



Inclusive Education Reform in SAARC Countries: Prospects and Challenges

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ABSTRACT: South Asia, an area of the world with a high population density, is home to one-fourth of the world's inhabitants. But both the educational divide and the jobless rate are relatively significant. Education is a crucial cornerstone for the cultural, social, and economic growth of the community. Although the SAARC summit was when the concept of educational cooperation was originally put forward, little has changed over the past few decades. The dispersed policies and division of educational objectives across several committees and subcommittees have hindered the rate of progress. SAARC nations have recently been working together to increase access and education quality, particularly for the region's most disadvantaged communities. This study makes an effort to list the numerous difficulties that South Asian nations have when adopting IE reform. The study also lists some potential approaches to deal with the difficulties.

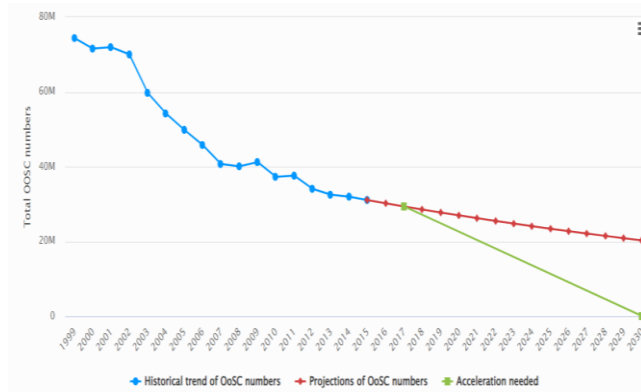
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1. INTRODUCTION

SAARC is the regional association comprising of eight nations (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) established in 1982 with an aim for the economic equality, growth, social inclusion, and cultural development within South Asia region (Naik, 1999; Shaheen, 2013). South Asia, an area of the world with a high population density, is home to one-fourth of the world's inhabitants. But both the educational divide and the jobless rate are relatively significant. For the cultural, social, and economic development of the local economy, education is a fundamental foundation. Although the idea of cooperation in the field of education was first proposed at the SAARC summit, nothing has changed over the previous few decades. The rate of development has been slowed down by the fragmented policies and division of educational goals across several committees and subcommittees (Zhang et. al., 2014). They have recently been working together to increase access and education quality, particularly for the region's most disadvantaged

communities. The area's low literacy rates, inadequate school facilities, poor educational quality, lack of excellence and access, high dropout rates, and limited financing are only a few of the region's frequent educational issues (See Figure 1). SAARC nations have identified severe obstacles in the access of primary education in the region, especially from low student enrolment, high levels of dropout, and repeated classes (S.K.Khanna, 1994; Unianu, 2012). Secondary and tertiary levels of education experienced a similar predicament. In 1997 during the 12th SAARC summit, the nation committed to offer free education to all children in the age group of 6-14 and recently the member nations of SAARC reiterated to their commitment. Om 2008, SAARC and the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to help member nations achieve "Education for All" (EFA). SAARC nations' commitment was included in the framework of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)(Pandey, 2021), and declared Education as a top priority that is inclusive

and of high quality in order to support diversity and realise EFA's objectives.



Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS)

Figure 1: Trend and projections of primary and lower secondary drop out children in South Asia

2. EXPLORING FACTORS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

The notion of inclusive education (IE) is a moving target. When it comes to the education of children with disabilities, IE used to be equated with "special education." All children, including those from various ethnic origins, are included in more recent definitions of IE. It is crucial to realise that IE differs greatly from integration, a word that is sometimes used synonymously in several SAARC nations (Desai, 2010). These terminology differences are briefly discussed in the next section.

The integration of children with special needs into regular classrooms first gained acceptance in developing nations in the early 1980s. Integration was defined as "the physical placement of impaired students, either partially or fully, in regular schools". Because it encourages the inclusion of kids with special needs in general education courses alongside typically developing pupils for certain time periods, integration is also known as "mainstreaming." One of the most important aspects of this concept is how much more emphasis is placed on the kid changing to suit the system than on the system adapting to fit the child. Studies have shown that instead the system of education transforming to fit the learner, students are forced to adapt the protocol, curriculums, pedagogy, and practises the traditional ways of education (Mandal et. al., 2022).

3. INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Giving special needs students educational chances is only one aspect of inclusive practises in schools. To "accommodate and respond to the different abilities, needs, and experiences of all pupils," inclusion in schools is intended. Inclusion is characterised by four fundamental challenges. These include the following:

- a) seeing IE as a process;
- b) spotting and removing obstacles;

c) guaranteeing the attendance, engagement, and performance of all students; and

d) emphasising at-risk pupils.

These elements in a group defines inclusive education (IE), and is a strategy to enhance the quality of education reducing the obstacles of learning by identifying the needs and capabilities of each individual child. The goal of this strategy is to significantly improve educational opportunities for students who are currently enrolled in school. Social justice used to be thought of as the equitable allocation of commodities, rights, and obligations among people (Putturaj et al., 2021). Due to its personal emphasis on distribution, this approach to social justice was not without its drawbacks (Bhatia, 2012). "The origin of uneven distribution resides with the formal and informal rules or norms that regulate how members of society regard one another, rather than the distribution itself or primarily with the individuals who are part of this process".

