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The Decline of Educational System In Iraq

**Rakesh Kumar Ranjan
and Prakash C. Jain***

*[*Rakesh Kumar Ranjan is a Research Scholar, and Prof. Prakash C. Jain is a faculty in Centre for West Asian and African Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.]*

Iraq is abundant with natural resources and its geographical location makes it strategically important. It is composed of a mountainous region in the northeast and the vast Syrian Desert, inhabited by a few nomadic shepherds. In the southwest lies the heart of the country which is a fertile lowland region watered by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Most of the population is Muslim Arabs, divided into the Sunnis of central Iraq and Shiites of the south. The Kurds, who inhabit the north, are the principal minority ethnic group.

The history Iraqi culture and civilization can be traced back to 7,000 years. It has been the seat of several civilizations. Unlike its neighbours, it has a long history of civilizations, an antiquity as great as or even greater than that of its principal rival in the Arab world, Egypt. Iraq, known in the ancient period as Mesopotamia, was ruled by such great rulers as Hammurabi, who codified the law governing life of the citizens, and Nebuchadnezzar. Subsequently, the Persians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Mongols, Ottomans and others dominated this area.¹

Like its glorious civilizational history, Iraq has had a history marked with incredible literary achievements. The Sumerians are well remembered for their contribution in the field of education. It was they who first divided the circle into 360 degrees. Iraq produced the world's first literary epic which reflected the importance of education and enrichment of knowledge. They had a great knowledge of medical science, architecture, metaphysics etc. Cuneiform, the first system of writing, was introduced by them to the world.

But despite its glorious past in the field of education, the present education system of Iraq is almost on its deathbed. The analysis made in this article covers the developmental phases of Iraqi education system in the modern era till its downward slide during and after a decade of wars and sanctions.

Since the formation of modern Iraq in 1921, the country suffered from a variety of deep schisms. Prominent among these was the huge gap which separated the urban and rural populations. The rural population was itself divided on the basis of the tribal system of organisation, being united only in the common suffering of primitive socio-economic conditions. The most challenging problem faced by the nascent state was that of social and national integration of all the different groups– Kurds, non-Arabs or non-Muslim groups, each

possessing a sense of identity of its own. These groups through centuries of Ottoman rule had become accustomed to living in isolation from one another. All the governments since 1921, in their own ways, looked at education as the principal means whereby integration could be achieved.²

But the base on which the educational system developed after 1921 was extremely narrow. The old Ottoman provinces of Baghdad, Mosul and Basra, which constitute the Iraq of today, had been only slightly affected by the cultural revival witnessed by some other Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century. Modern schools were very few in number and access to them was limited to a very small wealthy elite. Traditionally, religious institutions provided education, basically in the form of the *katatib* (singular, *Kuttab*: elementary school) at which small children received basic religious education by a *mullah*.³ Though the system and content of education was unsuitable, the *katatib* continued to serve as the principal centre of primary education until the end of the Ottoman rule and the passing of the country into British hands after the World War I.

In spite of the existence of a few government schools together with the *Katatib* and some foreign and private missionary schools under the Ottomans, the rate of literacy did not exceed 0.5 per cent.⁴ The period between the British occupation and the 1958 revolution witnessed some important developments on the educational and social levels. The *Katatib* gradually gave way to public primary schools, such that by 1958 only two recognised *Katatib* remained in existence. The relative expansion in primary education, however, was unable to match the increase in the population. Thus, the percentage of illiteracy registered in 1957 was 81.71 per cent, ranging from 91.51 per cent in rural areas to 63.3 per cent in urban centres, and from 91.6 per cent among women to 72.4 per cent among men.⁵

Under the post-1958 republican regime, education received more serious attention. Education was made compulsory and the number of pupils admitted to primary level increased from 43,000 in 1957-58 to 84,900 in 1963, then to 926,000 in 1965. In spite of the earlier legislation of compulsory education, it was only during the 1970s that Iraq witnessed the establishment of free education system at all stages from primary to higher educational level. Six years of primary schooling was made compulsory with plans to extend compulsory education by three more years. So much so that enrolment at primary schooling level had reached 99 per cent by the end of the 1970s.⁶

The expansion of the educational system, however, was necessarily focused exclusively on children. To bring some enlightenment to the illiterate sections of the adult population required a different approach. From the 1920s onwards, schemes were proposed at official as well as at private level to reduce or eradicate illiteracy.

