailand to Burma. However, the Japanese did not succeed in winning the universal support of the people (Silverstein, 1977). During this period an anti-Japanese resistance movement arose under the leadership of the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL). The AFPFL opened its ranks to all the peoples of Burma, regardless of ethnic origin, religion, or political beliefs, and after the war it emerged as the most important voice in Burmese politics. Finally, the Burmese Independence Army, which changed its name to 'Defence Army' in late 1942 and to 'National Army' in 1943, rebelled against the Japanese on March 27, 1945 and joined forces with the Allies.

In October 1945, the British-sponsored Burma government in exile returned from Simla to take charge of the administration. However, the struggle for independence was high on the political agenda of the AFPFL. At first, the British government proposed the idea of 'two Burmas': 'Plain Burma' was to taste the first fruits of full self-government while 'Hill Burma' had been reserved for an official regime under British tutelage (Tinker, 1984, pxiv). However, the agreement signed at Panglong on the 12th February 1947, by Shan, Kachin, and Chin leaders and by representatives of the Executive Council of the Governor of Burma, changed the British's idea of 'two Burmas' (see Panglong Agreement, 1947). The agreement showed that the Shans, Kachins and Chins would co-operate with the Burmans in building a unified Burma at an acceptable price (Tinker, 1984, pxxv).

In accordance with the Aung San-Attlee Agreement of January 1947, elections were held in which the AFPFL won a large majority. Before the new Constituent Assembly could prepare for independence, Aung San and six members of his Executive Council were assassinated on 19th July 1947.

National Independence

On the 4th January 1948, Burma gained independence and chose not to join the British Commonwealth. In the process of the struggle for independence, some Burmese leaders, including Aung San, hinted that there was a considerable likelihood of their remaining inside the Commonwealth (Burma Office, 1947, p496). Partly perhaps from fear of domination by the Burmans, the minorities were anxious to remain within the British Commonwealth (India and Burma Committee, 1947, p236). From the British point of view, in principle, it was undesirable to see any part of the Empire secede. Amongst Burmese leaders, as regards Burma remaining inside or outside the Commonwealth, it would probably involve considerable risks, with strong nationalist aspirations of the people and communist opposition, to advocate remaining in the Commonwealth. Furthermore, it is thought that many of the politicians in those days, who considered themselves to be socialists, would like to stand with the socialist world and other Asian

neighbours rather than western capitalists. After fifty years of independence, it is clear that although there might have been some advantages such as educational development, economic co-operation and possible intervention by the British government in political dispute and the rights of minorities if Burma had joined the Commonwealth, Burma showed a high spirit of self-reliance by not doing so.

From 1948 until 1962, Burma was governed by a parliamentary democracy based on the September 1947 constitution. Although the political structure was a unitary system, the country was divided into 14 administrative divisions, including seven states (Chin, Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Mon, Rakhine and Shan)² and seven divisions (Irrawaddy, Magwe, Mandalay, Pegu, Rangoon, Sagaing and Tenasserim) (see Appendix 1). The present-day population figures (e.g. Derbyshire and Derbyshire, 1996) show that Burmans constitute the ethnic majority, comprising 72 per cent of the total population. Out of more than a hundred minority communities, the most important are the Karen, 7 per cent of the population, the Shan, 6 per cent, Indians, 6 per cent, Chinese, 3 per cent, Kachin, 2 per cent, and Chin, 2 per cent. The official language is Burmese, spoken by 80 per cent of the population. The population figures also show that Burma is a multi-faith nation in which 87 per cent of the population is Theravada Buddhist, 5 per cent Christian, 4 per cent Sunni Muslim, 3 per cent Animist, and 1 per cent Hindu. Animism and Christianity are concentrated amongst the ethnic minority communities.

An important point here is that according to article 201 of the Constitution of 1947, ethnic minorities had, in theory, the right to secede from the Union, but, under article 202, the right was not to be exercised until 10 years from the date of the coming into force of the constitution. In March 1948, two months after independence, the Communist Party of Burma began an armed insurgency against the government. Between 1948 and 1961, various minority ethnic groups joined the armed insurgency. The young democracy of Burma suffered severe civil unrest.

In 1958, the U Nu government transferred power to the caretaker government led by General Ne Win, the head of the army. After eighteen months, general elections took place and the new parliament was convened in April 1960. The government's programme called for strengthening of democratic institutions, establishment of Buddhism as the state religion and creation of new states within the Union for the Mons and Rakhine (Silverstein, 1977). However, the establishment of Buddhism as the state religion was not successful because non-Buddhist minorities mobilised in opposition to the government. A subsequent military coup took place in March 1962, in which General Ne Win took power.

He then instituted a one-party rule (the Burma Socialist Programme Party) under military control. In 1974, a new constitution was drafted under which one-party rule continued, but in which party membership was opened up beyond the military. Political conflicts, underground communist movements, student demonstrations and ethnic insurgencies remained unresolved, with the Burma Army absorbing a large proportion of the country's budget and resources.

² The creation of new states within the Union for Mon and Rakhine took place in 1960.

The 1988 Movement

In 1987, Burma, a fertile country rich in natural resources, was designated 'Least Developed Country' by the United Nations. The next year, there were nation-wide demonstrations for freedom and democracy, but the army used harsh measures to crush the demonstrations. On 18 September 1988, the military took power. The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) was set up and the 1974 constitution was abolished. On 27 May 1990, general elections were held in which the main party the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi won 81 per cent of the seats. However, there was a complete failure to honour the election results and to transfer power to a duly elected civilian government.

In January 1993, the regime thought it had found a solution to this problem by calling a National Convention that would sanction a constitution that guaranteed a leading role for the army. As the regime strictly controlled the entire constitution-drafting process, other forces, including the NLD and the ethnic organisations that had signed ceasefire agreements with the regime, were denied the right to freely participate in the process. When Aung San Suu Kyi, General Secretary of the NLD, was released from house arrest in 1995, the NLD called upon the regime to reform its National Convention in order to allow the NLD to become fully involved in the constitutional drafting process. As the junta refused, the NLD delegates boycotted the National Convention. The NLD later declared that they would also draft a new constitution. In response to the NLD's plan, the regime promulgated Law No. 5/96 prohibiting everyone including NLD members and elected representatives from drafting, debating or even discussing a future constitution outside the National Convention.³

The various ethnic armed opposition groups and exiled democratic organisations, who considered that the constitutional principles laid down by the military regime were lacking not only in ethnic rights but also democratic rights for the people as a whole, have also drafted a constitution in 1996 that they call '(Future) Constitution of the Federal Union of Burma' under the banner of the National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB). The NCUB's constitution aims to lay the foundation for a long-term resolution of the 'ethnic question' and to sustain reconciliation among the different groups. Sadly, political stalemate continues among these competing political forces (the military regime, the NLD and the ethnic forces) and the prospects for dialogue and national reconciliation remain uncertain.

