

LITERACY IN TAJIKISTAN: CHALLENGING UNESCO'S HIGH  
LITERACY RATES FOR TAJIKISTAN

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A Thesis  
Presented  
to the Faculty of  
California State University, Chico

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of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
in  
Teaching International Languages

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by  
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Fall 2009

LITERACY IN TAJIKISTAN: CHALLENGING UNESCO'S HIGH  
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A Thesis

by

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Fall 2009

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## DEDICATION

*To all people who have the right to, but no opportunity  
for an education.*



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## ABSTRACT

### LITERACY IN TAJIKISTAN: CHALLENGING UNESCO'S HIGH LITERACY RATES FOR TAJIKISTAN

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Research has shown that the literacy rate in Tajikistan has been going up since 2002, following the stabilization of conflict that continued after the end of the civil war in 1997. The current state of education in Tajikistan is dire, and educational resources are scarce. The International Crisis Group's report contends that Tajikistan is a potential "failed state," which contrasts sharply with a literacy rate of 99.6% reported by UNESCO and the government of Tajikistan. This research will investigate why the high literacy rates claimed by the government of Tajikistan cannot be accurate. Specifically, this study will challenge the unreliability of the figures published by UNESCO, which are based on government statistics. There are political, economic, social, and cultural factors that hinder the development of literacy in Tajikistan. This paper urges both the international community and citizens of Tajikistan to make efforts towards

maintaining the high literacy rates enjoyed during Soviet times, and not to wait until the outcomes are irreversible. Tajikistan is already 10-15 years behind in achieving literacy targets due to civil war and its aftermath. Literacy rates need to be improved from existing levels, rather than continuing to drop.

## CHAPTER I

### THE PROPOSED STUDY

#### Introduction

Events of the 1990s have brought new and significant challenges to the world. Prior to 1990, there were 159 member states in the United Nations; today 192 countries enjoy UN membership. The fall of the Iron Curtain has added even more countries to the list of developing nations in the world. The fifteen former Soviet republics, though similar to other developing countries in some ways (e.g., economic instability), have been termed “countries of transitional economies” because they have historically enjoyed high literacy rates, political and cultural stability, and economic growth under Soviet control. Though these newly independent countries have been termed transitional economies, not all have experienced smooth transitions. Some have faced a dramatic drop in economic growth, and even economic contraction; others have faced territorial conflicts with neighboring countries; yet others encountered internal power struggles that lead to civil war. In Tajikistan, power struggle between communist and Islamic fundamentalist factions led to five full years of war and chaos.

The civil war in Tajikistan caused severe setbacks and challenges for all economic, political, and societal sectors in Tajikistan. In addition to the shock that people experienced with the collapse of the political and socio-economic infrastructure that the Soviet Union provided, civil war forced people to fight even for a piece of bread in the

cities, and to starve in rural areas. It is estimated that the civil war took from 60,000 to 120,000 innocent lives; many more fled the country, leaving behind homes and families.

Today, Tajikistan is in the process of recovery. It is a sovereign country with an independent government recognized by the UN and countries around the world. Tajikistan's government is making an effort to show the world rapid progress from a state of social and economic decline into a progressive state with growing social justice and economic prosperity. However, the five-year civil war inflicted lasting damage to people's lives and mentality. In the aftermath of civil war, people are trying to recuperate, and still heavily reliant on, and unquestioning of, centralized governmental authority. Just like the Soviet times, people are hoping that somebody will emerge and save the country from the turmoil of the past twenty years.

As already mentioned, every sector in Tajikistan was hit by civil war. Although some are on a path to recovery, social sectors such as education and health seem to be deteriorating day by day, still far from recovery after cuts in the centralized funding and intellectual support they used to receive from Moscow in Soviet times. During the civil war, teachers and other intellectuals either fled the country or became Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), moving to the capital, Dushanbe, which was still under government control. Schools in rural areas turned into military bases and weapons dumps. Schoolboys and girls rarely attended school, fearing recruitment by militants, or being kidnapped for ransom or forced marriage.

### Problem

The problem of illiteracy is a global problem. It is especially critical for countries like Tajikistan where historically high literacy rates have fallen into decline. It seems intuitive that maintaining a high literacy rate should be an easier task than starting from scratch, as is the case in some African countries. UNESCO currently reports a high literacy rate for Tajikistan, based on figures provided by the Tajik government. However, figures from the Tajik government are unreliable. By providing inflated figures, the Tajik government hopes to demonstrate to the international community good governance and effective education policies, thus ensuring the continued flow of international aid money that it depends on.

### Position

The rich history of Tajikistan, where culture and education prospered under the Persian Empire and suffered turmoil through invading waves of Arabs, Turks and Mongols, highlights the importance of education in the lives of Tajik people. It went through dark ages at the time when Islam was introduced, but Tajikistan awakened again when Samanids came to power in the ninth century. The Soviet Union also played an important role in increasing the literacy rates in Tajikistan. The Tajik people were willing to embrace the opportunity for an improved system of education, even though it came through foreign domination. Just across the Pyanj River in Afghanistan, the story was quite different. The Afghan people rejected Soviet education and actively resisted it. The results are apparent in Afghanistan today, where education is poor and literacy rates are low.

The central position of this study is that Tajikistan does not have and cannot have the high literacy rate claimed the by Tajik government due to three primary reasons: sad legacies of civil war, corrupt and ineffective government, and a return of fundamentalist Islam in the country.

### Goals

The goal of this study is to examine existing problems in the education system of Tajikistan that hinder high literacy achievement rates, and to increase awareness in the international community about these problems. This study examines the current state of education in Tajikistan, and critiques international acceptance of government methods and explanations. It benefits the Tajik and international community's decision makers and policy makers in redefining their goals for funding literacy campaigns. It is especially important to international governmental organizations and people of Tajikistan in making the government of Tajikistan accountable before its people and the international community.

### Purpose

The purpose of this study is to investigate the accuracy of the high literacy rates reported by the government of Tajikistan and demonstrate why the data cannot be accurate, given current economic, political, social and educational realities. Specifically, this study will challenge the figures published by UNESCO as unreliable and examine factors that account for inflated literacy rates.

## Procedures

This descriptive study examines why Tajikistan cannot have the literacy rates reported at this time. It describes the historical development of Tajikistan as a country, its educational development during different reigns and invasions, and the current socio-economic condition of the Tajik people.

Scott (1990) states that

documentary sources of information, of all kinds, figure centrally in the research of sociologists. Official statistics on crime, income distribution, health and illness, censuses of population, newspaper reports, diaries, reference books, government publications, and similar sources are the basis of much social research by academics and their students. (p. ix)

In today's technological era, official documents of government, international, and non-government organizations are available on the Internet. Most media outlets post their findings and reports online as well. This research draws on a variety of different types of official documentation. These include newspaper articles from the websites of different newspapers as well as email correspondent with experts on literacy issues in Tajikistan.

This study reviews literacy and educational development in Tajikistan. The actual procedures for this study are as follows:

1. A literature review of the Persian Empire, formation of Tajikistan as a country, and the educational development of Tajikistan was undertaken. This literature involves extensive research by ethnographers and anthropologists, resources such as books and periodicals from the library, and articles on the Internet.
2. A literature review of world literacy rates was carried out. Official documents from international organizations, accounts and reports were obtained from different

Internet sources, such as the online libraries of UNESCO, Library of Congress, World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and various non-governmental organizations.

3. Unofficial interviews were conducted via email with experts on literacy and education in Tajikistan.

4. Information solely focused on Tajikistan literacy rates and educational development was obtained from online resources, newspaper articles and other media reports. Some of the resources and information that were unavailable online or in local libraries were requested by email from contacts in Tajikistan.

#### Parameters

#### Limitations

This study is limited specifically to the state of literacy and education in Tajikistan, and only investigates why Tajikistan cannot claim such high literacy rates. Obtaining any sort of reliable information is a problem in Tajikistan. The 2003 Millennium Development Goals report highlighted insufficiencies in education statistics and inconsistencies in statistics for other socio-economic sectors. The World Bank observed that the “government’s generally poor statistics and weak monitoring capability makes tracking and evaluating World Bank group activities difficult” (Briller, 2007, p. 3). Even different international government organizations report conflicting data. For example, “the World Bank reported educational expenditures as 3.45 percent of country’s GDP, USAID – as 2.7 percent, and Asian Development Bank as 2.9 percent” (Briller, 2007, p. 3).

## Scope

This study is specific to Tajikistan, but other countries around Central Asia have similar problems with the decline of literacy and the educational system. The shock caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union has affected all countries in the post Soviet territory, particularly the sudden cut in centralized funding to all former Soviet republics. Even though Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have not experienced civil war, political and economic instability has plagued these countries as well. The majority of people in these countries are Muslim, and fundamentalist Islam has returned to these countries as well. Therefore, I hope that lessons learned from this study may help prevent or eradicate the risk of illiteracy problems in these countries as well.

## Problems Hindering Educational Development and Causing Illiteracy

The success of literacy programs in Soviet Tajikistan was mainly due to a strictly imposed education system. Although early Soviet programs such as “Down with Illiteracy” in the 1920s had been somewhat successful in Tajikistan, it wasn’t until the 1970s that the literacy rate in Tajikistan and other Central Asian countries increased to almost 100 percent. Some of the problems that Soviet Tajikistan faced during the 1920s and overcame in 1970s are very similar to those that Tajikistan now faces since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The dissolution of the Soviet Union plus a five-year civil war created challenges. Despite government claims that literacy rates remain high, ample evidence exists that Tajikistan has been unable to maintain high literacy rates during almost twenty years of independence. The following are just a few examples of socio-

economic challenges that hinder educational development and the preservation of high literacy rates in Tajikistan:

1. There is lack of teachers in rural areas and insufficient number of teachers in urban areas.
2. There is little appreciation, understanding, or desire for quality education among Tajik people in rural areas.
3. Although universal education is free, unofficial “fees” make it unaffordable for families to send their children to school.
4. There is lack of educational facilities that meet basic safety standards.
5. There is no organized plan for halting growing illiteracy rates.
6. Crumbling transport infrastructure in rural areas since the collapse of the Soviet Union reduces access to education.
7. There are transportation and fuel shortages.
8. The status of teaching as a profession has decreased drastically. Being a teacher does not provide as high a status in society as it once did.
9. There is lack of interest in the teaching profession due to low salaries.
10. There is a growing religious belief that the ability to read and write anything other than the Quran is corruptive and unnecessary.
11. There is a growing need for families to keep young people at home or send them to work due to high unemployment among parents.
12. A religious belief, that educating women is unnecessary and corruptive, is being revived in rural areas.

13. There is a lack of government accountability to its own people and the international community. Corrupt officials siphon off international aid intended for educational development.

14. Children as young as 13-17 migrate to Russia and other Central Asian countries to find jobs.

15. The socio-economic gap between rich and poor is widening, blocking access to education by the poor.

16. Libraries in rural areas have been demolished, and books are used for fuel.

17. Ethnic and linguistic diversity in Tajikistan makes it difficult for the government to establish a centralized curriculum in Tajik, the official national language.

### Summary

The government of Tajikistan claims a high literacy rate among its citizens. This study attempts to reveal existing problems in the educational system of Tajikistan that make such high literacy rates impossible.