The first attempt was made by the *Ahali* grouping in the 1930s to organise the society for combating illiteracy. The schemes which were implemented before 1958, however, achieved little or no success. By 1963, a framework of illiteracy centres had been established, 330 for men

and 56 for women. In 1965, their numbers reduced to 323 for men and 45 for women.⁷ But still the impact remained limited.

The causes of the failure or limited success of illiteracy eradication schemes before 1968 are to be found principally in the lack of an overall vision. For developing a clear strategy to solve the problem, illiteracy needed to be viewed within its political dimension which involved the phenomenon of cultural illiteracy as well as that of alphabetical illiteracy. Moreover, the approach to the problem lacked determination and dedication. Other factors contributing to this failure were the absence of accurate statistical information on the members, age groups, employment, gender and distribution of illiterates; the insufficiency and inadequacy of the texts prescribed for adult learners; the lack of adequate funds to provide suitable learning conditions; and the low motivation among adult learners in the absence of mature guidance.

Some scholars are of the opinion that during the 1950s and the 1960s Iraq's population was growing very rapidly.⁸ So even if the number of literates was increasing the proportion remained the same. Therefore, to combat illiteracy decisively a compulsory and comprehensive scheme was necessary.

Ba'athist Ideology and Government Planning for Education

The Ba'th Party of Iraq which had its monopoly over the political sphere of Iraq since 1963 till the American invasion in 2003 (after which it has been banned by the US army) drew its legitimacy from the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party which was founded by Michel Aflaq in Damascus in the 1940s to combat Western colonial rule. Ba'athist beliefs combined Arab Socialism, nationalism and Pan-Arabism which were often contradictory to the approach adopted by other Arab states.⁹ Due to its secular and modern approach it was very difficult for the Arab world to accept it in original form. In Iraq too it became autocratic in nature. But still, it had a great role in the development of education sector in Iraq.

For the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party in Iraq, the educational sector was of vital importance. A serious attention was given to reshape educational system along national and socialist lines and to develop it thoroughly to achieve comprehensive progress in the society and meet the needs of the government's developmental plans. The Ba'ath party consistently stated that illiteracy was not just an educational, social and economic problem, but also a central political issue with far reaching implications.¹⁰ The issue was mentioned in the Party's first manifesto in 1947, and in the Report of the Sixth National Conference (1963).

The party leadership was obviously committed to eradication of illiteracy. Illiteracy was quoted as an obstacle to the fulfillment of the objectives of the Arab nation. The building up of socialism and the practice of democracy necessitated complete and immediate eradication of illiteracy and the mobilisation of the potentialities to fulfill this mission with immediacy and success.¹¹

In the Ninth National Conference it was articulated as a vision of a future society, free from the old, obsolete, and exploitative relationships that held the woman prisoner in their own society.¹²

The objective of eradicating illiteracy was incorporated in Article 27 of the Provisional Constitution that was adopted following the Ba'ath takeover of power in 1968. The Report of the Eighth Regional Congress of the Party stated that:

The coming stage must witness a reappraisal of the means previously employed in this field in order to achieve a transition from the phase of reducing illiteracy to the phase of its complete eradication..... The noble aim of eradicating illiteracy is one of the main fields of our strife and activity. On its success will depend the determination of many vital political, economic and social issues in this country.¹³

In spite of its great ideological and public oriented policies related to education, the Ba'athist leaders were not able to handle the situation effectively, mainly due to external factors. The situation had become truly unbearable by 1979. Some scholars have pointed out that during the early 1980s the system broke down altogether. This was the period of Iran-Iraq war that stopped scholars from going abroad as the state made travel abroad difficult and contingent upon membership of, and rank in, the party.