2. Education before Independence (1945-1948)

Before World War II, there were three types of school in Burma:

1. Vernacular School in which the medium of instruction was Burmese or one of the recognised indigenous languages;
2. Anglo-Vernacular School in which English was taught as a second language and the media of instruction were English and Burmese or one of the recognised indigenous languages;
3. English School in which the medium of instruction was English, with Burmese as the second language.

³ Information presented by Khin Maung Win, Burma Lawyer Council, at a women's rights conference held in Chiang Mai, Thailand in October 2000.

The vernacular schools were administered by local education authorities and were the only schools for the majority of children throughout the country. In a country like Burma, where only those with a good knowledge of English could enter government service and the professions, vernacular schools became second-rate schools. The teachers in those schools were devoted to their work, but they were comparatively worse off than their colleagues in the other two types of schools in respect of training and academic background as well as in respect of scales of pay and chances of preferment (Office of the SUPDT, 1947; 1953). The Anglo-Vernacular and the English schools, on the other hand, with their high fees and other expenditure, were only affordable to parents with higher income. Admission of Burmese children to English schools was also in many ways restricted (*ibid.*). During the pre-war period, of the 6854 schools, 6552 (96%) were vernacular schools (251 High, 863 Middle and 5,438 Primary), 215 (3%) Anglo-Vernacular and English schools (102 High, 106 Middle and 7 Primary) and 87 (1%) Government Schools (38 High, 7 Middle and 42 Primary). Pre-war education did not therefore by any means guarantee equality of opportunity in education for all children.

Soon after the return of the British Government in July 1945, the Department of Education was formed to implement the Simla Scheme of Educational Rehabilitation financed out of the British military budget. Its primary objective was to fulfil the phases of the allied military effort against the Japanese in South East Asia (Office of the SUPDT, 1953). According to the Simla Scheme 42 post-primary schools and 2,060 primary schools were opened. In 1947, the Education Reconstruction Committee chaired by the Honourable Sir Htoon Aung Gyaw reported the review of the education system of Burma and the proposal for its reconstruction with the concept of a homogenous system of schools (Office of the SUPDT, 1947). The report said that the whole education system should be state provided and state controlled. The report also said that three separate types of schools must be welded into one uniform system. This implied the abolition of state grants-in-aid, privately owned Anglo-Vernacular and English schools and the consolidation of the different grades and kinds of teachers into a more homogeneous teaching body, embracing the ordinary and the specialist teachers required for the re-designed curricula for the reconstructed school system. However, the report allowed mission bodies and private interests who wished to continue to maintain private schools to do so at their own expense. The report also allowed monastic schools to continue. Furthermore, the report considered the association of the Buddhist clergy and other religious teachers in the spiritual guidance of children in all schools and recommended that religious instruction should be made a compulsory component of the secular curriculum.

The report also emphasised the reorganised system of schools that consisted of:

- Primary school (Standards I to V) for children aged 6 to 11 year olds;
- Post-primary school (Standards VI to IX) for children aged 11 to 15 year olds;
- Pre-university school (Standards X to XII) for children aged 15 to 18 year olds.

Education in the primary and post-primary grades was free and in the pre-university grade subsidised.

The report suggested re-designing the curricula to provide functional realistic instruction related to civil and occupational environments and particularly to the predominantly agricultural and rural nature of life in Burma. To this end the report suggested infusion of manual instruction and physical education in the re-designed curricula. The basic subjects for primary and post-primary considered in the report were:

Primary Schools

1. Religious Instruction
2. Language – reading and writing
3. Arithmetic
4. Geography
5. Nature Study
6. Hygiene
7. Handicrafts
8. Physical Education

Post-Primary Schools

1. Religious Instruction
2. Language – reading and writing
3. Elementary Mathematics
4. Geography
5. History
6. Science
7. Handicrafts and practical subjects
8. Physical Education

The report recommended that in the primary and post-primary schools both English and Burmese should be regarded as subjects of equal importance and taught intensively from Standard I. The report also encouraged bilingual instruction in both primary and post-primary. In the pre-university and university stages, English must continue to be the main medium of instruction. Indigenous vernacular languages other than Burmese and English were recommended to be taught in primary schools in which there was a majority of students whose mother tongues were neither Burmese nor English. Furthermore, the report introduced a Romanised script for the Burmese language as a supplement to but not as a substitute for the present Burmese script. The rationale was that the Romanised script would aid foreigners in learning the Burmese language quickly and might be useful for certain commercial purposes including the despatch of telegrams in Burmese (Office of the SUPDT, 1947, p8). Burmese nationalists were critical of the introduction of the Romanised script (e.g. Nyi Nyi, 1976) and it never was adopted. The substitution of a Romanised script was successful in the case of some ethnic minorities areas such as Chin and Kachin routinely use Romanised script – often as originally introduced by Christian missionaries - for their languages till today. Amongst the ethnic Karen, some areas use Romanised script and some use their own Karen script.

The report considered that there should be a public examination at the end of each educational stage. The committee was in favour of the Record Card system. These would be records maintained throughout a pupil's school career, giving an objective assessment of the individual's attainments, intellectual, moral, physical, aptitudes, skills and reactions to instruction. These would also abolish the 'pass-fail' system. The Report considered it wrong that 'a pupil who fails in an examination, which may or may not test their capacity within a narrow field of mental activity, in the immaturity of their childhood or youth, should be branded for life as a *failure*' (Office of the SUPDT, 1947, p10; my italic).