To better understand the possible causes of illiteracy in Tajikistan, definitions and the history of illiteracy in the world are outlined in Chapter II. This background will lay the foundation for explaining and examining illiteracy and educational problems in Tajikistan. The problems outlined in Chapter I are discussed in great detail in Chapter IV: Tajikistan's Literacy and Educational Challenges.

## CHAPTER II

### WORLD LITERACY/LITERATURE

#### REVIEW

This chapter summarizes the history of illiteracy in the world. It examines the definitions of literacy used by various researchers, and the impact of literacy on the political, economic, social and cultural development of various countries. The focus is on various programs that have been initiated by international organizations such as the United Nations and by governments of industrialized and developing countries to eradicate illiteracy around the world.

#### Literacy

“Worldwide, nearly a billion adults, at least 600 million of whom are women, are illiterate. Over 70 percent of them live in developing countries” (Chelbowka, 1990, preface, p. 17). Before delving into the problems of illiteracy around the world, it is important to define the term “literacy” or what constitutes a “literate person.” Many researchers have written extensively on the definition of literacy. Likewise, many international organizations concerned with the eradication of illiteracy (e.g. the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, commonly referred to as UNESCO), have attempted to establish a universally acceptable definition for more practical purposes. In the aftermath of World War II and the industrial boom that

followed, many more countries felt the need for a literate population. If literacy was primarily used for personal enjoyment prior to the World War II, after the war literacy was a necessity for natural development. Thus, the definitions of literacy have changed over the time.

Traditional dictionaries define an illiterate person as someone who is unable to read and write. UNESCO (1957) initially suggested the following definition of a literate person:

[A]n individual is literate when he [she] has acquired the essential knowledge and skills which enable him to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in his group and community, and whose attainments in reading, and writing, make it possible for him to continue to use these skills. (p. 20)

Later, a calculation component was added to the UNESCO definition of literacy. A literate person should be able to calculate using basic math along with reading and writing skills. A literate person is considered also to be one who is continuing to apply his skills after the initial learning has taken place and immediate supervision is no longer available.

Miller (1973) came up with three levels of literacy: basic literacy, comprehension, and functional or practical literacy. According to Miller (1973):

- Basic literacy means the ability to use corresponding visual shapes and spoken sounds in order to decode written materials and to translate them into oral language.
- Comprehension means the ability to understand the meaning of verbal materials.
- Functional or practical literacy means the ability to read (decode and comprehend) materials needed to perform every day vocational tasks. (p. 3)

According to W.S. Gray (UNESCO, 1956) “a person is functionally literate when he has acquired the knowledge and skills in reading and writing which enable him to engage effectively in all those activities in which literacy is normally assumed in his

culture or group” (p. 24). Similarly, Sticht (1975) defines functional literacy as the possession of those literacy skills needed to successfully perform some reading tasks imposed by an external agent between the reader and a goal the reader wishes to obtain (p. 4). Jeffries (1967) takes into account the scarce resources and the enormous extent of the illiteracy problem around the world. It is reasonable to concentrate on teaching functional literacy to those who need it in order to fulfill their place in the community, rather than to disperse efforts teaching minimum literacy to people who can continue to get on without it.

A more realistic definition evolved in relation to functional literacy during the 1950s Adult Education conference in Zaria, Nigeria:

A useful standard of literacy implies that the pupil can make use of what he [she] has learned without further help from the instructor....(The test involves) Reading. Reading with understanding a passage in the vernacular. The passage set should be self-contained, so that it conveys a complete meaning. The subject matter of the passage should be within the understanding and experience of the candidate. The language used should be in the idiom familiar to the candidate.....Writing. Writing a letter to a specific person containing specific information. The letter must be framed in the customary form.... (as cited in Clammer, 1976, p. 6)

The point of reading and writing is to make communication possible (Jeffries, 1967). Communication is a two-way process. A person who can only read or write cannot be considered literate, just as a person who can only sign his/her name or recognize his/her name in print would not be considered literate. Considering the importance of writing over the past 5000 years and the profound effect it has on the lives of each and all, surprisingly little attention has been given to its importance.

Over time, new definitions and views of literacy evolved. UNESCO, for example, developed the following definitions throughout its work on global literacy campaigns:

1958 - A person is literate who can, with understanding, both read and write a short simple statement on his or her everyday life.

1978 - A person is functionally literate who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his or her group and community and also for enabling him or her to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his or her own and the community's development.

2003 - Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve his or her goals, develop his or her knowledge and potential, and participate fully in community and wider society (set in 2003 and published in UNESCO, 2005).

2004 - The notion of "plurality of literacy" was advanced to stress the social dimensions of literacy in relation to both acquisition and application. Therefore, literacy is seen as comprising diverse practices embedded in socioeconomic, political, cultural and linguistic contexts, acquired in school and outside of school. It also involves family and community contexts; the media in various forms of technology; skills for further learning; and the world of work and life in general. Thus, this concept of literacy emphasizes the literacy challenge as making societies literate and not simply as making individuals literate (UNESCO, 2009a, p. 13).

The world today is witnessing a major shift in a new global literacy environment. Traditionally literacy that means only reading and writing skills may be pertinent to some countries. Rapid technological advances and development force us to look at literacy from different perspectives and dimensions. A business manager may lament the lack of a literate work force, while the politician may be concerned with eradicating illiteracy; school teachers may link illiteracy with reading, thinking and writing-related difficulties; media activists will urge that the understanding of literacy be widened to include not only print, books, newspapers, labels and maps, but also visual and audio texts from the Internet, television, radio, films and multimedia; and the radical

educator will attempt to link literacy with attempts to empower and liberate the people (Pandian, 2001). Some developing countries that have been illiterate for centuries are now changing their attitudes towards traditional literacy and moving forward with rapid technological advances to respond to broad social, economic and technological changes. Malaysia, for instance, is moving from being a developing country to a “knowledgeable society” that responds to the global technological environment. The intent of this research paper is to attract the attention of decision makers and policy makers in Tajikistan and to encourage them to respond to social, economic and technological changes and not let a society that enjoyed literacy fall into decline.

## World Literacy

### The Beginning

Although the development of the modern alphabet traces back to the Semitic language, Semitic societies were not as literate as the Greek. The spread of written language and literacy is due to the Greeks, who adopted an alphabet that led to a literate society. Historians believe that most citizens of Athens were literate. Apparently, even uneducated people could read.

Rome inherited the tradition of literacy from the Greeks and disseminated it throughout the west. Romans believed that building schools and providing education to all was fair. This does not mean that education became universal, but it did mean that elementary education was available for those who could not afford it (Cipolla, 1969). However, with the fall of the Roman Empire and the invasion of Germans, who had neither a tradition of literary education nor sympathy for it, literacy reached drastically

low levels. Ignorance increased as a consequence of political turmoil and disorganization. The church was the only organized body that could save literacy from complete annihilation (p. 39). As a consequence, the religious clerks in the west were the only people to possess literacy. With the rise and fall of different empires and civilizations over time, the progress of literacy was not linear in Europe. The seventeenth century witnessed the scientific revolution, but literacy and basic education did not flourish. The invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century did not lead to mainstream literacy.

The main credit for the earliest efforts to develop literacy goes to the Christian churches. Some Christians, particularly Christians, broke away from obedience to the Pope in Rome in the sixteenth century. The leaders of these reformation movements took steps to have the Bible translated into the languages spoken by the people in England and Wales in the eighteenth century. The churches founded Sunday schools to help the general population of the country to read. Due to such Protestants efforts, these countries reached a high degree of literacy at a comparatively early date.

This model was replicated overseas. Missionaries traveled abroad to “educate” foreigners. For example, when the pioneer British missionary, William Gary, traversed India in the eighteenth century, one of his first preoccupations was to translate the Bible into local language and teach people to read it. Throughout India, China, Africa and Pacific, it was Protestants, who laid the foundation of education and literacy. The motive was to encourage reading of the Bible and conversions to Christianity. Laubach (as cited by Jeffries, 1967) said “For churches the first great motive in teaching illiterates is to enable them to read the Bible. Literacy and Bible translation are twins.” (p. 32)

Despite the efforts of missionaries to educate people overseas, little advancement was made in the growth of literacy in Asia and Africa. It was not until after World War II that those governments of industrialized countries initiated literacy movements and embraced literacy as a public service in the interest of social development the world over.

The revolution in world politics immediately after World War II caused profound changes in the attitudes of people and nations. Many colonized countries around the world achieved national independence. If some countries in the third world enjoyed limited education during colonial periods, they were now deprived of even those gains. For example, India that went through turmoil of separation after it gained independence from Britain. While some countries made efforts to stand on their feet, some others were torn apart by civil wars. The illiteracy rate in third world countries was unimaginable. It was a worrisome factor to international relations, stability and peace in the world. Related to this, Jeffries (1967) says:

So long as the gap between the privileged minority and the underprivileged majority persisted and widened, there could be no stable world order. The time must come when the gap would no longer be tolerated. It would be closed either by rising the less privileged to a higher standard of living or by dragging the privileged down to the level of the rest. (p. 76)

Literacy rates, even in some industrialized countries, could be improved. For example, in the U.S., even after a massive campaign to eradicate illiteracy in 1969, the results of a study carried out by Sticht in 1975, showed that some 13% of American adults had an error rate of at least 10% in filling out application forms for a Social Security Number, a personal bank form, public assistance or a driving license, while 3%

had an error rate of more than 30%. In an address before the Annual Convention, the former U.S. Commissioner of Education, James E. Allen remarked:

Imagine, if you can, what your life would be like if you could not read, or if your reading skill were so meager as to limit you to the simplest of writings, and if for you the door to the whole world of knowledge and inspiration available through the printed word had never opened. For more than a quarter of our population this is true. For them education, in a very important way, has been a failure, and they stand as a reproach to all of us who hold in our hands the shaping of the opportunity for education. These individuals have been denied a right – a right as fundamental as the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness – the right to read. (Allen, 1969, p. 95)

### Successful Literacy Campaigns in the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century

The 20<sup>th</sup> century was marked with successes in eradicating illiteracy primarily because demand for literate people increased after World War II. Most of the successful countries mentioned below engaged in eradicating illiteracy in rural areas. These countries had had illiterate populations for centuries. Education was accessible to only upper class and rich people. The division between rich and poor was visible and unavoidable. Only by reaching out to people in rural areas could these countries attain high literacy rates. A prominent example is the Soviet Union, which started literacy campaigns from villages and rural areas.

#### Japan

The country that can claim the earliest success in fighting illiteracy is Japan. Until the middle of the nineteenth century, Japan heavily relied on China as a cultural medium. The Japanese alphabet used many Chinese characters and was inaccessible to ordinary Japanese. In 1853, Japan quickly responded to the Western offer of knowledge, techniques, and experience. Compulsory education was introduced in 1872, and by 1900,

illiteracy virtually disappeared (Jeffries, 1967). Today Japan enjoys a literacy rate of 99 percent for adults 15 years old and older (Central Intelligence Agency, n.d.).