Earlier, the Iraqi academics enjoyed the right to travel abroad to conferences and meetings, and in many cases, the state subsidized their expenses. Still, the security apparatus often considered those who spent time abroad suspect and they could face harassment and interrogation on their return. The reduction in freedom to travel had its cognate in the abandonment of the tradition of earning at least one higher degree at a school in Europe or North America. An older generation of Iraqi academics fondly remember the time when they could study freely in other Arab states, the US and Europe and enjoyed free tuition and liberal stipends from the government.

Though the women participation in the political domain remained limited during the Ba'athist regime, they were encouraged to get involved in the field of education and even business and commerce. In colleges and universities they mixed freely with their male counterparts. This was quite needed for their overall development. In fact, the Ba'athist educational policies did remarkably well towards the emancipation of women. Iraq's structures of teaching, learning and research not only suffered substantially after the Iran-Iraq war, but continue to face the cumulative effects of two decades of mismanagement, Ba'athist cultural politics, and regime paranoia.

This process of deterioration has further accelerated since the early 1990s, when the Iraqi state had to take extreme measures in response to UN sanctions and the fall in oil revenues. As a consequence, many of these institutions got stagnated by the late 1980s. Looting and violence on the campuses was just an additional humiliating act in a longer process of erosion that transformed what was perhaps the most elaborate and well-developed higher educational and research system in the Arab world into a pale shadow of its former self.

Education during the Era of Oil Boom

Following Iraq's nationalisation of the oil industry in 1972, and the oil price rise of 1973-74, Iraq entered a period of unprecedented social change and economic growth. The overall improvement in standards of living, under new production relations, had naturally brought benefits to people which created the framework within which the age-old problem of illiteracy could be solved.

The legislative basis which laid the guidelines for educational policies in Iraq in the 1970s was set by three laws. An Illiteracy Eradication Law was promulgated in 1971 which was followed by a Free Education Law in 1974, whereby the state undertook the responsibility of covering all financial costs at all stages of education, i.e., from kindergartens to universities. In 1976, Compulsory Education Law was passed which made the primary schooling compulsory for all the children in the age group of 6 to 15 years, and committed the state to provide all the necessary facilities. Also, free meals were provided to all students in kindergartens and primary schools.

Further, in November 1977, a general census was carried out in order to provide the necessary data regarding the number of illiterates, their age groups, sex, income and ethnic and geographical distributions. The data collected for the census revealed that there were 2, 212,630 people between 15 and 45 years of age, who did not have the basic skills of reading and writing. Of these, there were 676,693 men and 1,535,937 women (69.42 per cent of the total)¹⁴ The percentage of illiterates in rural areas averaged 48.67 per cent of the rural population, while the governorate of Baghdad alone hosted one-fifth of the total number of illiterates.

After the comprehensive national campaign in May 1978, a Supreme Council for the Eradication of Illiteracy was created, with members drawn from relevant ministries and organizations, and some others serving in their capacities as an educational experts or social workers. The Supreme Council sought to mobilize educationists, statisticians, psychologists, social workers and religious and community leaders for the campaign. For the first time army and internal security force was involved in this campaign.

In May 1978, the National Comprehensive Campaign for Compulsory Literacy Law was passed; making the eradication of illiteracy a national issue towards which all the country's facilities on both official and popular levels were to be oriented. The law specified the objectives to be achieved as follows:

- * To teach reading, writing and arithmetic.
- * To develop professional skills.
- * To help illiterates raise their culture, economic and social standards of living.
- * To promote national consciousness among illiterates.

* And to encourage those who gained literacy.