The report pointed out that the fundamental aim of Burma must be a state system of free universal compulsory primary education. However, the report did not recommend compulsory education: giving the reason that there was a danger in the premature introduction of compulsion. Whilst schools must be provided, teachers must be trained, adequate funds must be found and a warning should be taken from the failure in India of premature attempts at compulsion (Office of the SUPDT, 1947, p3). The report was in agreement with the Campbell Committee (see *ibid.* Appendix II), which stated that compulsory education could only be introduced by planned stages, beginning with the imposition of compulsory attendance on pupils who enrol voluntarily and proceeding, according to a carefully planned and co-ordinated programme, to compulsory enrolment and attendance of all children of the prescribed age group. At the beginning of the post-war period in Burma, it was considered that times were too hard for the introduction of statutory compulsory education.

According to the 1953 government publication *Education in Burma, before independence and after independence* (Office of the SUPDT, 1953), it seems that there might have been a parallel committee, as it states that 'in 1946, an Educational Policy Enquiry Committee was formed and a fairly comprehensive report covering most phases of post-war educational needs was submitted by the Committee' (Office of the SUPDT, 1953, p2). However it was not mentioned who the members of the Education Policy Enquiry Committee were and what the relationship with the Education Reconstruction Committee was.

3. Education after Independence (1948-1962)

Soon after the declaration of independence on the 4th January 1948, the Government of the Union of Burma announced a statement of Educational Policy which was based upon the 'Report of the Educational Policy Enquiry Committee and upon other reports previously considered by Government' (Office of the SUPDT, 1953, p3). The then government confessed that the policy was not successful 'due to factors beyond control' (ibid. p3). One of the factors may have been the outbreak of civil war in the nascent Union of Burma and the fact that government was only in control of the main urban centres at that time.

On 1 June 1950, a new policy was initiated for implementation. The salient features of the scheme initiated were:

- Amalgamation of the post-primary and primary schools in places where the former exists, to form complete units teaching from the Infant to the Ninth Standard;
- Revival of Middle Schools teaching from the Infant to the Seventh Standard;
- Re-classification of primary schools' teaching from the Infant to the Fourth Standard;
- Insistence on the use of the Vernacular (Burmese) as the medium of instruction;
- Introduction of English as a Compulsory second language at the post-primary stage, i.e., from the Fifth Standard (Office of the SUPDT, 1953).

The new policy also initiated a scheme for free education for all pupils in state schools, from the primary to the university level. Private schools were allowed in their own school buildings under the registration of 'Private Schools Act 1951'. A pilot project for compulsory primary education was introduced in the suburbs of Rangoon for two years. In 1953, the government launched the new education plan as one of the ten 'Welfare Plans' (see Office of the SUPDT, 1953, p17). The aims of the new education plan (also known as five fundamental principles) for the Welfare State were:

- To ensure that every citizen of the Union of Burma shall have a basis foundation in the three R's;
- To train an adequate number of technicians and technologists for the rehabilitation;
- To train and equip young men and women so that they can shoulder their responsibilities as citizens of the Union;
- To eradicate illiteracy and imbue all citizens of the Union with the five 'Strengths' (National Health, National Education, National Wealth, National Character and National Unity); and
- To perpetuate the principles and practice of democracy through out the Union.

Amongst other educational matters the curriculum was also re-oriented in accordance with the new educational aims set forth in the education plan and graded for the primary, middle and high school stages, with emphasis upon practical and prevocational subjects and activity programmes. In this curriculum design there was no consideration for religious education. This was remarkably different from the pre-independence period. In the 1947 Education Report it was clearly stated that 'Buddhist monks and other religious teachers could play a part in the spiritual guidance and instruction of the people in the system, wherein children of all races and religions shall receive religious instruction as a compulsory adjunct to the secular curriculum'. To inculcate the spirit of co-operative living and to make the school atmosphere congenial, the new plan gave greater attention to school gardening and arts and crafts while general science and practices of other kinds including organised games were equally important. The new plan also launched the establishment of teacher training schemes to deal with the urgent need for trained teachers of all grades.

The organisation of the school system in the new education plan was a 5-3-3 system that consisted of:

- Nursery School for children aged 3 to 5 year olds (Private Provision);
- Primary School (Infant Class (Standard 0) to Standard IV) for children aged 5 to 10 year olds;
- Middle School (Standard V to Standard VII) for children aged 10 to 13 year olds;
- High School including Agriculture and Technical High Schools (Standard VIII to Standard X) for children aged 13 to 16 year olds; and
- Vocational and Technical Institutes and university for young people aged 16 onward.

In the middle schools, the following subjects were introduced: carpentry and technical and commercial subjects for urban schools; and animal husbandry and agricultural subjects for rural schools. In the high schools, the following subjects were introduced in the curriculum to give a vocational bias in the ordinary high schools: pre-medical subjects, for both boys and girls; general workshop for boys only; domestic science (including Home Nursing) for girls; and business and commercial training for both boys and girls.

Another significant change was that modern textbooks were introduced in Burmese in all subjects. In 1958, the Ministry of Education announced the policy on the medium of instruction⁴, namely, that the medium of instruction was to be Burmese in schools and English was to be taught only from the Fifth Standard onwards (Union of Myanmar, 1992). However, there was a broad spectrum of state, private, Christian and Buddhist monastic schools legally functioning around the country and private and Christian schools taught English from the beginning of primary education. These private schools also put emphasis on academic subjects without introducing pre-vocational knowledge. At the university, Burmese was also the medium of instruction for all subjects starting from Intermediate part A. English was the medium of instruction in the Honours and Masters classes.

The curriculum for the state schools introduced vocational subjects according to local needs rather than a unified qualification system. Education after independence may have

⁴ There is not enough evidence found by the researcher that this announcement was whether under the caretaker government (1958-1960) or before the caretaker government.

brought about an academic-vocational divide, an urban-rural divide, and inequality of opportunity between girls and boys. There was also, as stated above, no provision for Religious Education for the spiritual development of pupils. Furthermore, no consideration was given to the use of indigenous vernacular languages when teaching pupils whose mother tongue was not Burmese. Although a two-year pilot project for compulsory primary education was conducted in the suburbs of Rangoon, there was no evidence of statutory obligation for compulsory requirement.

4 Education under Military Rule (1962-1988)

Burmese military rule can be classified into two phases: from 1962 to 1974 was the first phase of absolute military rule; and from 1974 to 1988 was the second phase of 'constitutional dictatorship' (Silverstein, 1977). In April 1962, the Revolutionary Council formed by the junta led by General Ne Win proclaimed its political programme entitled 'The Burmese Way to Socialism', wherein the policy on education was given as follows:

Education: The Revolutionary Council believes the existing educational system unequated with livelihood will have to be transformed. An educational system equated with livelihood and based on *socialist moral values* will be brought about; *Science* will be given precedence in education (my italics).