### Turkey

Similar to Central Asia and the Caucasus, Turkey had an Arabic script and a literacy rate as low as 10 percent in 1923, when Mustafa Kemal took over leadership of what had been a monarchical state. He introduced a complete reorganization of the language system and education. In 1928, the Arabic script was replaced with the Roman alphabet. Textbooks in Arabic were replaced by new ones, and everyone between the ages of sixteen and forty was required to become literate. The government introduced free and compulsory education. The president himself did not shy away from teaching in village schools, attracting thousands of volunteers to help the initiative. After seven years of an intensive literacy campaign, the adult illiteracy rate dropped from 90 percent to 80 percent. By 1950, it dropped to 68 percent of the population, and by 1960, the percentages for males and females over the age of ten were 43 and 75 respectively (Jeffries, 1967). In 2007, UNESCO estimated literacy at 88.7% for Turkish adults 15+ years old, and 96.4% for youth 15 to 24 years old (UNESCO, 2007)

### India

In the 1930s, India had 325 million illiterates – one third of the illiterate population in the world at the time. Throughout the decades that followed, the illiteracy rate in India slowly declined. According to the India Census Commissioner, in 1901, 93.5% of the population was illiterate, whereas in 1931, it was estimated at 90.4% (UNESCO, 1957), and fell even lower in the 1950s. One important consideration is that the India went through some territorial divisions during the late 1940s, and, therefore, it

is impossible to directly compare the census figures of the 1950s with previous data. The slow decline in illiteracy was due to reductions in the number of adult illiterates in India. In his report Laubach (as cited in Jeffries, 1967) claims that “[t]he idea of teaching adults to read after they had passed out of school age was not given serious consideration in India until this century” (p. 41). Another important factor is the linguistic diversity and complexity of India, which makes it hardly comparable to any other country. The only possible comparison is to the linguistic and social diversity of the then Soviet Union, which had approximately seventy different languages. However, according to Jeffries (1967):

India lacked two keys to success which the Soviets possessed: an authoritarian central government determined to give literacy the necessary priority and to use its powers, if need be, to make learning compulsory; and a national spirit dedicated to a militant justification of its independence and fed by an ideological doctrine passionately believed and insistently proclaimed. (p. 41)

In 1938, the Congress Party took power in India and made the teaching of literacy a primary policy goal. The slogan of the campaign was “Each one teach one” inviting anybody who could read and write to teach at least one illiterate how to read and write. The campaign was enormous across the country. In Bihar Province, for instance, between May 1938 and June 1939, over 700,000 people were taught to read. As a result, illiteracy rates fell significantly.

### Iran

The people of Iran have also experienced turmoil throughout their history. Iranians pay close attention to the educating of their children. In Chapter III, there is a detailed discussion of the social and educational development of Persia, which is present day Iran. With the conquest of Persia by the Arabs, Iran adopted Islam as the state

religion. Although some attempts were made by Arabs to destroy Iranian culture, eventually Arabs embraced Iranian education and art. It is worth mentioning that Mohammed, being illiterate himself, hired Persian writers to write the Quran. Much attention was paid to Islamic teaching, and Islamic philosophy began to emerge. Scholars of that time believed that education was necessary for everyone. However, Islam became powerful, and Iranians lost touch with their pre-Islamic culture. Young people's minds were shaped by more authoritarian mindsets, resulting in higher illiteracy rates in Iran.

Education has remained "noble" throughout Iranian history. It was accessible to the upper class elite, who occasionally received an education in Europe. With the appearance of court minister Mirza Taqikan-Amir Kahber on the Iranian political scene, the government acquired new dimensions (Katouzi, 1978). Mirza introduced many new western ideas to the political system in the middle of nineteenth century. Influenced by western education and philosophy, he established the first westernized school in 1849. The school had all European teachers and focused on military training, engineering, medicine, pharmacy, mining, natural sciences, mathematics, history, geography, and French as a foreign language. Before the school was established, groups of students were selected to study in France. These students brought back French education, which served as the foundation of an education system in Iran.

Despite efforts to introduce western education in Iran and make it available to all, education still remained open only to the upper classes. Iranians in rural areas, constituting the majority of the population, were deprived of not only education, but also basic necessities. Education began to improve during the reign of Reza Shah (1925-1941), who dedicated himself to the concept of westernization and sought to put

education at the top of national priorities. He found education in a miserable state: The government budget for education was limited, the curriculum was under the influence of local clergies, teacher salaries were paid late, and education for girls was unheard of. Reza Shah corrected many of these problems, but despite significant strides in the education system, there were still major obstacles that interfered with his goals: A lack of qualified teachers, elitism, and the old teaching methods emphasizing memorization rather than critical thinking and learning.

The son of Reza Shah, who is known to Iranians as Shahan Shah of Iran, inherited the throne in 1941. His goal was to eradicate illiteracy from all segments of Iranian society and develop the country into a modern dynamic society. In the aftermath of the World War II, the demand for elementary education became so great that the Ministry of Education encouraged the establishment of private schools. Iranian government started cooperating with the American government (the branch currently known as USAID) to train teachers, revise curricula, provide better educational facilities and reach people in rural areas. In addition to these efforts, Shahan Shah passed a law in 1962 that formed a literacy corps to combat illiteracy in Iran's villages and rural areas. Social services for women were established, and the army was mobilized for the literacy corps mentioned above. This campaign not only involved the army and education sector, it also mobilized resources from the Ministries of the Interior, Health, Agriculture, Justice, and the Department of Community Development in planning and revising the curriculum. More schools were built, hygiene facilities provided, scout groups formed, roads built and textbooks printed and collected for school libraries. The literacy corps received the Krupskaya award in 1972 for its achievements. The award is named after

Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin's wife and a Soviet educator, who played a prominent role in eradicating illiteracy in the Soviet Union. Iran's literacy rate doubled from 33.4% in 1963 (when the law was passed to eradicate illiteracy) to 62.5% in 1977 (Katouzi, 1978), just before the Islamic Revolution.

### Soviet Union

The experience of the Soviet Union in eliminating illiteracy was extraordinary. Compared to any other country throughout history, the Soviet Union achieved literacy rates that no other country had at that time in the field of education and literacy. The Soviet Union responded to the issue of illiteracy immediately after the Bolshevik Revolution. It showed tremendous achievements in eradicating illiteracy across republics. This success was noted by John Dewey, American philosopher and educator, who published an appreciative account of experimental Soviet education in 1929.

In the early years after the 1917 revolution, only a quarter of all Russians could read and write. Among the Russian peasantry, 93 percent were illiterate. To rectify this, Lenin signed a decree in 1919 announcing that all Soviet citizens aged eight to fifty years old who could not read or write were obliged to learn to do so. The official campaign started in 1923, with the slogan "Down with Illiteracy." This campaign was so intense and all encompassing that people learned everywhere: in clubs, offices, schools, and in the outdoors. Even for the army, literacy became compulsory.

In the Soviet republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus, literacy rates had been as low as four percent for men and one percent for women. There were two major obstacles that prevented the immediate eradication of illiteracy. The first issue related to

languages. Some seventy languages were spoken in the Soviet Union, and the Central Asian and Caucasus regions were the most linguistically diverse. To improve literacy rates, there was a need for a standardized writing system. In many republics, local scripts were replaced first by Latin and later by Cyrillic script. Once the language writing systems were standardized, special departments and publishing houses were established to produce textbooks and other literature in the various native languages.

The second major obstacle that hindered the eradication of illiteracy in these regions was Islamic leaders' resistance to Soviet education and social change. The conflict with religious clergy, especially in rural areas of Central Asia and the Caucasus, was frequently bloody. At least in theory, Islam requires its followers to seek knowledge. However, the interpretation of "seeking knowledge" by imams and mullahs (Islamic priests and clerks who are able to read the Quran in Arabic) is that studying anything other than the Quran is corruptive to the mind. A Muslim should seek knowledge in the Quran only. As a result, Islamic forces resisted the Bolshevik introduction of new forms of learning, burning schools and killing teachers. At different times in Soviet history throughout the republics, anti-religious indoctrination campaigns were launched through media and schools to establish "scientific atheism" and to attain high literacy rates.

Despite the obstacles and hardships, considerable progress was made towards the eradication of illiteracy in the Soviet Union. The 1939 census in Russia showed a literacy rate of 81.2% for people aged nine and above, and 89.1% for people between nine and 49 (Brickman & Zepper, 1992). In Central Asia and the Caucasus during "late 1930s, the Soviet government began to expand the network of state-run schools despite the strong public opposition to this change by Islamic leaders" (Federal Division of the

Library of Congress Country Study Series, 1996). As a result, literacy rates increased as well. For example, according to the 1939 census, in Azerbaijan, literacy rates reached 82.8% overall, or 88.8% for men and 76.1% for women (Avakov & Atakishiev, 1984). It was a tremendous achievement. The republics were expecting to eliminate illiteracy completely, but the turmoil of World War II postponed attainment of this ultimate achievement.

### Literacy Today

In some countries, successful literacy campaigns of the 20th century did not eradicate illiteracy completely. The achievement of high literacy rates in the Soviet Union, for example, was derailed when the Soviet Union collapsed in December, 1991. The end of centralized educational policies and the end of funding from Moscow left many republics without any hope of maintaining such high literacy rates, let alone further advancing literacy, for example in science or technology. Iran's steady progress towards high literacy was slowed by the Islamic Revolution, and the literacy achievements of India and China faded with the high birth rates in those countries.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, known as UNESCO, was the first international organization after the World War II to take on illiteracy as a global problem. The principal function of UNESCO is to "act as a central agency, at the service of all, for inspiring, planning and coordinating action, for pooling information and experience, for conducting and if necessary subsidizing research and experiment, and for providing member governments with facts, figures, expert advice, technical help and its general good offices, in order that national programs may be wisely

prepared and efficiently conducted” (Jeffries, 1967, p. 70). Annual conferences held since UNESCO’s inception in different countries attract the attention of governments to the issue of illiteracy and ways to resolve it. A guiding principle was that illiteracy cannot be dealt with in a vacuum; it is an issue for the entire world. In 1957, UNESCO published an impressive statistical survey entitled *World Illiteracy at Mid Century*, the first systematic attempt to set forth all the known facts about illiteracy in all the countries of the world.

At the 1990 annual World Conference on Education for All held in Jomtien, Thailand, representatives from 155 countries and organizations agreed to make primary education accessible to all children and to massively reduce illiteracy before the end of the decade. A World Declaration on Education for All was adopted, reaffirming the notion that education is a fundamental human right. It was agreed that governments would intensify the process of meeting basic learning needs for all by the year 2000. However, the Jomtien Education For All (EFA) targets were not achieved by the year 2000. Much money was spent, but no set targets were achieved. However, these poor results did not discourage the countries and organizations involved. On the contrary, they became more aware of the issue, since literacy rates were not improving, and, in fact, were deteriorating in some countries. By 2000, there were fifteen new former-Soviet countries in the world with transition economies, where education was deteriorating year after year.

To tackle the issue of illiteracy again, the World Education Forum met in Dakar, Senegal on the eve of the millennium. It was the most significant event to address issues of education at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. By adopting the Dakar Framework for Action, the 1,100 “participants of the Forum once again reaffirmed their commitment to

achieving education for all by 2015” (UNESCO, 2000, p. 11). In providing the opportunity for a strongly renewed commitment to practical action, the Dakar Framework for Action also enables new targets to be met (UNESCO, 2000).