Similar to this study proposed focusing on "freedom" as the aim rather than the "Rawlsian" idea of primary goods distribution (Diamond et al., 2016). The key takeaway is that while distributing primary products equally is one way to achieve social justice, changing the system and the process is required to achieve freedom. Researchers acknowledge that social justice is both a process and a goal despite discrepancies in social justice theories. The establishment of a just society, free from prejudice against any person or group based on their race, religion, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, is the aim of the social justice process (Matthey-Prakash, 2021). The study shows that "social justice involves a vision of society in which the allocation of resources is equal and all citizens are physically and mentally safe and secure". According to this philosophy, IE promotes all kids to enrol in neighbourhood ordinary schools, regardless of their backgrounds (such as race, belief, class, gender, handicap, ethnicity, and socioeconomic position) (Kirkbride et al., 2008). Additionally, IE establishes the "agenda to incorporate those groups who have been socially marginalised" in accordance with the ideals of social justice. Similar to this, equality is at the heart of the "Education for All" (EFA) aims.

Children who are denied access to education are denied their human rights and are unable to engage in the most basic forms of pursuit of their interests and aptitudes (Jora et. al., 2022). Exclusion from education of any kind is against human rights. In keeping with the goals of the EFA, IE is based on the principle that every learner, regardless of their particular characteristics or quirks, has a right to an education (P. Mittal & Raghuvaran, 2021). Therefore, the push for inclusion in education may be seen as an effort to address and meet the diverse needs of every kid through increasing participation in learning, cultures, and communities and reducing exclusion from and within the educational system.

India launched a "zero-rejection" policy that aims to ensure that all children, including those with special needs, receive a quality education regardless of the nature and severity of their condition (Lakshmi & Visalakshmi, 2013). All Indian schools should be inclusive and kid-friendly, according to a joint goal of the provincial and federal governments. In comparison to other countries, the EFA has a stronger overall standing and is included in the Maldives and Sri Lanka (Alom, 2018). This paper tries to identify all of the challenges that South Asian countries face when implementing IE reform. The report also includes a list of suggested solutions to the problems. The majority of its basis is comprised by a careful review of the literature. Below, the review process is briefly discussed.

4. METHODOLOGY

For this study, a thorough examination of the literature was done. The study explored database of ProQuest, A+ education, ERIC, Web of Knowledge, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar available online from Central Reference library of Delhi University to find pertinent, peer-reviewed articles that reported data from South Asian countries about IE reforms. The study attempts to find prospects, challenges and opportunities for implementing inclusive education in South Asia was the main emphasis of this investigation. The report also focuses on how IE reform is going right now in South Asian nations. To find topics for this research, a generic, inductive analytical technique was used. Engagement, empowerment, and cooperation as well as support for IE reform are two themes that came out of the analysis.

5. NEED OF ENGAGEMENT, EMPOWERMENT AND COLLABORATION

Without the helpful input of teachers and other school staff members, educational policies are developed across all of South Asia. Additionally, instructors have little latitude to make improvements to schools without the government's office of education's consent. Similar to this, when implementing IE, the school community, including the head of school and school management, has little authority to make any important choices (A. Mittal, 2021). As a result, the present hierarchical system that is centralised in power prevents school administrators from making changes that support reform initiatives and gives teachers and other members of the school community a limited amount of input into the formulation of policies. In order to significantly contribute to converting IE policy into reality, teachers in both formal and informal leadership roles need to have the necessary power. The activation of School Management Committees (SMC) and Parent Teacher Associations (PTA) were two other key decentralised management initiatives that attempted to expand the chance for teachers and parents to advocate for the development and improvement of local schools (Kaur, 2021). The numerous approaches used enhance the activities and offer forums for collaborative conversation to entice all interested parties to freely

engage. The people involved in IE reform must cooperate not only during school-related activities but also while communicating with other schools about IE reform-related concerns.