Socialism was not new, having entered the political arena in the 1930s. However, western materialism was substituted for eastern spiritual values in education under the Ne Win regime. Although the policy statement desired 'an educational system equated with livelihood', which apparently seemed to prepare the children for the opportunities and experiences of adult life, it narrowly focused on 'science' rather than a balanced and broadly based curriculum. Since the 1960s science took precedence over all other subjects and arts subjects were considered to be intellectually inferior. Students were told which subjects they could study at university on the basis of their results at the Tenth Standard examination, those with the highest marks being allowed to study medicine, followed by engineering and other sciences and maths. Those with lower marks were allocated to arts subjects and felt that they had been discriminated against. Although the education policy was based on socialist moral values, there was no equality of opportunity, given the precedence accorded to science subjects, as pupils were already divided into A-list and B-list students at the end of Standard VIII (see below).

Following the 1962 military coup, all schools were nationalised. There were no longer Christian schools but Buddhist monastic schools could continue to function in rural areas. In 1964, the system of education was reorganised. The structure of the 'New System of Education' comprised: (a) Basic Education; (b) Technical, Agricultural and Vocational Education; and (c) Higher Education. In the Basic Education, school structure was changed from a 5-3-3 to a 5-4-2 system that consisted of:

- Primary School (Standard 0 to Standard IV) for children aged 5 to 10 year olds;
- Middle School (Standard V to Standard VIII) for children aged 10 to 14 year olds;
- High School (Standard IX to Standard X) for children aged 14 to 16 year olds.

The use of Burmese as the medium of instruction still remained. There was no consideration for indigenous vernacular languages for those whose mother tongues were not Burmese. There was also no provision for religious education in the curriculum. English was taught as a second language from the Fifth Standard. Children had to sit

examinations at the end of each standard based on a 'pass-fail' system. National examinations were at Standard VIII and X. At Standard IV there was a township level examination. Examination results at Standard VIII were placed in two categories: A-list and B-list. A-list students could study science subjects at High school and B-list students could study only arts subjects. As stated above, the examination results at Standard VIII sharply segregated young students. Furthermore, the result of this segregation was to downgrade the importance of arts subjects such as history, philosophy, psychology, sociology and so on, whether the policymakers had this intention or not. The vast majority of brighter students opted to follow the science route, for reasons of prestige and because this would lead them to more secure jobs as doctors, engineers or scientists. Such jobs were unobtainable by those who were only able to study arts subjects.

As a result of this policy, about 70 per cent of students continued the science route and 30 per cent the arts route. In the science stream, the combination of subjects were Burmese, English, Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry and Biology. There were two different combinations in the arts stream. The first combination consisted of Burmese, English, Mathematics, Economics, History and Geography. The second combination consisted of Burmese, English, Optional Burmese, Additional English, History and Geography. Again at Standard X examination, there were also the A-list and B-list. A-list students were entitled to apply for universities and B-list students were entitled only for vocational institutes. Thus, children's examination results at an early age determined the shape of their adult life.

Another discrimination was introduced under Burma's 1982 Citizenship Law, whereby full citizenship is confined to those who can prove ancestors resident in Burma before the first British annexation in 1824-25, which for many of the country's estimated 1.5-2 million Indian and Chinese inhabitants is nearly impossible (Smith, 1995). On the basis of this law, holders of Foreign Registration Cards and their children are barred from many occupations, and under the Ministry of Education's 1980-81 regulations on university entrance, an applicant must be a 'Burmese national'. Moreover, those Indians and Chinese who pass this obstacle are still barred from professional subjects such as technology and medicine (see also Smith, 1995).

In 1974, military rule changed to constitutional dictatorship. According to article 152 of the 1974 constitution, 'every citizen shall have the right to education' and 'basic education' would be compulsory. Although the right to free education was theoretically available to all, in reality it was a different story, as this chapter will show. The 1974 Educational Policies embraced the following areas: (a) Basic Education; (b) Technical, Agricultural and Vocational Education; (c) Higher Education; and (c) Educational Research. The curriculum for the Basic Education included only two subject routes: arts and science. There was no inclusion of vocational subjects into the Basic Education curricula. Skills acquired in technical, agricultural and vocational education are not relevant to the employment opportunities open to young persons (UN, 1998, p7). 'Educational research' became one of the important factors in 1974. However, academic freedom as well as freedom of speech was not guaranteed under the dictatorship regime.

Other education-linked attempts made by the government were youth schemes. They were outstanding student scheme, volunteer scheme, school council and 'Lanzin Youth'. 'Lanzin Youth' was the youth wing of the Burma Socialist Programme Party to sustain the government and its party. School Council members were handpicked, not based on

democratically elected members. The outstanding student scheme was considered producing only an elite. To be a *lu-yiy-chun* (outstanding student) a student must pass three different level tests (school, township and district) based on the criteria of academic, sport, general knowledge and intelligence (IQ). This researcher, when he was in the Standard VII, was selected by the school for a township level test but was not successful. Thereafter the student's age was counted as a criterion. Since the researcher's age was some months older than the required age, he had no more chance to be a *lu-yiy-chun*.

Student volunteers were usually sent to government construction sites in their summer holidays. The volunteer scheme, however, was to some extent helpful for literacy campaigns. Thanks to a group of volunteers of the Education Department, the literacy campaign in Burma was initiated in 1964. Most of the illiterates in the country were peasants and workers in rural areas, with a predominance of women (see Thaug Tut, 1981). It was in 1966 that the campaign was centrally organised. The basic principle and strategy of the campaign adopted by the Central Literacy Committee was based on the characteristics of mass movement with community participation using local resources on a voluntary basis in a selected region throughout the year (*ibid.*). In 1969, Meiktila district in central Burma was chosen as a pilot project area. In 1970, the campaign was extended into two more districts – Sagaing and Kyaukse. In 1971, it was further extended into four more districts – Shwebo, Monywa, Myingon, and Magwe districts. The notable recognition of Burma's literacy campaign was the award of the 'Mohammad Reza Pahlavi Prize' for 1971 to Burma by the international tribunal of the UNESCO (Nyi Nyi, 1972). The literacy campaign was something that Burma could be proud of. In 1974, further literacy centres were expanded to include Kalaw, Ywagan, Myaing, Kyonebyaw and Pegu.