Since its inception in 1945, UNESCO was the only organization mandated at an international level with the mission of making recommendations in education. However, as corporate experience shows, any sort of monopoly leads to less effectiveness and efficiency. In the early 1980s, the World Bank criticized UNESCO for a lack of quality, relevance, reliability and accessibility to statistics. “A study prepared jointly by the United Nations International Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the World Bank concluded that UNESCO statistics were narrow, and neither reliable nor easily accessible” (Cusso, 2006, p. 533). UNESCO’s data was also challenged by publications such as *Education at a Glance* sponsored by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in the early 1990s, and *Knowledge and Skills for Life* in 2000, where “indicators were not only used to compare characteristics of national education systems, but also to compare underlying political decisions” (Cusso, 2006, p. 533). In 1999, “a former World Bank education specialist named Heyneman told the ‘sad story’ of UNESCO’s education statistics. He insisted on the urgent need for reform and modernization of statistical services” (Cusso, 2006, p. 533). Although UNESCO’s staff had differing reactions to this criticism, the organization made efforts to reform and restructure. However, the “incongruities between the restructuring objectives as regards to the quality of statistics, and the actual results of this reform,” have never materialized (Cusso, 2006).

If UNESCO was criticized ten years ago for its lack of quality in statistical data and heavy reliance on government-provided data, the situation today has not changed. After all, UNESCO statistics are as good as the government's report. There is no doubt that UNESCO has established strong connections with the governments of all countries that no other organization can rival. However, many of these are developing countries that lack reliable and accurate data collection systems. They have governments that are generally poor, weak, and frequently corrupt, governments that should not be cited as valid and legitimate statistical sources. For example, World Bank reports (as cited in Puryear, 1995) that "in Uganda the Ministries of Education and Finance cannot agree on how many primary teachers the country has – the Ministry of Finance claims 85,000 and the Ministry of Education counts 140,000" (p. 80).

Today the world has only a handful of countries with high GDPs that act as donor countries for literacy campaigns in developing countries. The rest of the world is heavily dependent on them for providing funding and technical assistance. In countries where the government is authoritarian, the interests of the people come last and priorities differ. This is the case in Tajikistan and other former-Soviet countries in Central Asia. The governments report inaccurate high literacy rates to UNESCO. These governments have different reasons for inaccurate provision of high literacy rates. One reason is to keep the flow of funding coming from international donor organizations, while at the same time siphoning off aid money and leaving their own people behind in poverty and illiteracy. The second reason is to demonstrate to the international donor organizations that they are following up with their promises and actually performing.

UNESCO is no longer the only organization to make recommendations in education. Currently, the World Bank, OECD, UNDP, and UNICEF lead education-related projects, make recommendations, and, in certain cases, even produce statistics in education. Although all of these organizations have developed their own statistical surveys and indicators, they still rely on government figures from countries like Tajikistan, despite evidence that existing problems in the socio-economic sector suggest lower literacy rates than the impossibly high government-reported rates.

Despite all the criticism, UNESCO and other donor organizations continue to do good work in eradicating global illiteracy. For example, to commemorate the new millennium, in 2000 the UN developed the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), of which the second and the third goals are directly related to education and eradicating illiteracy. Goal two of the MDG “aims to achieve universal primary education by 2015, ensuring that children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling” (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2003) Even though fighting illiteracy was already a top priority in 1963, when UNESCO issued its report in *World Campaign for Universal Literacy*, today too many pupils still leave school without acquiring basic literacy skills.

The third MDG goal addresses gender inequality and seeks to empower women by eliminating gender disparity at all levels of education no later than 2015. Today, there are 700 million illiterates worldwide. A third of them are women living in rural regions of developing countries. Despite the fact that women constitute the powerful “lever” for the development of their countries, illiterate women have been neglected too often and for too long by governments and international organizations.

## CHAPTER III

### TAJIKISTAN: A CASE STUDY

#### History

The history of Tajikistan is a rich mixture of legends and myths, facts and figures. It would be a mistake not to consider the history of Iran, former Persia, when discussing the history and formation of today's Tajikistan. Tajikistan came into being as a distinct country only in 1920s, following the Bolshevik revolution in Russia. Before this revolution, Tajikistan was merely a province of a succession of great empires such as Tsarist and Soviet Russia, Ottoman Turks, and the Mongols. All these empires have influenced today's Tajikistan in different ways, but the most significant and enduring was the Persian Empire, based in current Iran. Many Persian dynasties rose and fell, governed by a succession of empires that controlled the Central Asian area that includes Tajikistan. Each of these dynasties reflected cultural developments that directly affected the history of the Tajik people. Thus, to explain the culture and background of current Tajikistan, one has to start with history of Persia.

The earliest known civilization in Persia was the Elamite Empire that lasted from 2500 through 644 B.C.E. (Shahmiri, n.d.a). It was a small but powerful kingdom with a well developed government structure. The Elamites held varied "areas together under a coordinated government that permitted the maximum interchange of the natural resources unique to each region" (Iran Chamber Society, 2009b). Under the Elamite rule,

the characteristic arts and culture of Persia began to develop. The Elamite kingdom was overthrown by the Assyrians in the eighth century B.C.E.

In the seventh century B.C.E., the independent kingdom of Media was established in Iran. Another major Aryan group, the Fars, settled south of this area, giving their name to the province, Fars or Persia, and the Persian language, Farsi (Iran Chamber Society, 2009a). Other Aryan tribes, the Soghd “and the Hind, migrated to the east, the Aral Sea region. Subsequently, the Hind migrated southeast to the northwestern regions of the Indian subcontinent” (Bashiri, 1999) hence, the name “India” and the Hindi language. The Soghdians settled the region around today’s Samarkand between 1,000 and 500 B.C.E., giving their name to the province of Sogdiana. The Soghdians are believed to be direct ancestors of the Tajik people.

Scholars now believe that these Aryan tribes from Central Asia were the original source of Persian civilization (Bashiri, 1993). Cook (1983) discusses the theory that Persians entered Iran from Central Asia, not the Caucasus as had been hypothesized by nineteenth-century scholars. Moreover, Cook (1983) suggests that,

they reached their situations in the Zagros from the East not only by crossing the Iranian plateau north of the great central deserts but by working round to the south and entering Fars (Persis) through Karmenia. This northeastern origin has some support from similarity of names east of the Caspian (as Parthia) and the resemblance noted between the Old Persian and Sogdian languages. (p. 83)

The Median Empire did not last long. Under Cyrus the Great, the Persians overthrew the Medes and established the Achaemenian Empire in 550 B.C.E. The Empire lasted through 320 B.C.E., and flourished under great rulers such as Cyrus, Darius, Xerxes, and Artaxerxes. Persepolis, today’s Teheran, was founded during the Achaemenian Empire (Iran Chamber Society, 2009b).

Following the fall of the Achaemenian Empire, the Arsacid dynasty established the Parthian Empire in 247 B.C.E. It was overthrown by Sassanids in 224 C.E., who tried to revive the Achaemenian Empire. The Sassanid Empire lasted over 400 years. The Sassanids inherited a weak economy that revived due to well-coordinated use of natural resources and human intervention. Under their rule, the military regained strength and power, and protected Persia from Central Asian nomadic tribes and Roman armies for over four centuries. The Empire turned into a full theocracy under the rule of Ardashir, who made his deity the Imperial religion.

Weakened by theocracy and the suppression of other religions, Persia was ripe for invasion by the Arabs in 637 C.E., during their great religious upsurge and conquest following the founding of Islam by Mohammed. This conquest created a period of upset and confusion in the political, religious, linguistic and cultural lives of the inhabitants of the Persian Empire. The Arabs imposed their religion, Islam, and language upon their new subjects. These years have been termed the “dark years of Persian Empire.” The Arab rulers banned the traditional poetry, publication of books, singing and dancing that was a big part of Persian culture and education. Arabs were assigned to each household to live and share meals with the Tajik people in order to inculcate their religion and culture. The Farsi language was replaced by Arabic, which became the official language of the Darbar (the government). However, the Arab grip eventually weakened, and new national dynasties arose in different parts of the Persian cultural area; among those were the Taheris, the Saffarids, and Samanids. The Samanid Empire played a vital role in the Central Asian area that includes current Tajikistan.

Shahmiri states that “the Samanids were the first native dynasty to arise in Iran after the Muslim Arab conquest” (Shahmiri, n.d.b). The dynasty’s founder, Saman-Khoda, split the provinces under his control between his four grandsons as a reward for their faithful service to Abbasid caliph al-Mamun. “Nuh obtained Samarkand; Ahmad, Fergana; Yahya, Shash; and Elyas, Herat. Ahmad’s son Nasr became governor of Transoxania in 875 CE, but it was his brother and successor, Ismail I (892-907 C.E.), who overthrew the Saffarids in Khorasan (900 C.E.) and the Zaydites of Tabaristan, thus establishing a semiautonomous rule over Transoxania and Khorasan, with Bukhara as his capital” (Shahmiri, n.d.b). According to Frye (1975), the well-known Iranian renaissance began in Central Asia rather than in Iran, due to its diversity in social groups (p. 177).

Under the Samanid rule, Persian was restored as the language of government, replacing Arabic, and Bukhara emerges as a political, economic and cultural center of the revived Persian Empire. The Empire flourished under Samanid reign, and every sector of life was touched by the Samanid government. They

introduced a major program of urbanization, a new civic administration, and a revival of traditional local customs and allocated resources for public education, and encouraged innovation and enterprise. In short, they created a civilization that, in many respects, was unique for its time. (Bashiri, 1993)

For example, books were translated from Arabic to Persian. Samanids supported the development of literature, and during their reign, several prominent poets emerged, such as Rudaki, the first Persian/Tajik poet, who revived the Persian language after the Arab invasion. Rudaki was born in 858 near Panjakent village in current Tajikistan. When his fame reached Bukhara he was summoned to the court by the Emir (Islamic ruler) to recite his work. Another prominent poet was Daqiqi, who was asked by the Emir to write an

epic history of pre-Islamic Persia. Unfortunately, Daqiqi was murdered, and his work was unfinished until it was completed by Firdausi in the 10<sup>th</sup> century and became known in the world as *The Epic of Kings*.

The “Samanid revival also benefited sciences, especially mathematics, astronomy, and medicine. While geography, historiography, philosophy, and literature cultivated the society, the fields of mining, zoology, and agriculture contributed to the economy and the well-being of the state. Few rival the fame of al-Khwarazmi, the author of *Kitab al-Mukhtasar fi Hisab al-Jabr wa al-Muqabilah*, in the development of medieval mathematics and the theory of numbers. (Bashiri, 1993)

This was the milieu in which algebra was founded as a new branch of mathematics by mathematicians such as

al-Biruni, Ibn-i Sina (Avicenna), Sijzi, and Buzjani. Both al-Biruni and Ibn-i Sina were also involved in the field of physics. The former excelled in the practical aspects of physics while the latter contributed to theory. The leading physicist of the era, however, was Muhammad Zakariyyah al-Razi, a founder of practical physics and the inventor of the special or net weight of matter. Other contributors to physics were Ibn-i Sina (acoustics), Ibn-i Haitham (optics), and al-Biruni (who completed the efforts of al-Razi in determining special weights). (Bashiri, 1993)

These are a few examples of the prominent personalities who contributed to development of the Iranian and Tajik sense of cultural pride and nationality.

