

Cultural Values and Learning in Afghanistan

In modernizing their educational system, the people of Afghanistan are striving toward consistent emphasis upon the enduring elements of their own culture.

IN AFGHANISTAN, as in many other countries, it is difficult to epitomize cultural values by descriptions of educational practices. The lag between practice and valued cultural goals is particularly noticeable at this period in Afghanistan's development. Moving from a tradition of isolation from the outside world to a period of greatly increased communication with other nations in a relatively few decades the Afghan people have experienced marked changes in almost every department of life. It is not surprising that they find their educational aspirations far ahead of the school practices. These differences can best be seen in the historical perspective of the development of the country.

For centuries Afghanistan was the crossroads for some of the great civilizations of the world. Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, the Mogul Conquerors of India all scaled her passes and conquered her cities. The great silk caravans regularly traversed her borders in their travels from the Orient to Europe. Each period and each horde of invaders left its imprint on the country. In the numerous isolated valleys high in the rugged mountains which characterize much of the terrain of Afghanistan, re-

side tribes which even today evidence the distinctive ethnic characteristics of certain of the invading groups. At one time Afghanistan was the center of Buddhist culture. Later conquerors were Moslems who converted the country to the Moslem religion.

Afghanistan was not united under one king until 1737 when Nadir Shah of Persia conquered it. His successor Ahmad Shah, the first Afghan King, brought to Afghanistan its first real semblance of unity. This was only nominal since the mountain people continued to give allegiance to a tribal system of government. Even today the tribal system persists and the lower house of Parliament is made up largely of the chiefs of the tribes.

Place of the Teacher

Tribal loyalties along with the rugged terrain which defies easy communication and travel between sections of the country have tended to keep the people isolated. Life in the tribal villages was simple. Education of the young in the skills of farming and sheepherding and family chores was taken care of by the individual families. Few people could read or write. The mullah or priest because of his ability to read the Koran

and to write was an important person in village life. He served as scribe to those who occasionally needed this service. He was physician to the sick whom he treated with simple nostrums or with amulets containing quotations from the Koran. Because the Moslem religion requires all males to have some knowledge of Koranic law and prayers he was the village schoolmaster.

The Koran was the textbook and boys were taught by rote the religious laws and prayers. The more able boys whose families could do without their services at home for longer periods were taught to read the Koran and were given lessons in mathematics and history. The religious instruction by the few mullah schools was the only type of formal education offered to children in much of Afghanistan well into the twentieth century. The mullah school is still a familiar sight in many villages, a system of private tutoring developed for the sons of wealthy families.

The status of women in the Moslem religion was such that no provision was made for the education of girls outside of the home until very recently. There are a growing number of primary and secondary schools for girls and some interest in higher education for women, though compared to education for boys, girls' education is lagging. According to figures published by UNESCO in 1949 less than one percent of Afghan girls were in school.

Another factor in the isolation of the people was the role Afghanistan has played as a buffer state between Russia and English territory in the Middle East. In 1842 Afghanistan succeeded in decisively defeating the British army and the British were expelled from Afghan soil. This was a proud day in Afghan history and for many years memorial

lights have burned each night on the hills above Kabul commemorating this victory. The British continued, however, to keep close watch over Afghan relations with Russia and other nations. Later skirmishes with the British were not so favorable for the Afghans. In order to maintain her independence, which has been a source of great pride to her people, Afghanistan closed her borders to foreigners and viewed with great suspicion any interest by foreign nations. Changes in the international situation following the First World War freed her somewhat from this tension and there has been an increasing amount of intercommunication with other nations. Rigid adherence to a policy of neutrality, however, has characterized Afghanistan's relations with the western powers.

The beginnings of publicly supported education in Afghanistan reflect the goals of the period. Education was viewed as a steppingstone to government positions and as preparation for foreign travel and study. The curriculum of the schools was developed with these ends in mind. University education in Afghanistan is a relatively new development. The sons of wealthy Afghan families were sent abroad for their higher education. Necessary preparation for this foreign study included learning the language in which instruction would be given and becoming acquainted with the literature and history of the country to be visited. Early in this period most young men were sent to France, Germany, or England. Interest in studying in the United States developed later.

An interesting phenomenon of the de-

KENNETH D. WANN is professor of education at Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, N. Y.

velopment of Afghan secondary education was the early establishment of four separate secondary schools in the capital city, each of which prepared boys for study in one of these countries. The French high school gave instruction in French. Teachers and textbooks were imported from France and the content of the curriculum emphasized French history and culture. In the same way, the cultures of Germany, England, and the United States respectively were emphasized in the other schools. Very little emphasis was given to things Afghan.