In the Ywagan literacy campaign, the researcher participated actively as a volunteer when he was a second year university student. It was a sixty-hour literacy course over a period of a month for reading, writing and arithmetic. Being adults, the learners had not much leisure time left to attend the literacy classes and were reluctant to come forward to benefit through the literacy classes as they felt ashamed and embarrassed to reveal their illiteracy (Thaug Tut, 1981). The other significant problem was language. The learners in the Ywagan Township were Pa-O ethnic nationality and were speaking their own local language. They were taught in Burmese, the official language. Allott (1985) pointed out that the government was using the literacy movement as a powerful weapon in its struggle to unite the different racial and ethnic groups of Burma into a harmonious socialist state. The researcher argues that the supremacy of the Burmese language over the nationalities' languages is unfair. Literacy campaign work, which relied on the student volunteers, was not completed as planned because the universities were frequently disrupted by student demonstrations against the government during the years 1974-1976. From 1976 to 1988 there was no significant change in Basic Education. In Higher Education, regional colleges and university correspondent courses were launched. The study will continue without discussing higher education in detail.

5. Education on the Wave of Democratisation (1988 to 2000)

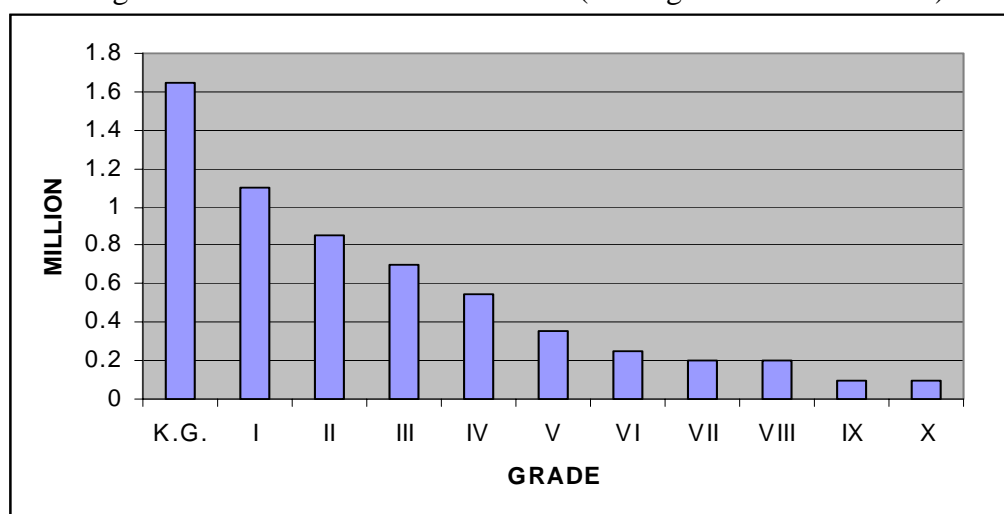
In 1988, Burma changed from a constitutional dictatorship to absolute military rule again and the 1974 Constitution was abolished. The rulers promised to establish conditions for general elections. General Saw Maung, the then Head of State, said that education was not the military regime's responsibility but that of the next elected government. However,

political power was not transferred to the party led by Aung San Suu Kyi although it gained a large majority in the 1990 elections. Since General Saw Maung took office, Burma was facing serious problems in education in terms of equity, quality and efficiency (see below).

A UNICEF report shows that almost 40 per cent of children never attend school and almost three-quarters fail to complete primary education in Burma (see Khin Maung Kyi *et al*, 2000, p.146). The secondary school enrolment rate is also low and the dropout rate is very high. As a result, less than 2 per cent of children who enter primary school complete secondary education (*ibid.*). This comes in sharp contrast with the school attendance rate of other countries in the West and the East. For example, England lays down eleven years for compulsory education; Thailand joins Japan in setting 12 years for compulsory education (reported in Bangkok Post, Monday, January 17, 2000, p.2). Figure A shows Burma's basic education enrolment during the period 1982 to 1988.

The low retention rate in schools, particularly in rural areas, is the major weakness in the context of Burmese education. According to demographic data estimated in 1997/98 (UN, 1998; see also Appendix 2), the population under 15 is 15.5 million and under 5 is 5.5 million. Therefore, the school children population is 10 million. However, the government figure shows that there only 7 million children are in schools (see Figure B). It is obvious to everyone that 3 million children have no school and/or are not attending school.

Figure A: Basic Education Enrolment (Average Period 1982-1988)



(Reproduced from Myanmar Education Research Bureau, 1992)

Figure B: Schools, Teachers and Students

	1995/96			1997/98		
	Schools	Teachers	Students	Schools	Teachers	Students
Primary Schools	35762	159078	5337432	35877	167134	5145396
Monastic Primary Schools	1507		83375	1556		93001
Middle Schools	2089	53202	1475081	2091	56955	1545601
High schools	914	16239	385225	923	17089	385270
Teachers' Training Schools	12	316	2067	14	372	3020
Teachers' Training Institutes	5	218	2170	5	281	2321

[Extracted from Union of Myanmar, 1998]

Even given the low rates of enrolment, there is a serious shortage of educational facilities, such as the number of schools, the number of teachers and resources like textbooks, libraries and laboratories (Khin Maung Kyi *et al*, 2000, p.146). The number of primary schools ranges from one in five villages in the heartland of Burma, to as low as one in twenty five villages in the border regions (see Khin Maung Kyi *et al*, 2000). It is particularly difficult for children in the ethnic nationality areas along the border to attend school, as there is instability due to civil war.

Children drop out of school for any number of reasons. Some are related to the child, his/her family and community environment, and others to the school environment (Myanmar Education Research Bureau, 1992). Child related factors include illness, lack of interest, or inability to keep up with the class. Family related factors include lack of motivation on the part of parents to send their children to school, inability of the former to meet school expense, or need for the child to help in earning the family income. Community related factors include poverty, malnutrition and poor health care, as well as low expectations about the value of education, particularly in underdeveloped areas. The school environment factors are related to the lack of availability and the poor quality of all the inputs of the educational process: teacher and teaching methods, curricula, teaching and learning materials, facilities, as well as the organisation and management of the school system (*ibid.*).

