EDUCATION IN PRE-COLONIAL AND COLONIAL TIMES

Education has a long tradition in Myanmar, closely linked to its Buddhist heritage. In the area of present-day Myanmar – and its earlier predecessors – education has been established since at least the 11th century (Furnivall 1943, Cheesman 2003: 48). Prior to the establishment of a centrally administered national education system in the mid-19th century by the British colonial government of Burma, a traditional education system run by the Buddhist monks was thus already in existence. In the 19th century the literacy rate seems to have been comparable to that of Europe, and possibly even higher (Hillman 1946: 527); figures indicate that in 1886 the literacy rate was 85% (Ministry of Education 2009, cited by Gärtner 2011b: 7). A considerable proportion of children, far more boys than girls, received instruction in reading, writing and recitation in Buddhist monastic schools, where they were also fed and put to work. The importance of the monastic schools extended far beyond the provision of education: ‘This system ensured widespread literacy, mitigated class distinctions by bringing rich and poor together and opened even to the poorest prospects of advancement to the highest posts. Although its primary function was to perpetuate among successive generations the principles of Buddhism, it was one cause for the stability and permanence of Burmese civilization’ (Furnivall 1957: (h), cited by Gärtner 2011b: 2).

Under colonial rule, an education system on the British model was established in parallel to the traditional system; from 1890 onwards the Education Department sought to ensure universal schooling (Cheesman 2003: 52/53). In creating a local educational elite the main aim was to provide trained administration officials for British services; the system also resulted in a deliberate indigenisation of the administration by giving children of collaborating village headmen preferential access to the schools (Hillman 1946, Tin Cung 2011: 88/89). The founding of the first missionary schools in Mawlamyine, Yangon and Mandalay – by such denominations as the Lasallian Christian Brothers, the Methodists and the Anglicans – marked the emergence of higher education provision for the new elites, mainly in the cities. Education policy was also applied as an instrument of colonialism in the country’s mountainous and peripheral regions with a view to converting people from their former beliefs to Christianity. The establishment of a health system and targeted regional development measures were tied in with this endeavour. The level of educational provision and opportunity improved for girls specifically (Chie Ikeya 2008).

The foundations of the higher education system were also laid during the British period. Rangoon College was founded in 1878; between 1904 and 1920 it was known as Government College and affiliated to the University of Calcutta (Hillman 1946: 530). As a result of the Rangoon University Act of 1920, Rangoon University was formed from the merger of Rangoon College and Judson College; it eventually combined six colleges.

After the end of the Japanese occupation, during which schools and universities were repeatedly closed and re-opened but eventually forced to a standstill (Hillman 1946: 532), the British government re-established the education system in 1945 under the newly founded Ministry of Education. After independence efforts focused on facilitating access to education for all sections of the population – an endeavour that in the face of significant financial...