The law made regular attendance at illiteracy eradication classes obligatory, and laid down punitive measures to deal with those who failed to comply with its provisions. Trade unions and popular organisations played a decisive role in carrying out the decisions and recommendations of the Supreme Council. The mass media was fully employed to familiarise the public with the objectives and seriousness of the campaign and the benefits to be reaped. Therefore, special programmes were broadcast on radio and television and exhibitions depicting the various aspects of the battle against ignorance were offered to the public. Daily evening literacy lessons were televised on all channels of the national networks¹⁵

It was not only that the laws were made with adequate groundwork done, basic infrastructures were also developed and priorities were quite visible. All schools and public buildings were used for holding literacy classes. The circumstances and special needs to each village and community were taken into consideration. The handicapped, the disabled, and the blind were enabled to attend special literacy centres equipped with the requisite teaching aids. Those sentenced under law were told that any progress they showed in learning would be taken into consideration in remission of their punishments.

Apart from these programmes, which the government implemented, it also tried to solidify the base of the campaign by recreating literacy teachers from among primary school teachers, government employees, university students and volunteers. Most of them were offered special training programmes. The syllabuses were based on the requirements of the readers, i.e., the vocabulary and references were used related to the occupational functions of each group. And the government also tried to develop consciousness of individuals as to their obligations as citizens.

A large-scale expansion in this field was made in line with the requirements of qualitatively building up 'Man' under the Revolution. The initiation of the national comprehensive campaign for the eradication of illiteracy in December 1978 was spent on creating the infrastructural base for eradicating illiteracy. Measures were taken to train literacy teachers and administrative personnel at National Training Centre for Fundamental Education which was created for this purpose. A number of decrees were passed with the objective of encouraging illiterate citizens to enroll at literacy centres. Further, literacy was made a condition for employment in government departments.

Women Education

Until the ouster of Saddam Hussein women's political participation was very limited but they were encouraged to get involved in the field of education and even business and commerce. In colleges and universities they mixed freely with their male counterparts. In fact, the Ba'athist

regime did remarkably well on the issue of emancipation of the women. It also took enough steps for the development of women education at every level.

Despite primary education for girls in Iraq having begun early in the century, and the first secondary school for girls opening in 1929, the number of educated women remained comparatively limited until the mid-1960s. Till then the opportunity for girls to pursue their education was effectively open only to those who came from wealthy and middle class families in the cities. Although female illiterates outnumbered males by more than two to one in 1965, only 12 per cent of adult literacy centres were there for women.

In 1980s, out of 762 people's schools, 416 were for women and the rest were mixed. The entry of women into the educational system as a whole is another noteworthy feature of the Ba'athist educational policy. The data in Table 1 shows that there is a drastic increase in the girls' education at all the three levels during 1970-1980. The year 1974 constituted a major development in the Iraqi educational system. This involved not only exemption of girls from tuition fees but also free books and all other educational requirements. Therefore, school expenses were no longer an obstacle in the way of enrolment of lower-class girls. As a result, by the 1980s there was an increase in female literacy. It raised the involvement in employment and also the job opportunities. Women in 1980s accounted for 46 per cent of all teachers, 29 per cent of all physicians, 46 per cent of all dentists, 70 per cent of all pharmacists, 15 per cent of all accountants, 14 per cent of all factory workers and 16 per cent of all civil servants. And women participation in non-agricultural labour force rose from 7 per cent in 1968 to 19 per cent in 1980.¹⁶

The Table 1 shows how the percentage of girls' enrollment at all educational levels increased between 1970 and 1980. Adding to the benefits and planning by the government in 1979-80, education at primary school level was made obligatory for all Iraqi children. As a result, the number of girls' enrollment at the primary school level increased sharply that year.

Until the 1980s, the education system in Iraq was widely regarded as one of the best in West Asia. During this period the number of students seeking to pursue higher education in the 1980s increased dramatically. Accordingly, in the mid 1980s, the government made plans to expand Salah ad Din University in Irbil in the north and to establish Al Rashid University outside Baghdad. The later was not yet in existence in early 1988, but both were designed ultimately to accommodate 50,000 students. In addition, at the end of December 1987, the government had announced plans to create four more universities: one in Tikrit in central Iraq, one each at Al Kufah and Al Qadisiyah in the south and at Al Anbar in the west.

Earlier, education was provided by the government through a centrally organised system. Compared to the early system of education, Saddam Hussein returned to a very different school system from the one in 1975. Under him, government passed a compulsory education law mandating that both sexes attend school through the primary level. Although middle and upper class Iraqi women had been attending university since the 1920s, rural women and girls were largely uneducated until the second half of 1970s.