The serious plight of children who never enrol in a school or who drop out of school is one result of army rule. Child soldiers, child labour and street children are the result of the decades of neglect of compulsory basic education. Nevertheless, thanks to Buddhist monks, children who never enrolled in secular schools can still learn the three Rs in monasteries. With regard to 'functional literacy', however, which is required for labour to work efficiently with appropriate skills in agriculture, industry or other sectors (Khin Maung Kyi *et al*, 2000, p.157) children need at least nine years of compulsory education.

It is hard to determine whether Burma is in a transition stage or is simply regressing. The political stalemate since the 1990 general election has impeded progress in democratising. More recently, however, a senior member of the military government, Lieutenant-General Khin Nyunt, who is also the Chairperson of the Myanmar Education Committee, has reiterated that Burma is on the right political track and the administration is laying the foundation for the establishment of a democratic system (BBC World Service in Burmese, Thursday May 27, 1999). In stark contrast to such statements, is a special report on human rights, published in Geneva in 1999, that shows that Burma's military government is one of the world's most repressive regimes in company with countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Sudan and Kosovo (UN, 1999).

Despite the present impasse, the United Nations organisations are involved to improve Burmese education. The apparent starting point for educational priorities in Burma was the World Conference on Education for All, held in Jomtien, Thailand, in March 1990. A Burmese delegation, headed by the Minister for Education, adopted the objectives of the World Declaration on Education for All (Inter-Agency Commission, 1990). Subsequently, UN agencies (UNDP and UNESCO), together with the Ministry of Education, Burma conducted a joint effort, 'Education Sector Study Project' which started in mid-1990 (Myanmar Education Research Bureau, 1992). In 1992, the final report of the study recommended the following key goals:

- redefining the role of primary education;

- strengthening curriculum development to meet changing needs;
- creating a fair and efficient selection system;
- making evaluation learning-oriented;
- linking education to life after school;
- improving the quality of teaching;
- providing appropriate facilities and instructional materials; and
- improving sector management.

The regime has set a goal of achieving universal access to basic education and completion of primary school by 80 per cent of primary school age children by the year 2000, with assistance from UN agencies (see Khin Maung Kyi *et al*, 2000, p.157). However, the government investment in education is very low. According to the official financial figures published in 1999, the Ministry of Education can use only 7.5 per cent of the budget for all ministries while the Ministry of Defence use 40 per cent (see CRPP, 2000). The money allocated to education is only 0.5 per cent of the Gross National Product compared to an average of 2.7 per cent in other Southeast Asian Countries (source: AFP Bangkok August 22, 2000)⁵.

Curriculum Consideration

Primary schools provide Burmese, English and mathematics from Standard 0 (KG) to Standard II, and Burmese, English, mathematics, history and geography for Standard III and IV. Primary school curriculum is fact-oriented, overemphasising preparation for secondary education rather than the mastery of basic skills, such as literacy, numeracy, hygiene, and thinking and reasoning skills, as its main objective. Science is introduced at Standard V. Burmese, English, mathematics, science, history and geography are taught from Standard V to VIII. There is no longer a science route and an arts route after the Standard VIII examination in 1993. (It was abolished in 1977, then reintroduced in 1985.) Students learn both arts and science subjects at Standard IX and X. They are:

1. Burmese;
2. English (second language);
3. Mathematics;
4. Science (physics, chemistry and biology); and
5. Social (history, geography and economics).

Textbooks of mathematics and science for Standard IX and X are in English and the medium of instruction is both Burmese and English. This was introduced in 1991. Before 1991, all textbooks for Basic Education were in Burmese. Arts subjects are still in Burmese. Up to standard VIII, children learn in Burmese and English is taught as a subject. There is a big gap between Standard VIII and Standard IX for children who face higher-level subjects with textbooks in English. It is generally felt that too much of the basic education curriculum content is compressed into the two-year high school cycle. Teachers also face difficulties in teaching in English. Most teachers give explanations in Burmese, but pupils are required to read and write in English. Question papers are also in English. For Standard X examination students need to cover the courses for both Standard IX and X. It should be noted that there is no moral and spiritual education, design and technology and information technology. Art and sports are in some cases extra curricula activities. The secondary school curriculum does not achieve a proper balance between preparation for university and college and preparation for the work place.

⁵ The message was sent by "Open School Campaign" <oschool1@chmai2.loxinfo.co.th>

Since teaching and learning in Burmese schools are intensely exam-oriented, because access to preferred university courses is determined by the number of marks obtained at the Tenth Standard exam, pupils resort to private tutoring, called *kyu-shin* (= tuition). Pupils' learning centres have shifted from the government school classroom to private tuition schools and house groups (*waing kyu-shin*). This brings about unnecessary inequality of opportunity for pupils, resulting from differences in family means and geographical background.

In the academic year 2000-2001, the senior secondary school curriculum has changed to subject grouping. After their Standard VIII examinations, students have to choose one out of seven groupings, which are:

1. Burmese, English, mathematics, physics, chemistry, economics;
2. Burmese, English, mathematics, geography, history, economics;
3. Burmese, English, mathematics, geography, history, optional Burmese;
4. Burmese, English, mathematics, history, economics, optional Burmese;
5. Burmese, English, mathematics, history, physics, chemistry;
6. Burmese, English, mathematics, optional Burmese, physics, chemistry;
7. Burmese, English, mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology.

On which grounds will children choose a subject group? There is no tradition of career guidance in Burmese schools. Parents from working class and from rural areas have little knowledge about education and the labour market. If teachers choose a grouping for their pupils, it may not be fair for those children whose academic interests are different from the teachers' choice. Even if the grouping chosen results from a sound dialogue between students, teachers and parents it has to be said that the children are required to make an important decision that will affect their adult life at a very young age.

Another drawback associated with the subject grouping system is that these groupings all concentrate exclusively on preparing students for higher education at the expense of vocational skills. Since less than 10 per cent of secondary school students go on to higher education, the majority 90 per cent are not equipped for the world of work. One important problem linked with the present secondary school curriculum is therefore the lack of consideration regarding linking education with working life (Myanmar Education Research Bureau, 1992). In particular, the primary and secondary school curricula have narrowly focused on the teaching of facts rather than promoting skills, which are needed for the world of work as well as social life.

In 1998, the Ministry of Education proposed that primary schools should offer Burmese, English, mathematics, basic science, social studies, aesthetic education, physical education and school activities (see Ministry of Education, 1998, ch.1, p.10-11). The study, however, highlights the problems found especially in 'social studies': the 'moral and civic' subject aims at producing obedience to rules rather than active participation in society.

