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...
difficulties and political unrest was ultimately unsuccessful, especially in the peripheral regions. The Welfare State New Educational Plan of 1953 attempted to bring the school system under central control, but the private schools – including the mission schools – remained independent. In 1958 Mandalay Intermediate College was promoted to university status.

Following the coup d’état by General Ne Win in 1962, the education system was nationalised, the missionary schools closed, and English banned as a language of instruction. ‘The Burmese Way to Socialism’, which had ultimately arisen from an anti-colonial stance, resulted in the state taking control of the education system. In 1964 numerous departments – including economics and medicine – were split off from the universities and became separate institutions. In 1970 some private schools, catering mainly for the well-off, were permitted to re-open (Gärtner 2011b: 5).

Nationwide resistance against the government and the mismanagement and under-provision for which it was responsible, its disregard of election results and its crushing of the protest movement (which had been strongly supported by students) led between 1988 and the early years of the 21st century to a temporary closure or in some cases ‘resting’ of the universities and relocation of the institutions to the urban peripheries. During this period teaching was often limited to short courses. The students were subsequently taught on new, predominantly smaller campuses outside the cities until they obtained their degree. The universities of Yangon and Mandalay took only post-graduate students. Between 1993 and 2004 the Universities of Culture in Yangon and Mandalay, the Theravada Buddhist Missionary University in Yangon, the Myanmar Maritime University in Thilawa and the Myanmar Aerospace Engineering University in Meiktila were newly established. From 1994 onwards the universities of Yangon and Mandalay were allowed to train PhD students; this authorization to hold examinations was later extended to a small number of other institutions, including the Yangon Institute of Economics and the Maritime University.

THE CURRENT EDUCATION SYSTEM

Today there is a system of national mandatory education under the 30-Year Long-Term Education Development Plan, which was implemented in 2001/02. The system requires pupils aged between six and sixteen to complete eleven years of schooling, consisting of five years of primary schooling (one year of kindergarten followed by four years of elementary school), four years of middle school and two years of high school leading to a school-leaving examination to qualify for university attendance from age 16 upward. In 2014/15, 187,327 primary, 69,212 middle and 28,817 high school teachers were teaching in 36,410 primary, 4,860 middle and 3,134 high schools. 5,166,317 pupils were being taught in primary, 2,542,830 in middle and 730,866 in high schools (MNPED 2015: 104).

To this day, monastic education plays a major role in providing schooling, mainly for children from underprivileged social groups and in remote and sparsely populated regions (Cheesman 2003, Lorch 2007 and 2008, Pyi Phyo Kyaw 2015, Lall 2016). Officially 12,111 novices and 5,571 nuns together with 115,658 boys and 85,767 girls were being taught at primary school level in the country’s monastic schools; the number of primary schools was put at 972, of which 208 – the majority – were in the Mandalay Region, 134 in the Yangon Region and 121 in the Ayeyarwady Region. Middle schools – a total of 557 nationwide – were attended by 10,458 novices, 5,844 nuns, 29,879 boys and 23,454 girls. Myanmar also has two monastic high schools, both in the Mandalay Region, attended by 3,455 boys and 2,025 girls (all figures: 2014/15; MNPED 2015: 113/114). Monastic education is needed because although attending a public school is free of charge in principle, school uniforms, books and other materials still have to be purchased. This poses a problem for many parents in rural regions specifically. The values of education, knowledge and reason are highly prized in Buddhism, and consequently, the population in general – often not just parents and grandparents but also the extended family and the village community – will concentrate all disci-