Thus the Samanids’ reign was crucial to the formation of Tajikistan and the prosperity of Central Asia. The Empire ended in 999, when it was usurped by Turks, who had been at first slaves in, and then later commanders of the army, and by Mongol invaders, the ancestors of Genghis Khan. Over the successive centuries, several dynasties would rise and fall after the Turks’ ascendancy. During this uneasy time, Persia immersed itself into the practice of Islam and Sufism. In the sixteenth century, Safavid regained power, and for a short time, Persia flourished again. Unfortunately, it did not last long. Internal decay continued while other powers arose to dominate Central Asia,

including the Mongol, Ottoman, and Russian Empires. These coexisted with the Safavids for awhile, but as the Safavid Empire weakened, territorial divisions grew and pieces of the former Persian sphere fell away and were absorbed by the new Empires.

A portion of the Persian language speaking population of Central Asia fell under the domination of nomadic Turkic speaking tribes such as the Uzbeks. Bukhara, the cultural center of the part of the Empire that includes Tajikistan, separated from Iran, and was established as the Uzbek Khanate of Bukhara.

The establishment of new boundaries became more and more permanent, and by the eighteenth century C.E., the histories of current Iran and current Tajikistan were no longer connected. The modern Iranian Renaissance began in 1906, marked by a constitutional revolution that was followed by the ascent of Reza Shah the Great to the throne in 1925, the founding of the Pahlavi dynasty. He was succeeded by his son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi Aryamehr, who ruled as the Shah of Iran from 1941 to 1979, and was overthrown by the Islamic revolution that established the current Islamic republic of Iran. None of these developments had much impact on the modern history of the Central Asian region that includes Tajikistan.

Modern history has taken Tajikistan in a different direction. The Tajiks were traditionally governed from Bukhara, originally a city of ancient Sogdiana, ruled by the Umayyad Arabs during 709 – 874 C.E., and a cultural and political center during the Samanid reign of 875 – 999 C.E. Bukhara emerged as a cultural, trade and political center of the Islamic world, and education reached a peak during the Samanids Empire. But Bukhara declined until the late sixteenth century, as Turkic and Mongol Empires were ascendant and then fell into decline themselves. In 1740, the Nadir Shah of Persia

conquered Bukhara. Although it regained independence, Bukhara never again flourished as it had in its prime. The area around Bukhara and Samarkand was shared by Uzbeks, Tajiks and Sarts. The Tajik dialect of Persian (Farsi) was the principal language, but had borrowings from Arabic and Turkic.

In 1866, Bukhara Emirate again lost its independence after it was conquered and made into a Protectorate by the expanding Tsarist Russian Empire. Following the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, Bukhara was proclaimed a “People’s Soviet Socialist Republic” in 1920. Then, in 1929, Joseph Stalin, the leader of the USSR, dictated that Tajikistan was to be an Autonomous Republic, but that its two major cities, Bukhara and Samarkand, would become part of the separate Uzbekistan Soviet Socialist Republic. In December 1929, Tajikistan was recognized as a separate socialist republic with its own language, culture and traditions. The borders established by Stalin remain to this day, and Tajikistan remains cut off from its major cities of Bukhara and Samarkand, the main educational and cultural centers in the region.

The collapse of the Soviet Union shocked people in all republics, including Central Asia. After gaining independence, some republics were able to cope with the shock and made it through without major conflicts and wars. This was not the case in Tajikistan. The battle for power between the Communist government and the Islamic leaders led to a five year civil war. The war cost thousands of innocent people their lives. The border policies were strengthened, and some countries introduced visa regimes, which made it difficult to travel and negatively affected the trade. The situation of Tajikistan after its independence from the Soviet Union is discussed in depth in Chapter IV.

## Geography

With an area of 143,100 square kilometers (88,918 square miles), modern Tajikistan is the smallest country in Central Asia, slightly smaller than the state of Wisconsin. This landlocked country lies between Sur Dariya and Amu Dariya (dariya is river in Persian). To the east is China, to the west Uzbekistan and the major cities of Samarkand and Bukhara, cut off from Tajikistan in 1924. Afghanistan is south, and Kyrgyzstan is north. A narrow Wakhan corridor separates Tajikistan from Pakistan. Topographically, Tajikistan is mountainous, encompassing 93 percent of the land. The two main mountain ranges are the Pamirs to the southeast and Altay to the north and these ranges are the source of 40 percent of the water supply for the Central Asian region. The highest peak is Ismoli Somoni, which at 7,495 meters (24,589 feet), was the tallest mountain in the former Soviet Union.

## Climate

Tajikistan is far from the ocean, and thus has a midlatitude continental climate with hot summers and polar winters. This is especially so in Badakhshan, which is surrounded by the Pamir Mountains. The climate changes drastically according to elevation.

Tajikistan has not been unaffected by recent global climate changes. During the past several years, Tajikistan has experienced the longest and most severe winters in 30 years, while summers are unusually hot (Stern, 2008).

## Population

Tajikistan is experiencing one of the highest population growth rates in Central Asia, with increases every year, despite major social and economic problems. Civil war was a major factor leading to rapid emigration and labor migration of Tajiks overseas, mainly to Russia. Between 1990 and 2000, the population increased at an average annual growth rate of almost 1.7 percent, and grew from 5.3 million to 6.25 million. Rural areas of Tajikistan are home to 73.4 percent of the population (Goskomstat, 2001). In 2008, the population reached 7,211,884. It is estimated that more than 2 million Tajiks live outside of Tajikistan, not including the Tajik populations of Bukhara and Samarkand in Uzbekistan.

## The People

Racially, Tajiks belong to the Aryan Indo-European population group. “From an ethnic point of view, the Tajiks are Iranian” (Bashiri, 1993). They are descendants of the same ancestral Iranian tribes from which the Persians, Kurds and Baluchis are also descended. These constitute the Iranian peoples. The Tajiks “were separated from the main body of Iranians after the territories to the east of the Oxus River” (Bashiri, 1993) fell under the domination of Western Turkic cultures. However, Tajiks have maintained their Persian identity, particularly in cultural and linguistic terms.

The Soviet Union brought about many changes to an already ethnically diverse region with increased population movements, including forced relocations of entire ethnic communities. Since the founding of the Tajik Soviet republic, Tajikistan has become a home to many ethnic groups. In 2000, about 80 percent were Tajiks, 15.3

percent Uzbek, 1.1 percent Russians, and 1.1 percent Kyrgyz and Turkmen (Library of Congress, 2007).

### Language

The Tajik language was traditionally designated as Farsi, was relabeled as a separate Tajik language to reflect the population living in that area. Tajik, like the other Central Asian languages in the former USSR, “underwent a two-stage alphabet reform by order of the Soviet regime” (Library of Congress, 2007). First, the Arabic alphabet was replaced by the Latin alphabet in 1929. Then, in 1940, Moscow declared Cyrillic (as used by the Russian language) to be the official alphabet of the Tajik language, which is still used after independence up to this date.

The Russian language was the official language of government during the period in which Tajikistan was a part of the Soviet Union. After Tajik independence, it retained the status of a lingua franca. Most government documentation was carried out in both Tajik and Russian. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was an attempt to revive Arabic script. However, socio-economic and political challenges have prevented this from happening. Following the perestroika and glasnost policies introduced by Gorbochev in 1989, a law “On State Language” was enacted to make Tajik the official language; Russian was accepted as a lingua franca. However, in practice, Russian remained the prevalent language for official transactions, since the government could not afford the complete transition from Russian to Tajik. The law “On State Language” was recently revised, and in October 2009, a new law was enacted that removed Russian as an authorized language for use in government, business, etc. All Tajikistanis from all ethnic

backgrounds are now required to learn and use Tajik if they want to enjoy the rights and privileges of Tajik citizenship.

### Religion

Islam is the predominant religion of Tajikistan. About 93 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim, with 5 percent Ismaili, a branch of the Shi'a sect of Islam. Orthodox Christians comprise about 3 percent. Other religions such as Baha'i and Zoroastrianism are practiced by small minorities of the population. There is also a small community of practicing Jews living in the capital. "Soviet efforts to secularize the society were largely unsuccessful, and the post-Soviet era has seen a marked increase in religious practice" (Federal Division of the Library of Congress Country Study Series, 1996). However, the Tajik government continues to follow the secular model adopted by most of the other post Soviet regimes.

Before the Arabs brought Islam to Central Asia in the seventh century C.E., the dominant religious tradition in the region was Zoroastrian. "Zoroastrianism is the oldest of the revealed credal religions, and it has probably had more influence on mankind, directly and indirectly, than any other single faith" (Boyce, 2001, p. 1). The Zoroastrian prophet, Zardusht (Zarathustra) is believed to have been born between 1400 and 1200 B.C.E. The Zoroastrian mantra is "*pure thought, pure word, and pure action.*"

### Education

The development of the education system in Tajikistan grew out of three significant eras. Each era played a different role in defining educational systems and attitudes in Tajikistan. Pre-Islamic education developed during the reigns of the Persian

dynasties. The Islamic Era was initiated by the Arab invasion of Central Asia in the seventh century. With it, came the spread of Arabic language, Muslim traditions and the study of Quranic texts. The Samanid dynasty took over power from the Arabs, and encouraged broad educational and scientific development in addition to Islamic instruction. A brief discussion of Pre-Islamic and Islamic education was covered earlier in this chapter. The most recent educational developments, those most crucial for literacy growth in Tajikistan, were instituted by the Soviet Union, during which the literacy rate spiked to almost 100 percent.

The Tajikistan Soviet Socialist Republic or Tajik SSR was one of fifteen republics of the former Soviet Union (USSR). Following its establishment as a separate SSR in 1929, a new capital was established in Dushanbe, at the time a small village of 3,000 people.

Before the Bolshevik overthrow of the Tsarist Russian Empire in 1920, education was available to only an elite minority. Those few Tajiks who received a formal education were closely connected to aristocratic upper class Russians. An alternative religious education offered by Islamic madrasahs (Islamic schools), where a religious ideology was inculcated through Quranic study. The madrasahs were administered and staffed by clergymen. A large portion of the population was under the influence of religious dogmas and prejudiced against secular education. “According to the first Soviet census in 1926, the literacy rate was 4 percent for Tajik men and 0.1 percent for Tajik women in the territory of today’s Tajikistan and parts of current Uzbekistan” (Federal Division of the Library of Congress Country Study Series, 1996).

Soviet policy created a modern westernized public education system in Tajikistan. From the first day, “not a single revolutionary leader, scientist or teacher had any doubts as to the need to create a new school in the republic which would differ from the old one by its general socio-political essence and character, by its scientific-theoretical and pedagogical principles and social aims” (Avakov & Atakishiev, 1984, p. 15). Tajikistan was one of the last “socialist republics” to join the Soviet Union. By the time the Tajik SSR joined, the socialist leaders had already established policies for public education in the other republics. In the early 1930s, the Soviet government started to expand the state-run public schools. This initiative was unwelcome from the perspective of Islamic leaders, who benefited from illiteracy among men in general women in particular. “As a result, some schools were burned, and a number of teachers were killed” (Federal Division of the Library of Congress Country Study Series, 1996).