IE Reforms

The unfavourable views of their fellow students, classroom teachers, and parents of children with and/or without impairments have an impact on the full inclusion of disabled kids in ordinary schools. The attitudes of instructors and the leaders of teacher education institutions in Bangladesh are both problematic since many of them do not favour the full inclusion of pupils from varied backgrounds. A major impediment to changing attitudes toward inclusive education in India is the caste system. It can be argued that attitudes are a crucial factor when implementing IE in traditional classrooms. It is undeniable that stakeholders' positive attitudes—such as teachers'—are crucial when enacting IE reform, especially if one is seeking an inclusive shift in teaching methods. The insufficient training of pre-service teachers is one of the biggest problems the nations in the area have. Teachers must be committed (heart), have the required knowledge and abilities (brain), and be able to practise inclusion in order to teach effectively in normal classrooms (hands). It seems that these nations' university education programmes provide less information regarding several IE-related topics. Programs vary significantly as well, from one lecture on kids with impairments to a whole semester on special education (Jafar et al., 2022). It is not surprising that graduates of these programmes continue to show low levels of commitment to and high levels of fear about teaching in inclusive classrooms. If teacher education programmes are to adequately equip graduates to manage classrooms with a variety of learners, it would seem that they need to be revised in a methodical manner. The importance of inclusive education must be understood by teacher educators in order for this difficult change to become operationalized. They must also comprehend that inclusive education benefits all students, not just a select group of them. Schools and educators must have adequate human, educational, and physical resources in order to successfully implement inclusion. When attempting to meet the unique requirements of a varied set of students, teachers often lack these tools in their classrooms. The majority of the time, classroom teachers do not have the necessary blackboards, curricula, or special needs equipment (such Braille for visually impaired children) to handle diversity. Additionally, the majority of schools lack amenities like ramps and restrooms equipped for students using wheelchairs that are accommodating to special needs children. Numerous worldwide studies have explored how encouraging inclusive practises calls for the provision of adequate assistance and resources to handle diversity and special needs. It was shown that instructors thought they lacked the resources they needed to undertake inclusive education in their classes.

It is undeniable that South Asian nations are less technologically advanced than Western nations, and the majority of schools in underdeveloped nations, especially those in the SAARC area, are not sufficiently resourceful or prepared to use IE effectively. In the SAARC area, instructors frequently complain that they lack enough teaching materials and that the government does not provide enough aid to underprivileged children (such as kids with impairments). IE implementation is still feasible even with constrained funding, nonetheless. Given the crucial role resources play in effectively implementing IE in conventional schools, academics from both developed and developing nations have highlighted the need of making effective and creative use of the local resources at hand. In order to implement inclusive practises, schools must be resourceful with the funds they have been given (Singh, 2021). The restricted ability of local school leaders to make any choices at the school level is one of the drawbacks for the local schools. This situation affects, among other things, how schools begin to organise the essential resources, such as support instructors or teaching materials. Despite these obstacles, all of the SAARC nations have made substantial progress toward reaching EFA by using an IE method. The enrolment of girls in ordinary schools, for instance, has significantly increased in Bangladesh.

With UNICEF's "Back to School" initiative, which is based on IE principles and has ushered in education for all children, including females, in normal schools, the quality of post-conflict education in Afghanistan is progressively improving. The demilitarised, war-torn Afghan society may benefit from the IE strategy's promotion of social cohesion and pledges of hope, social justice, and equal rights. However, improved teacher preparation, resources, and a comprehensive curriculum are necessary to achieve the goals of EFA through IE; otherwise, it will be difficult to reach this milestone. The human rights movement significantly influenced the defence of the basic rights, dignity, and fair access to education of all people with disabilities, and India has made substantial progress toward realising EFA. In recent years, IE has benefited from the launch of several programmes in India. The new administration of the Republic of India has a long-held goal of providing universal and compulsory education for all children between the ages of 6 and 14. This is clear from the fact that article 45 of the constitution includes it as a directive policy. But even more than 50 years later, this goal is still far away. But in recent years, it appears that the government has taken this omission seriously and made basic education a Fundamental Right of every Indian citizen. The government's decision to take this action must have been influenced by the strains of economic expansion and the severe shortage of competent and educated labour. In recent years, the Indian government has spent just around 3% of its GDP on education, which is considered to be a relatively low amount.

6. CONCLUSION

Despite the South Asian countries' considerable successes in fulfilling the EFA and MDG objectives by using an IE strategy, the analysis covered in this article revealed that the majority of the countries are still facing significant challenges. These difficulties include a lack of funding, inadequate teacher preparation, a lack of local support for student involvement in school, and a lack of coordination among interested parties. In order to reduce the barriers to achieving the Education for All milestone and establishing high-quality education for everyone within an inclusive educational paradigm, the SAARC platform can play a critical role in information exchange, fund mobilisation, collaborative research projects, and the creation of policy guidelines. Political, human, and children's rights form the basis of the argument for universal quality primary education and its acceleration. All SAARC nations must continue to place a high focus on enrolling and retaining all children in school and making sure they are learning in order to advance human development. It is time for SAARC countries to open up dialogue on shared educational policies and collaborative strategies in response to the rising demand for education throughout the world. A nation's journey to knowledge, wisdom, peace, and prosperity can include both education and culture as components of soft power. The region's youth, who are its future, should approach the future with optimism and work to find common ground in their interests. In order to considerably strengthen diplomatic connections between nations, additional educational and cultural exchange programmes are required. Cooperation in education aims to showcase the educational landscape so that knowledge is not restricted to India's borders. An important turning point in the SAARC region's cooperation is the founding of South Asian University in New Delhi. Similar to the South Asian Foundation, each year two students from each SAARC member state are awarded scholarships to complete their academic studies at any of the UNESCO Institutions of Excellence.

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