Early in his rule, President Saddam Hussein was credited with creating one of the strongest school systems in the region. Iraq won UNESCO prize for eradicating illiteracy in 1982. Literacy rates for women were among the highest of all Islamic nations, and unlike most West Asian school systems, Iraqi education was largely secular. Much of these gains for women had been wiped out during the course of development since the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and particularly after the US-led coalition invasion of Iraq in 2003. Because of this, dropout rates at school and colleges and thereby illiteracy among the women increased sharply during the 1990s. Further, the law and order situation in Iraq since 2003 forced women from going to schools and colleges. Thus the literacy rate for women is currently estimated to be only 24 per cent as compared to 56 per cent for men– the lowest in the region.¹⁷

Effect of Wars, Sanctions and Invasion

The educational system seriously deteriorated due to overall negligence in large part by the government as a consequence of Iraq's engagement in eight year long Iran-Iraq war, Kuwait war and sanctions imposed by the United Nations Security Council, and finally by the American aggression on Iraq in 2003. With the outbreak of the Gulf war, the government faced a dilemma regarding education. Despite the shortage of wartime manpower, the regime was unwilling to tap the pool of available university students, arguing that these young people were Iraq's hope for the future. As of early 1988, therefore, the government routinely exempted students from military services until graduation, a policy it has adhered to rigorously. This policy, however, had caused resentment among many people and especially those who were forced to serve multiple tours at the front because of continuing manpower shortages. This was one of the reasons for the high drop-out from the higher education in early 1990s.

The negligence on the government's part led to decline in the quality of education, teaching as well as learning conditions at all levels. Teachers were not paid enough to sustain their lives. The course content was either distorted or was outdated, and the educational system came to a standstill. In the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, as per the UNICEF estimates, school spending plummeted by 90 per cent. The UN sanctions imposed after the war had a disproportionate impact on the education of women and children (especially girls). The government no longer enforced compulsory education law. Teacher's salaries dropped to only \$ 6 a month. The high depreciation in Iraqi currency forced children to work, to support their family. The gender gap in school enrolment as well as female illiteracy increased dramatically due to financial inability of the parents to send their children to school. When faced with limited resources, many Iraqi families chose to keep their girl children at home.

According to UNESCO estimates, until 1989 Iraq had been allocating 5 per cent of its budget to education. This was higher than what most other developing countries spent on education (3.8 per cent). Iraq was also the largest and preferred destination for students from the Middle East, Africa and the Muslim world. Thousands of students went to Iraq to study and to better their lives.¹⁸

However, much of this educational progress made during the 1960s and the 1970s was seriously undermined due to military conflict and economic sanctions since the early 1990s. The US invasion in March 2003 was an additional cause of this decline. The level of literacy in Iraq which was relatively better in the region during the 1970s and 1980s, stood at only 34 per cent in 1997 and further sharply declined to 29.7 per cent in 2001. Presently, the school enrolment is estimated at 30 per cent only. That is one of the lowest in the world. The combined ratio of enrolment at every level is again the lowest in the region. By 2002, the US Agency for International Development had estimated that the school enrollment in Iraq fell to 53 per cent.

During this period of sanctions, many children were forced to drop out of school because they could not afford to pay bribes, or they had to contribute to support their families, or were punished harshly in the classroom. Because of this many Iraqi children missed valuable years of school, lack basic skills, and now they are so far behind that they could not return to school. Before the 'Gulf War', 92 per cent of all Iraqi school age children attended school. Attendance at school has always been high in Iraq as primary education was compulsory until the US invasion in 2003.¹⁹ After the conflict in May 2003, only one in six children had textbooks; school facilities were in poor condition, shortages of supplies and equipments were endemic, and the quality of education was in serious decline.