The Soviet plan was to educate every child. For example, the newspaper of the Azerbaijan Soviet republics, *Kommunist*, reported: “From now on every child born on our soil can be sure that he will not be thrown out into the street... The rights of the children in this country of workers and peasants should be fully protected; we mean by that the right to live and the right to education” (as cited in Avakov & Atakishiev, 1984, p. 17). However, with a high illiteracy rate, and a lack of trained personnel and teaching materials, this proclamation would remain empty words if another important policy did not also come through; to permit teaching in the children’s native language. The children of the poor spoke only their mother tongue and lacked reading and writing skills. With pre-existing high illiteracy rates, it was impossible to educate them in Russian, a foreign language. Although trained Russian speaking personnel and teaching materials would

have been coming from Moscow, the capital of the Soviet Union, the government did establish the right and real opportunity for children to study in their native language. This was critical because the majority of the population needing education lived in rural areas. This policy was not restricted to the Tajik language only. Being a multicultural and multilingual country with nationalities that include Russians, Uzbeks, Turkmen and Kazakh, Soviet Tajikistan gave children of people living in Tajikistan an opportunity to attend schools that taught in their respective native languages. The Soviet government was aware of the importance of the Russian language as the language of inter-republican communication. Therefore, it was included in the curriculum of all schools, irrespective of the language of instruction. Schools with Russian language instruction embraced learning the local language as a second language. Only through persuasion or voluntary agreement was it possible for non-Russian native speakers to attend Russian language schools.

In the decades after the 1920s, the Soviet secular educational system eventually prevailed. Religion was completely banned from the schools. A special decree of the People's Commissariat was passed to prevent clergymen from working and teaching in schools. School prayers were abolished. The separation of school and religion was the ultimate step toward establishing a public education system in Tajikistan. The experience of Soviet Russia and other republics with Muslim populations was later used in Soviet Tajikistan. The abolition of prayer and introduction of co-education of girls and boys were approached cautiously in Tajikistan, especially in the rural areas, where religious leaders were highly respected. At first, separate schools for boys and girls were built, and only later were co-educational schools introduced. The Soviet Constitution

guaranteed free, universal, and multilingual education to Soviet citizens. Schools were built and teachers were trained to teach in the rural areas. So, for the first time, the right to a quality education was available to Tajiks in the most remote areas through instruction in their native language, irrespective of age, sex, or nationality.

Building the new socialist republic did not come easy in Tajikistan. The Soviet government faced several problems before it was able to eradicate illiteracy in Tajikistan. First, there was the problem of language. The government had quickly confronted the problem of language in the Tajik SSR, based on earlier experiences with other Soviet republics. The problem of teaching in native languages without teaching materials and textbooks could not be quickly alleviated. Tajiks wrote in Farsi script before 1920, and then in Latin script until the 1930s. In 1928, the Tajik SSR officially switched to Cyrillic script used in the rest of the Soviet Union in order to alleviate illiteracy more rapidly. The Tajik intellectual, writer and poet, Sadriiddin Ayni, then had to invent a Tajik alphabet using Cyrillic script to include six additional letters to represent characteristic Tajik sounds. In 1928, Ayni wrote his first novel in the new Tajik written script. The switch to Cyrillic script resulted in an influx of textbooks and teaching materials from Soviet Russia. It was easier to publish and print textbooks in the new Tajik script when only six additional letters had to be added to printing equipment.

The second problem was a lack of trained teachers and other personnel to apply the new Soviet educational policies. The goals were unattainable with only the scarce resources that the Tajik SSR possessed. However, the spirit of progressive young people was inspired by educational successes achieved in Soviet Russia and other Soviet republics. Exchanges of personnel with the other SSR's made a positive impact on

development of public education in the Tajik SSR. The Soviet government assigned trained teachers and scientists to live in Tajikistan and help this newest Soviet republic. The influx of Russians, Kazakhs, Georgians, Armenians, Koreans and Germans to build infrastructure for the country also helped to speed up the process. “Newcomers” were often relocated to the most remote areas of the Tajik SSR to eradicate the problems of backwardness at their roots.

The third problem that Soviet Tajikistan encountered was resistance to the enrollment of girls to public schools and to the emancipation of women. In Tajikistan as in the other previously established SSR’s Muslim areas, women had been devoid of rights to an education, work and freedom to make their own life decisions. Women were treated as servants and inferior to men, and were banned from participation in the social and political decision making processes. Girls at age 9 were often forcibly engaged or even married. The luckiest went to religious schools held in the homes of female religious teachers. Girls from a young age were expected to learn only how to look after their husbands, children and house. It was impossible to change the overall educational system without changing these attitudes towards women’s participation. Therefore, progressive-minded women were actively recruited to bring about a change. The government set up and funded clubs and organizations to support women’s emancipation and to draw women into public and industrial activities (Avakov & Atakishiev, 1984, p. 29). On the other side, religious functionaries who opposed the Soviet policies used religious scriptures and appealed to the prejudices of illiterate people to persuade them that they committed a mortal sin and betrayed Islam if they sent their daughters to school. In Azerbaijan, for example, these acts of resistance resulted in the Central Executive

Committee adopting a decree in 1930 on Responsibility for Refusal to Send Children to School. It imposed administrative punishments, including fines and forced labor, for refusal to send children to school (Avakov & Atakishiev, 1984). The decree was subsequently adopted in Tajikistan and other new republics where these problems appeared.

### Summary

An understanding of the pre-Soviet historical, political and geographical context is needed to review and understand the development of education in Tajikistan. The historical cultural perspective of the area in which Tajikistan arose included traditional ideas of the importance of education. These cultural ideas and traditions developed particularly during the reigns of different Persian dynasties, especially Samanid dynasty from 875 to 999 C.E. This chapter also discussed education in Tajikistan before the Soviet Union, which was only accessible to members of the aristocratic upper class, and religious beliefs that prevented rapid educational development in Tajikistan.

## CHAPTER IV

### TAJIKISTAN'S LITERACY AND EDUCATION CHALLENGES

The success of literacy programs in Soviet Tajikistan was due mainly to a strictly imposed education system. Although early Soviet programs such as “Down with Illiteracy” in the 1920s had been somewhat successful in Tajikistan, it wasn't until the 1970s that the literacy rate in Tajikistan and other Central Asian countries increased to almost 100 percent. Some of the problems that Soviet Tajikistan faced during the 1920s and overcame in the 1970s are very similar to those that Tajikistan faces now, almost 20 years following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The dissolution of the Soviet Union plus a five year civil war, which claimed between 60,000 and 120,000 lives, created challenges for Tajikistan. GDP dropped 60 percent, and “damage to the economy was estimated at \$7 billion” (Briller, 2007). Landlocked, Tajikistan is located in a region of potential instability. Two neighboring countries are vulnerable to internal unrest: Uzbekistan with an authoritarian government and hostile to Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, which recently experienced the “Tulip Revolution” and is mired deep in its own economic and energy crisis. To the south, Afghanistan, a war-torn country for the past thirty years, shares a 1200km (746 miles) unpoliced border with Tajikistan. Religious extremism is boiling in Afghanistan with the Taliban influence increasing in border villages. In 2008, the State Statistics Committee of Tajikistan estimated 53% of

population was living under the poverty line, with 17% identified as critically poor.

International organizations report higher poverty rates.

Despite government claims that literacy rates remain high, ample evidence exists that Tajikistan has been unable to maintain high literacy rates during almost twenty years of independence. Present literacy rates reported by UNESCO are merely based on government statistical data. They “are unreliable and significantly underestimate the scale of the problem of falling literacy” (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), n.d.).

This chapter will primarily discuss three main reasons why Tajikistan cannot possibly have the high literacy rates reported by UNESCO. The first is the state of government in Tajikistan after the break-up of the Soviet Union: a level of incompetence and corruption that strongly suggests that the government of Tajikistan is not in a position to maintain high literacy rates among its population. The second is the poor state of education in Tajikistan combined with socio-economic problems indicates that literacy rates are actually dropping. The third is the revival of Islam in Tajikistan, especially in rural areas and among youth, leading to high dropout rates for girls from schools.

This chapter will provide evidence from reports prepared by the Tajik government and international organizations. Such high literacy rates are not possible in a war-torn country where corruption thrives and religious extremism is reviving, especially in rural areas that constitute 75 percent of the population. This chapter will speculate on why the government of Tajikistan has an interest in providing faulty literacy data.

## Twenty Years of Independence

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, negatively impacted countries like Tajikistan the most. Being one of the poorest republics and most dependent on outside help in Soviet times, Tajikistan turned out to be vulnerable to internal and external forces after independence in 1991. The civil war that broke out in 1992 between pro-communist government forces, backed by Russia and Uzbekistan, and Islamic forces, backed by Afghanistan and Iran, led to challenges that the government could not solve on its own. The civil war is not the focus of this study. The focus is the consequences of the civil war on Tajikistan and the Tajik people.

## Government, Corruption and Incompetence

A peace accord officially ending the civil war was signed in 1997, but this did not bring immediate stability to the country. It is believed that Tajikistan is among the few post-conflict countries that moved quickly from civil war to internal stability and to a functioning government, the reality is that peace did not bring stability to the country, nor did it create a functioning government. The peace accord was signed on the promise that the government would include 30 percent representation by the opposition party in any government office or ministry. This promise was broken, and the opposition was either removed from the government or put in prison. These tactics by the current government led to absolute power, which in turn has led to nepotism and corruption in government, and, in turn, throughout Tajik society. This has occurred despite the fact that Tajik people possess many factors that can and should prevent corruption from developing; among them are faith, traditions, moral and ethical norms, and knowledge. The International

Crisis Group, a non-profit organization based in Brussels, issued a report earlier this year linking corruption in the Tajik government to the “physical and intellectual poverty of government administration” (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2009). Across diplomatic circles one can hear comments such as “lack of competence,” “greed,” “corruption,” or “no capacity to run the country” (ICG, 2009, p. 17). At national, district, and local levels, the government is desperately short of trained personnel. Unfortunately, there is little government interest in addressing this issue, due to nepotism and a seemingly endless inflow of international aid. Qualified people either leave the country or leave the government for jobs with international organizations that improves the livelihood of half of the population in urban areas. The first wave of the “brain drain” happened during the five-year civil war when a majority of educated professionals left the country.