It is natural with the interest in European education and the influence of government officials who had studied abroad that the establishment of public primary or elementary schools would be influenced by the European system. A distinct European flavor characterizes primary education as well as secondary education in Afghanistan. The content of the many subjects taught, the system of yearly examinations from the first grade through college, the concept of pedagogy all reflect this influence. It is to be expected that village people would see little value for their children in this kind of education. They have little interest in sending their children to school. This lack of interest along with the need for entire families to work at farming the small, poor farms accounts for the fact that less than ten percent of Afghan boys are enrolled in schools. This lack of motivation for formal schooling poses a problem which the government must face if it is to upgrade the educational level of the country. Many Afghan educational leaders and teachers have recognized for some time the inadequacy of an educational system that superimposes the values of foreign cultures onto people who have vastly different cultural mores and needs.

A New Emphasis

In a report developed jointly by American educational consultants and Afghan leaders attention was called to this problem.

It seems to us that the dominant aim of all formal education in Afghanistan today, as it actually works out in practice, is further formal education. Success or failure is measured . . . in terms of passing examinations which admit to the next higher class. Thus the educative process tends to become its own justification—an end in itself. It need have no direct or vital relationship to the quality of living outside the school; indeed, it may and we think often does, “educate” away from life as it should be lived in Afghanistan. . . .¹

The emphasis today is on the development of a distinctly Afghan system of education—a system that will contribute to the welfare and growth of a nation emerging from a long period of isolation and underdevelopment. It is recognized that the changes necessary to bring this about are many and that the process will be slow. In 1956, The Ministry of Education set forth its first 25-year development plan.

The plan calls for a number of important changes and additions. There is to be a steady increase in the number of primary schools for boys and girls. Primary education will be terminal education for most boys and girls in Afghanistan. Less than five percent of primary school students go on to secondary schools. For many years to come, emphasis is being placed on making primary education more closely related to life in the villages. Attention is being given to instruction in better farming and

¹ Columbia University Teachers College Team, *First Six Months Report*, October 1954. P. 4-5.

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relative importance of topics before undertaking day-by-day plans. He will consider the resources and needs of the community and the children in his class. He will find health, attendance, and accumulative records helpful in revealing the needs and interests of children and will do his part to keep such records accurate and up to date. He will need to set aside some portion of the day, before or after pupils are present, for preparing the next day's work, when he can assemble pictures and other teaching aids, prepare or select practice materials suitable to his group and consult manuals, curriculum guides, and other professional materials.

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herding practices, to hand crafts, and to Afghan history and literature. The emphasis is on developing an understanding of and pride in the Afghan cultural heritage.

As rapidly as possible facilities for secondary education for men and women will be increased and improved. Foreign teachers are being gradually replaced with qualified Afghans. Agricultural and technological high schools are being opened and, recently, a faculty of agriculture and technology has been established in the University of Kabul. As in most countries the Ministry of Education faces the problem of making vocational education respectable and having it accepted as a desirable alternative to a purely academic course of study.

More and more attention is being directed toward providing higher education at home. An impressive University Center is being developed. Formerly the University of Kabul consisted of five faculties—literature, science, law, medicine, and religion—located in separate parts of the city and held together in a loosely organized fashion by a University Council of chancellor and deans.

Recent developments show a strengthened administration. The addition of the faculty of technology and the faculty of education will greatly improve the University's service to the country.

In carrying out this ambitious plan Afghanistan faces a number of problems. Financial resources are limited and will offer obstacles to rapid expansion. Obtaining an adequate number of teachers qualified to bring about the necessary curriculum changes is probably the most serious problem. For many years a single teacher preparing institution of secondary school level located in Kabul has supplied most of the teachers for the primary schools and the seventh and eighth grades and occasionally for higher grades of the secondary schools. The faculties of literature and science of the University have supplied most teachers for secondary schools from their limited number of graduates. Work is under way at the present time to establish two other teacher preparing institutions. These will also be on the secondary school level. The new Institute of Education of the University will in addition to preparing teachers assist in the in-service education of teachers already employed in the schools.

The Ministry of Education faces an additional problem of attracting able people to the teaching profession. Afghan teachers are poorly paid. The average teacher makes the equivalent of 12 to 15 American dollars a month. Most teachers must work at several jobs in order to live. Teaching in Afghanistan does not carry with it unusual social prestige as compensation for the low rate of pay. In spite of this condition, however, one finds throughout Afghanistan dedicated teachers who work long hours and who continually seek to find ways to improve their teaching.

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