The phases of war and sanctions have created an environment of insecurity outside, as well as within, Iraq in the entire region. The interim government formed under the guardianship of US could not heal up the wounds of war and sanctions. Instead, Iraq has been witness to a bloody revolt and civil war since 2003. The situation is so grave now that students do not go to classes due to the fear of attacks and killings. Reportedly, only 210,000 students attended colleges and universities in Iraq in 2007. According to the higher Education Ministry, at least 185 university teachers had been killed since April 2003, another 52 kidnapped and 41 wounded.²⁰

The lack of personal security for intellectuals is one of the worst problems that Iraq's higher education sector is facing today. It has been estimated that the number of professors, medical doctors, and professionals (pharmacists, lawyers, engineers, journalists, and so forth) killed since the invasion of 2003 runs into hundreds.

Iraq's University Professors Association reported in 2006 that 80 percent of assassination attempts on the country's campuses targeted university personnel. Out of that, more than half of those killed in these attempts were full or assistant professors, and half of the assassinations occurred at the University of Baghdad, with the universities of Basra, Mosul, and al-Mustansiriyya also being highly dangerous.²¹

Only about 30 percent of Iraq's university students attend classes these days. Agence France Presse in February 2007 reported that professors at the University of Baghdad have either given up trying to teach their classes or are arranging for their classes to be held just once a week because of professors' and students' security concerns.²²

Apart from the loss of human lives Iraq has had to compromise on its basic physical structures. Poor security is not the only thing disrupting academic life. According to a professor from Mosul University, closed roads and bridges make it very difficult for students to attend class, with only one-third typically showing up for their lessons.²³

Other than destruction of communication mediums and government buildings, educational structures like university buildings, schools and libraries have been the main targets in case of terrorist attacks. The valuable historical documents and cultural history of rich Sumerian civilization does not have any trace left in its own country's libraries as it got destroyed during this period.

The relatively positive picture of post-invasion higher education has been painted through the use of misleading data by certain sources. However, compared to the period when the Ba'athist party ruled under Saddam, the growth in education that has occurred since the invasion has been rather insignificant. It is only concentrated in Baghdad and the north of the country. Moreover, although the US-led invasion of the country in March 2003 ended an authoritarian regime, it failed to create a peaceful environment for the renewal of educational sector. In fact, the situation is much worse today than before the invasion, with preexisting structural problems exacerbated by disruption, violence, and shortages.

Concluding Remarks

The structure of Iraqi society has been mainly based on 'rentier' state and economy that began taking shape since 1952. A Sunni Arab-dominated state apparatus only began to show its social and economic heavy-handedness after the spectacular rise in oil revenues in 1952. Further, the emergence of Ba'athist regime in Iraq in 1963 and its subsequent consolidation by Saddam Hussein went hand-in-hand with the strengthening of the rentier state in the wake of yet another oil price hike during 1973-74.²⁴ This was the period when the government for the first time recognized the need for development of social sector where more emphases were given on education. During this period, one can see the linear developmental graph of educational sector in Iraq.

The three decades of war and sanctions have toughened the task of development of Iraq for the newly formed government. It has not only to deal with the grim socio-political and economic structure in the country but it has also to provide them with modern educational structure.

Most of the educational institutions require physical rehabilitation, furniture, equipment and materials for the teaching of science and technology, and replenishment of libraries. The curriculum, likewise, has been static and limited by political constraints. Renewal of curriculum and textbooks is an urgent challenge, with a need for updating, especially in the sciences and technology. Infusion of the values of peace and human rights, respect for others, citizenship and democracy are few issues that require urgent attention. However, the larger task of comprehensive curriculum and textbook renewal remains a major challenge in the coming

years. Curriculum experts and textbook writers need to meet with their colleagues from countries which have faced post-conflict reconstruction as well as with the broader international and regional community to benefit from developments in these fields.

With new government in power in Iraq there is some hope that the education system in the country would be revived for the better. To begin with, the government has announced increase in salary for teachers and other staff members. However, this is not enough; the management and governance issues will need to be addressed first and resources will be required for updating skills and promoting modern management and administrative processes. The future of the development of education system in present day Iraq will mainly decide the progress of the country in the coming days.

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