Xenophobic attitudes toward foreigners following independence forced non-Tajiks to flee the country. Russians were affected the most. The second wave, which has been continuous and cyclical, results from the inability of the government to provide for its citizens. Unless one has a “tagha,” a Tajik word for uncle that refers to a powerful connection, it is virtually impossible to get a job with the government. On the other hand, qualified people do not want to work for the government because of the low salaries and the existing corruption that would prevent them from doing their job correctly or thwart implementation of projects that benefit the country. Controlled by the president, the government does not feel accountable to its people and the international community, which subsidizes 40 percent of the budget (ICG, 2009). Government officials siphon off aid money meant to reach the sectors that need it the most. People in rural areas suffer the most. They comprise 75 percent of the population in Tajikistan, and get the least help. A

crumbling transport infrastructure in the years since the collapse of the Soviet Union has reduced access to rural areas. For almost fifteen years, they have been isolated. Some parts of Tajikistan, such as Garm, northeast of the capital Dushanbe, or the Gorno Badakhshan Oblast, further east, have been left to their own destinies. Very little government funding reaches them. Transportation and fuel shortages leave barely enough resources and infrastructure to provide for the capital city, let alone the periphery. Trips that may at one time have been a two-hour drive can now take five hours or more.

International labor migration was at its peak in Tajikistan before the world economic crisis of 2008. Much of Tajikistan's workforce, constituting 40 percent of the population, leaves the country to seek jobs in other countries, primarily Russia. An accurate number of labor migrants is hard to find; the figures differ depending on the source. According to a government analysis, 26.4 percent of labor migrants are between 18-29 years old, and 33.4 percent are between 30-39 years old (Rakhmon, 2008). Estimates of the total number of labor migrants working outside of Tajikistan vary according to the source. The official government figures claim 800,000, whereas estimates from international organizations put labor migration at closer to 1.5 million. These are conflicting statistics, and only one (or neither) can be correct. In an interview to International Crisis Group, a state-employed social scientist said that the governmental leadership does not believe the figures either. "Statistics reflect a Soviet mentality: they are intended to please the leadership by proving government bodies have achieved their assigned targets. They just want to have something that shows we are making progress on all fronts" (ICG, 2009, p. 10). This tendency of the government to report higher figures in order to please authorities is inherited from Soviet times, and resonates across all levels in Tajikistan

today. “Tajik specialists and international officials agree that government statistics are so inaccurate as to be useless” (ICG, 2009, p. 10). In other countries that support free expression and where democracy is practiced, the media plays the role of watchdog and intermediary between the government and the public, exposing issues of corruption, inaccuracy in government reporting, nepotism, etc. Unfortunately, this has never been the case in Tajikistan. The media is heavily censored by the government. Some western media outlets, such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and Radio Freedom, have been delayed their licenses to broadcast in Tajikistan. Therefore, Tajikistan lives in an information vacuum. The Tajik people do not trust a government that has proven to be corrupt and careless, while the government reacts to people’s passivity by falling deeper into corruption, greed, and incompetence.

### Education Sector

The lack of competence and widespread corruption in government extends to all sectors, including education. Education has been at the bottom of the list of government priorities. The high literacy rates that the Soviet government helped achieve were thought to have remained high after independence. Even today, after almost twenty years of chaos, literacy remains high according to official figures.

“As elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, the education system in Tajikistan was divided into primary, secondary, and higher education” (Library of Congress, 2007). Later, full time kindergartens were introduced to encourage mothers to return to school or the workforce in order to keep up with the “pyatiletka,” a Soviet term for five-year government plans that set targets for economic output. The constitution of Tajikistan

states that every person has the right to a basic education, from grade 1 to 9. Officially, basic education is obligatory and free of charge. Table 1 illustrates education system in Tajikistan by level, age, and grade/year.

Table 1.

*Education System in Tajikistan*

Level	Age	Grade/Year
Pre-school Education	3-6	
Primary Education	7-10	1-4
Basic Education	11-15	5-9
General Secondary Education		10-11
Secondary Professional Education	16-17	1-4 years
Primary Professional Education		2-4 years
Higher Education	18-22	1-5 years
Post-Higher Education	And above	3 years and more

Source: Adapted from UNESCO. (2008). *Central Asia sub-Region EFA mid-decade assessment: Synthesis report*. Retrieved September 15, 2009, from [http://www.unescobkk.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/efa/EFA\\_MDA/SSR\\_Drafts/CentralAsia\\_SSR\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.unescobkk.org/fileadmin/user_upload/efa/EFA_MDA/SSR_Drafts/CentralAsia_SSR_FINAL.pdf)

During Soviet times, basic education required 10 years of schooling. In 1985, as part of Gorbachev's political reforms known as *perestroika* and *glasnost* (Russian terms for reform and transparency), basic education was extended to 11 years of schooling to be closer to the western standard of K-12 schooling. When education was

centralized, 11 years of schooling was manageable, and some changes occurred. However, when Tajikistan became independent in 1991, and centralized policy and funding was cut off, the scarce resources and lack of qualified specialists in education caused the government to revert to 10 years of schooling. Today, school children are again required to complete eleven years of schooling, despite diminished resources and an ever worsening lack of qualified teachers. The indecisiveness demonstrated by this switching back and forth hints at the confusion that exists in the Ministry of Education, and suggests it is not a reliable source of information. A high turnover rate due to low salaries leads to inconsistencies and frequent changes in policies and rules. These

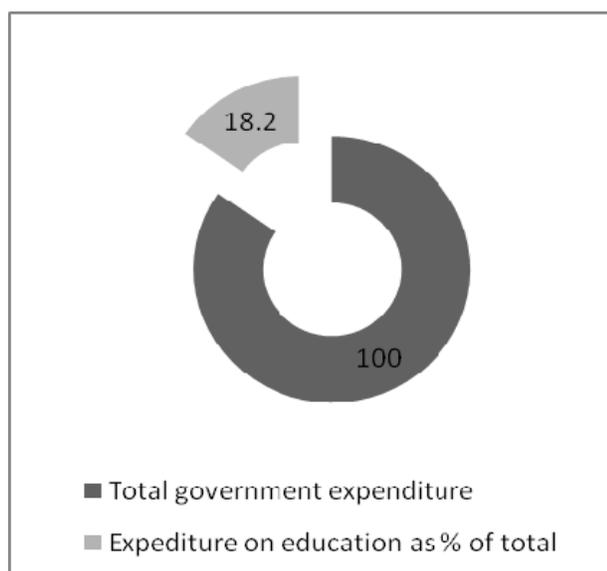
difficulties were first encountered when, after independence, the new national governing officials of Tajikistan did not fully understand the organizational underpinnings of the old system and the new reforms of 1985 that had been centralized in Moscow without sufficient managerial capacity to assume the full range of necessary administrative and managerial tasks. Moreover, the government faced a series of decisions for which there was little national consensus. These decisions included the allocation of roles and responsibilities, languages of instruction, educational standards, communication flows, reporting relationships, distribution of authority across levels of the education sector and most crucially, degree of centralization between national and local government bodies. Attention to the quality of instruction at the classroom level was often deferred while these larger policy issues were addressed. (Chapman, Weidman, Cohen, & Mercer, 2005, p. 516)

At the same time that Tajikistan gained independence from the Soviet Union, civil war broke out, and there were neither financial nor human resources to reform the education system to meet modern demands. The severe lack of financial resources during the 1990s made it practically impossible to provide a basic education for all, let alone to undertake a fundamental reform of the education system.

The government spending on education dropped dramatically from 11.1% of GDP to 2.6% in just ten years. The government recognizes

that between 4% and 6% of GDP is normally allocated to education in countries with comparable financial situations, and says it is committed to increased budget allocations for education. The 2002 Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) calls for an increase of funding for the education sector of 0.2% of GDP annually over a 3-year period. (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2003, p. 20)

According to UNESCO, the government expenditure on education in 2007 was 3.4% of GDP. Although government spending on education has been up for the past several years, the allocated funding does not reach the target. Additional funds that could help are instead siphoned off by bureaucracies and corruption at both national and local levels of government. Figure 1 shows public expenditures on education in Tajikistan. Figure 2 shows the distribution of public expenditure by education level in Tajikistan.



*Figure 1.* Public expenditure on education.

Source: Adapted from UNESCO. (2007). *UIS Statistics in brief*. Retrieved September 15, 2009, from [http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/document.aspx?ReportId=121&IF\\_Language=eng&BR\\_Country=7920&BR\\_Region=40530](http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/document.aspx?ReportId=121&IF_Language=eng&BR_Country=7920&BR_Region=40530)

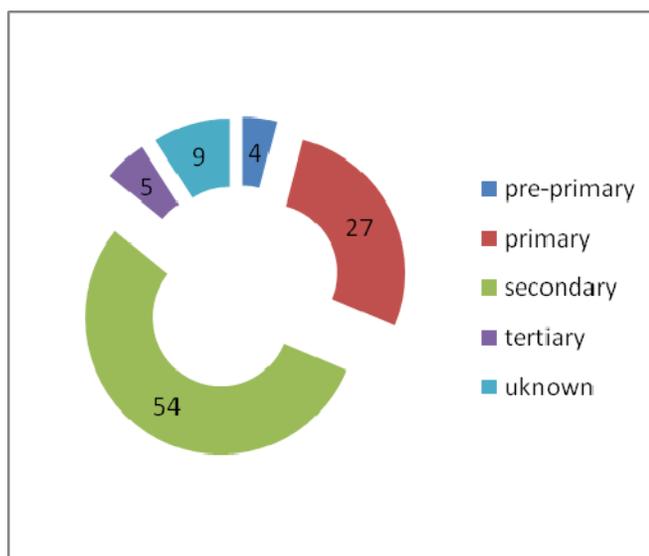


Figure 2. Public distribution on education per level

Source: Adapted from UNESCO. (2007). *UIS Statistics in brief*. Retrieved September 15, 2009, from [http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/document.aspx?ReportId=121&IF\\_Language=eng&BR\\_Country=7920&BR\\_Region=40530](http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/document.aspx?ReportId=121&IF_Language=eng&BR_Country=7920&BR_Region=40530)

The immense international financial and technical assistance from other countries and international financial institutions reached Tajikistan quite late, compared to other Central Asia republics, where the earlier influx of international organizations and funding somewhat helped to promote reforms (with the exception of Turkmenistan which chose to alienate itself from international “intrusion”). Tajikistan is five to ten years behind other Central Asia republics in terms of reforms. Nonetheless, instead of catching up, the Tajik government has been unwilling or unable to initiate meaningful reforms. This phenomenon can be found even among parents, who still live with the unfounded hope that a messiah will turn up and save the country from turmoil. Parents have been reluctant to accept and cooperate with educational reforms. Semikina (2001) notes that

many experts and parents questioned the need to extend education from 10 to 12 years, given that the Soviet model was so successful with just 10 years of education. It was financially more expensive for the government and the parents. From the government's point of view, the extension would involve stretching out the existing curriculum for an additional two years. Parents were not supportive of this reform, anticipating that it would cost them more to have their children enrolled in schools for two additional years.

The civil war caused schools to be vandalized and turned into military bases or military hostels. About 20% of the schools were destroyed or looted; a large number of teachers were killed or left the country. The civil war also had a psychological effect on the children who then needed special treatment. Out of goodwill, some teachers stored library books in their houses to protect them during the civil war. Others used them as fuel during cold winters. Desks and chairs were divided among local authorities and teachers. Today only a handful of schools in urban areas have adequate conditions for schoolchildren. Schools in rural areas are mostly abandoned, due to the severe conditions during Tajikistan's cold winters. The only resources teachers have are a blackboard and a piece of chalk. Most schools lack adequate sanitation (Table 2).