Primary level education is very important in that children need not only master literacy and numeracy skills, but also need to develop social and moral consciousness from an early age. However, the regime uses education as a political tool preventing children from

learning how to think⁶. Youngsters are expected to be disciplined in and out of school under the military regime. The notion of discipline invokes ideas of loyalty and the image of obedient citizens.

Assessment System

According to a government report (Union of Myanmar, 1998), a 'pass-fail' examination system has been given up in some primary schools. Instead, the system of grade promotion through continuous assessment is being carried out at 9,210 schools out of 40,450 schools. This study agrees that a pass-fail examination system is not ideal: a pupil who fails an examination early in childhood might be branded for life as a failure (as observed earlier, by Office of the SUPDT, 1947) and suffer from a deep-rooted lack of confidence in themselves. The continuous assessment system should be objective in assessing a student's progress throughout a course of study in terms of intellectual, moral, social, physical aptitudes and skills. However, the assessment system bribes students so that they become followers of the regime. For example, if a student is a member of the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) formed by the regime, he or she will get 16 extra marks to pass the yearly examination.

Another interesting point here is that according to the Burmese Government Newspaper, a Japanese educationist, Ms Fumie Kojima, is serving as a Basic Education Curriculum Expert at the Basic Education Department attached by Japan International Co-operation Agency (The New Light of Myanmar, Thursday 26 February 1998). It is thought that the government may prefer a Japanese model of education.

Teaching Profession

The problems mentioned above are worsened by the fact that the teaching profession has been neglected by the regime. Traditionally pupils have the same respect for their teachers as they have for Buddha and parents. Teachers enter the classroom with goodwill, interest and self-sacrifice (*seidana, wadhana, anina*). Nowadays, the status and role of teachers has declined due to the fact that teachers' salaries are very low and that they lack material support such as housing and transport as well as academic support such as pre-service and in-service trainings. The lack of trained teachers also affects the quality of teaching. In general, a university degree is the minimum qualification required to become a primary school teacher (Union of Myanmar, 1992). In some places, where there are not enough university graduates, people who have passed only the Basic Education High School (Standard X) examinations are allowed to teach primary grades (*ibid.*). These new recruits enter the classroom without initial teacher training. Some receive training after several years of teaching. In addition, over two-thirds of the primary schools are understaffed, especially in sparsely populated rural areas (Myanmar Education Research Bureau, 1992).

According to a government report (see Ministry of Education, 1998), some 57 per cent of primary school teachers, 58 per cent of junior secondary school teachers and 9 per cent of senior secondary school teachers have never undergone teacher training. After years of neglect regarding the teaching profession, the regime is now planning to introduce pre-service and in-service teacher training. However, these training programmes downgrade the level of primary school teachers. For example, after first year training, only qualified

⁶ Graham Bailey of the Free Burma Campaign in South Africa gave this statement on Burma's education system at a press conference in Bangkok after attending the 'education forum' held by the National League for Democracy on Monday 21 August 2000 in Rangoon (Source: AFP, Bangkok, August 22).

trainees can continue to attend the training for junior secondary school teachers. Those who fail to qualify go to primary schools to be teachers. This programme therefore downgrades the importance of primary education as the foundation of social, moral and academic progress in that the system allows for unqualified candidates to teach primary school children. Again, after the second year training, qualified trainees can continue to attend the training for senior secondary school teachers, but those who did not do so well go and teach at junior secondary schools. In like manner, after another two-year secondary school teacher training, many have no other alternative but to go to senior secondary schools to be teachers due to unsatisfying examination results. The best-qualified graduates can move on to post-graduate courses and follow master and doctorate degrees to become university lecturers.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, education in Burma can be categorised into four periods – before independence, after independence until 1962, under the military rule 1962-1988, and the present period of popular demands for democratisation while still under military control. Education before independence was colonial education widely criticised by patriots. This study does not discuss the colonial period. However, the ‘Education Reconstruction Committee Report 1947’ is impressive. It took into account a wide range of issues: comprehensive education, academic knowledge, pre-vocational knowledge, vernacular languages, bilingual method of instruction, spiritual and moral development, health education, physical education, and a record card system to overcome the weakness of ‘pass-fail’ examination system. The major flaw in the Report might be that it encouraged introducing a Romanised script for the Burmese language while Burmese script had already been in use (the source of Burmese script was the Brahmi script which flourished in India from about 500BC to over 300AD) (Myanmar Language Commission, 1993).

During the 1948-1962 and 1962-1988 periods, curriculum content, the assessment system and the supremacy of Burmese language over other nationalities’ languages remained the same. The differences between each period were that the former put emphasis on arts subjects and the latter on science, the former focused on five ‘strengths’ and on building up nationalism while the latter tried to indoctrinate children with political socialist ideas to sustain one party rule. From national independence until now, the structure of the education system is almost the same (see Figure C)⁷.

Obviously, subject-orientated teaching and children’s rote learning have dominated Burmese education. The system’s deficiencies were reinforced by the lack of teacher education and weak curricula. Rote learning has been a very strong influence in Burma since the Buddhist Scriptures were committed to memory. Monks simply learn the *Pitakas* (the three repositories of Buddhist Scriptures) by rote and memorisation. Since there was no script at the time of Buddha, rote learning was used to perpetuate the Buddha’s teaching in its original form. Rote learning has its uses in that education also

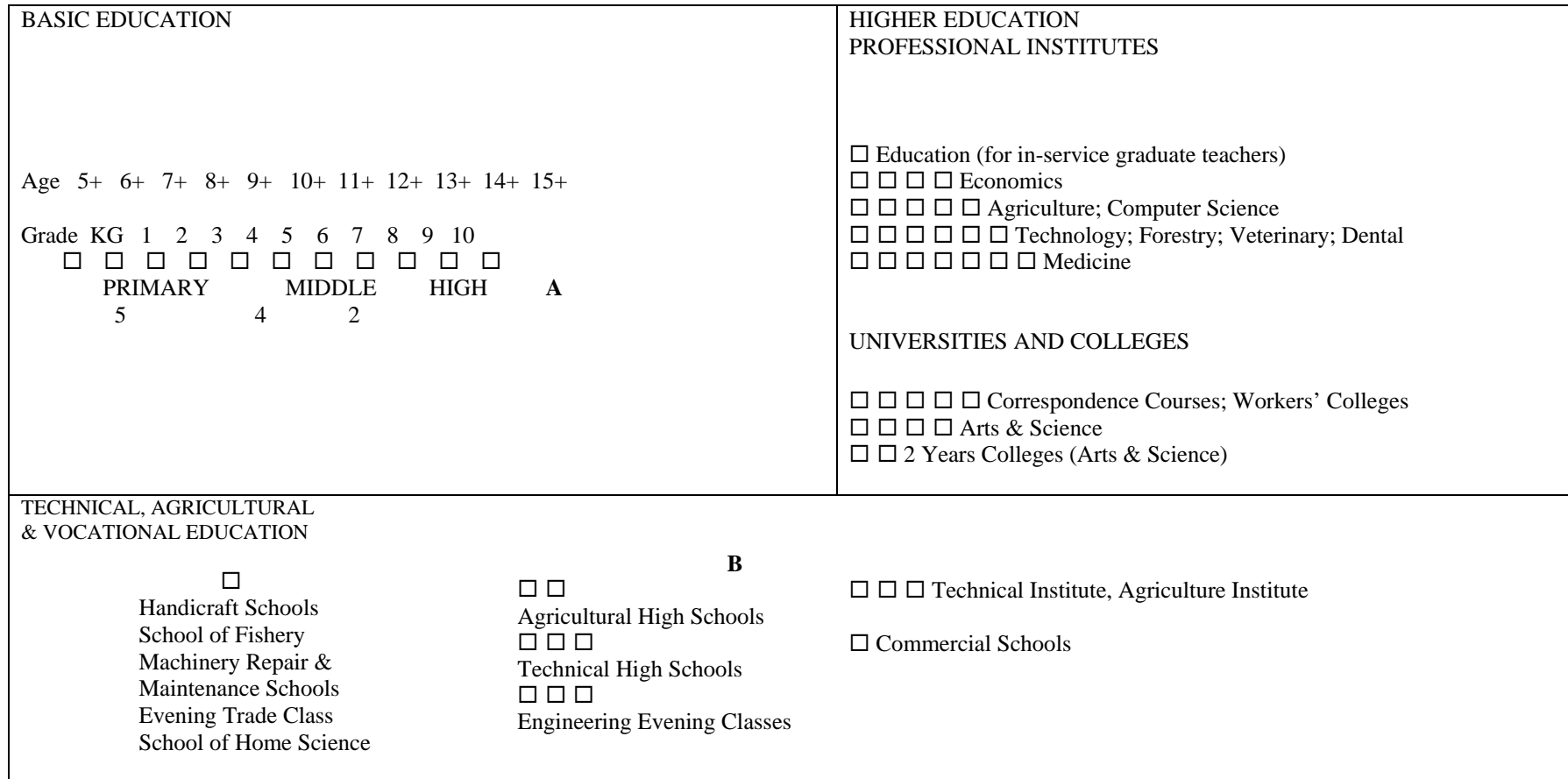
⁷ In Burma, kindergarten (KG), which is compulsory, is included in the primary cycle and is effectively treated as the first grade. Including KG, Burma has a 5-year primary cycle, whereas the international practice is 6-year cycle. However, the official academic year for primary school totals about 940 educational hours, compared to a world-wide average of 880 hours.

The words both ‘university’ and ‘institute’ in English are translated by *toggatho* in Burmese. For example, Institute of Medicine in English is *hsei toggatho* in Burmese. Mandalay University in English is *Mandalay toggatho* in Burmese. Besides, Technical Institute and Agriculture Institute are called *theip-pan*. Teacher Training Schools and Colleges are not shown in the Figure.

relies on remembering such things as timetables and verbs with irregular forms in English grammar, but rote learning without proof of understanding does not support modern education. In the teaching of modern subjects such as science and social studies, however, Burmese pupils are still expected to absorb knowledge in a passive, mechanistic way despite the international trend that learners should be encouraged to participate in an active way in the study of modern subjects.

There is an urgent need to modernise education in Burma. Universal access to basic education must be developed, in conjunction with the introduction of a broad and balanced curriculum. Educational aims must be harmonized with the conditions under which education takes place in Burma in terms of the great ethnic, language and religious diversities, and the established ways in which learning has taken place.

Figure C: Structure of the Education System



[Reproduced from Myanmar Education Research Bureau, 1

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Appendix 1 Burma (Myanmar)



[Source: Burma Links Page UNO, Asian Virtual Library, Myanmar (Burma).
<http://www.york.cuny.edu/~latt/burma/>]

Appendix 2

Myanmar at a Glance

(Adapted from United Nations Working Group, 1998)

Demographic Data

Population	46.4 million	1997/98
Crude Birth Rate	28	1996
New Births	1.3 million	1996
Annual Number of Under 5 Deaths	0.14 million	1997
Annual Growth Rate	1.8%	1997/98
Land Area	676,553 sq kms	
Population Density	67 per sq km	1996/97
Population Under 5	5.7 million	1997
Population Under 15	15.45 million	1997/98
Women Aged 15-59	13.85 million	1997/98

Social Data

Infant Mortality Rate	63/1000 births	1997
Under 5 Mortality Rate	106/1000 births	1997
Maternal Mortality Rate	232/1000 births	1994
Access to Health Facilities	60%	1992
Per Capita Health Expenditure	62 Kyats ⁸	1996/97
Access to Clean Water	49%	1997
Access to Sanitation	46%	1997
Net Primary Enrolment	81%	1997
Total Literacy	77%	1983
Per Capita Education Expenditure	243 Kyats	1996/97

Nutrition Status

Malnutrition (weight for age) – Severe among Under 3 Children	12%	1997
Malnutrition (weight for age) – Moderate & Severe among Under 3 Children	36%	1997
Low Birth Weight	24%	1991

⁸ 1 US\$ is about 6 Kyats in official exchange rate and 300 Kyats in black rate in 1998.

Economic Data

GDP per capita	1,602 Kyats	1997/98
Growth in GDP	4.6%	1997/98
Minimum Wage	600 Kyats	
Inflation	34%	1997/98
Exports (f.o.b)	5,488 million Kyats	1996/97
Imports (c.i.f)	11,779 million Kyats	1996/97
Total External Debt	US\$ 5,771 million	1995
Debt Service	US\$ 14.5 million	1994
Overseas Development Assistance	US\$ 102 million	