The government tried to decentralize school-level administration. Unfortunately, this shift in responsibility was not combined with any additional training for school principals who for decades had worked under the Ministry of Education's command. Many principals were appointed because they had connections to somebody in the government. Therefore, they were not necessarily skilled in resource allocation or building community participation (Chapman, Weidman, Cohen, & Mercer, 2005).

Table 2

*Number of Schools in Tajikistan in 2007-2008*

Type of school	Public	Private	Total
Comprehensive Secondary	3621	8	3629
Lyceum	36	7	43
Gymnasium	69	18	87
Evening schools	9		9

Source: Adapted from Mirzobekova, R., & Kurbanova, M., (2008, October 22). Таджикские школы: опять... *Asia Plus Information Agency*. Retrieved August 23, 2009, from <http://asiaplus.tj/articles/42/2640.html>

One of the biggest factors affecting the quality of education in Tajikistan is the inadequate level of teacher compensation (Chapman, Weidman, Cohen, & Mercer, 2005). This fact is recognized by government officials, educators, and parents. In 1998, for example, the average salary of teachers was \$6.90 per month, while the living wage was estimated at \$28.30 per month (Asian Development Bank, 2004). Low salaries discourage highly qualified individuals from entering or remaining in the field of teaching. Most qualified teachers leave to work for international organizations or to do private tutoring to earn comparably higher salaries. The most “unfortunate” teachers, those who are unable to find side jobs, require unofficial fees from students to compensate for their inadequate official salary. This is a burden for parents living in rural areas, who cannot afford to pay for school. If respect for teachers was traditionally high, today teaching is considered to be one of the lowest professions. Parents do not have trust

in teachers, who in turn require unofficial fees from students out of necessity. Low compensation also discourages college students from enrolling to teacher training schools. Students at teacher training schools avoid teaching once they graduate from school. The government tried to introduce some punitive measures by holding back the diplomas of graduates until they complete their mandatory three years of teaching in secondary schools. Unfortunately, because of high levels of corruption, these students can obtain fake certificates to “prove” they have completed their three years of teaching, while in fact they work in better paid jobs. In 2008, the Ministry of Education prepared to sue 4000 graduates who received diplomas at national expense, but are not willing to enter the teaching profession. According to the Ministry of Education, in 2007, there was a shortage of 6856 teachers in Tajikistan (Mirzobekova & Kurbanova, 2008). The Asia Development Bank estimates this shortage to be more like 11,000-12,000 teachers (Asian Development Bank, 2004).

Many children worldwide are forced to work, either because they live in poor families or for other reasons. Child labor has not bypassed the children of Tajikistan, who account for 40 percent of the total population (Briller, 2007). According to Tajikistan’s Labor Code, the minimum age for the employment of children is 16 years; workers younger than age 18 may work no more than six hours a day and 36 hours a week. However, it is acceptable for children under 16 to perform some light work that will not cause damage to their health and education, and with parental approval. This Labor Code is either misinterpreted or abused by local governments during the school year. The low quality of education is a serious concern in rural areas every fall. Besides the fact that rural communities are poorer and cannot support school initiatives and improvements,

some reasons relate to the way schools are organized. Every fall, high school and college students in rural areas are recruited to harvest cotton. Cotton, accounts for 11% of GDP in Tajikistan, and is one of the two main economic resources in Tajikistan. The cotton industry is controlled by a handful of investors who take advantage of farmers and students. Though the national government prohibits recruiting schoolchildren during the cotton seasons, the harvesting is still heavily dependent on children, and no punitive measures have been taken by the government. Typically, the curriculum is not fully implemented in rural schools during the cotton season. In some areas, the cotton season lasts two months; in others it can consume up to four months of the academic year. According to UNICEF, between 2000 and 2005, the overall percentage of children aged 5-14 in child labor activities in Tajikistan decreased by a factor of 2.4 (UNICEF, 2005). However, the Eurasianet news agency reports that in Tajikistan's southern districts near the Afghan border, most of the laborers picking cotton these days are women; the rest are children, some as young as six (Eurasianet, 2009). In 2002, schoolchildren typically missed school because it was closed for the cotton season. This year schools are open for students. After a long day in school, students go home to have lunch, and change clothes only to go to the cotton fields to pick cotton. It is prohibited by law to involve children in cotton picking, but local officials use coercive methods on teachers and students. For example, local officials, who are in charge of textbook distribution in schools, make it hard for children to get their textbooks if they refuse to go cotton picking. Sometimes during mid-term exams or finals, teachers might score students lower than they deserve.

In rare cases, students can be expelled from school (Eurasianet, 2009). A school principal in an interview with the International Organization for Migration said:

[w]hen children are used in field work for more than two months, even the best pupil is not able to catch up with missed classes, and all signatures and grades in the registers are nothing other than self-deception and the deception of schoolchildren. (2004, p. 24)

The issue of cotton harvesting by schoolchildren has been going on since independence in 1991 (Figure 3).

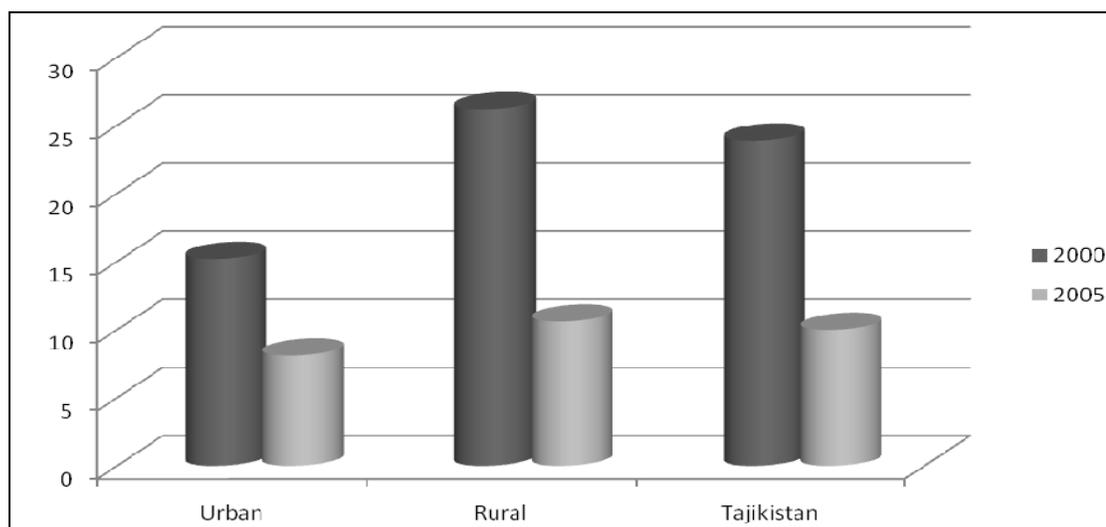


Figure 3. Child Labor, Tajikistan, 2000, 2005.

Source: Adapted from UNICEF. (2005). *The state of children and women in Tajikistan: Comparative analysis of MICS 2000 and MICS 2005 results*. Retrieved September 1, 2009, from [http://www.unicef.org/tajikistan/Comparative\\_Analises\\_Eng\\_report.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/tajikistan/Comparative_Analises_Eng_report.pdf)

### Revival of Islam in the Region

Soviet secularism flourished for almost 70 years in Tajikistan. Although secularism was not easy to achieve, the Soviet Union managed to suppress religious freedoms, and the division between the state and religion was absolutely clear. The suppression of religion continues up to the present. Almost all Central Asian countries are vulnerable to Islamic extremism. The civil war in Tajikistan was caused by Islamic

extremists who were rebelling against secularism. It was initiated by religious leaders who wanted to turn Tajikistan into an Islamic republic. Although many believe that the wounds of civil war have healed in Tajikistan, the consequences of war are still vivid. In addition to creating political, economic, and social turmoil, the religious revival in post-Soviet Tajikistan has had especially dramatic effects in the education sector. The government's inability to reach the poor and provide economically has forced the poor to seek refuge in mosques. Unfortunately, there are indications that Tajikistan is repeating Iran's history of the late 1970s. The number of youth turning to religion is growing day by day. The influence of salafism, "a puritanical Islamic movement that seeks to emulate the practices of the Prophet Mohammed and his companions," is especially popular among young Muslims. The International Crisis Group reports that approximately 20% of young Muslims who attend mosque are attracted to the teaching of salafis (ICG, 2009). Tajikistan is not an Islamic state, so it does not allocate time for people to pray five times per day, but people skip one hour of their work to attend a prayer. Students attend a congregational prayer on Fridays rather than sit in the classroom. The salafism movement is a recent phenomenon and is developing mostly in the capital, Dushanbe.

Rural areas of Tajikistan have always been more observant of religious traditions. When the Soviet Union collapsed, most of the radicals came from rural Tajikistan. Therefore, rural areas were the most affected by extremist religious views during the civil war and are still seeing the consequences. The revival of religion mostly affected the education sector and women's rights. Under the Soviet Union, women's rights were widespread, even in rural areas. During and after the war, the number of women who are not allowed to work or study is growing. First, during the war, parents

prohibited their girls from going to school out of fear of being kidnapped during the war. Today, keeping girls from school is based on religious tradition and poverty. This has led to a rapid reduction in female enrollment and graduation rates. The problem of young people not getting a complete education has been worsening. The *Mid-Decade Education for All 2008 Assessment* reported that initial transition rates from lower grades to senior grades increased from 56% to 61% until 2002. However, number of students, who reached grade 10, has decreased since 2003. In other words, only 55% of students in 9<sup>th</sup> grade went on to complete grade 10 in 2005 (UNESCO, 2008) (Table 3).

According to the EFA report, the main cause of high dropout rates is poverty. Unofficial school fees that compensate for low teacher salaries and fund school maintenance are overwhelming burdens for parents who can hardly find bread to feed their children. Also, hungry children typically do not go to school. To remedy this, international organizations introduced the Program for School meals. It is believed that the program had a positive effect on increasing attendance in schools. Attendance increased from 6 to 16% in schools where the program was implemented (UNESCO, 2008). However, increased rates of enrollment do not have a huge impact on the quality of schooling due to lack of skilled teachers and up-to-date curriculum and textbooks.

Another main cause for high dropout rates is a dramatic change in religious views in rural areas. Parents prohibit their daughters from attending school once they reach puberty. As soon as they turn 15 or 16 years old, they are considered good candidates for arranged marriages. Women are not allowed to attend mosques. Instead they convene for prayers in private homes. Parents hire female private religious teachers

Table 3

*Transition Rates*

	Transition rate from lower to senior grade of secondary school, %	
	Male	Female
National	62	47
GBAO	90	86
Hatlon Oblast	57	36
Sogd Oblast	61	60
Dushanbe	69	61
Republic-Subordinated District (RSD)	62	37
Urban area	67	57
Rural area	60	44

Source: Adapted from UNESCO. (2008). *Central Asia Sub-Region EFA Mid-Decade Assessment: Synthesis report*. Almaty: UNESCO. Retrieved September 15, 2009, from [http://www.unescobkk.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/efa/EFA\\_MDA/SSR\\_Drafts/CentralAsia\\_SSR\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.unescobkk.org/fileadmin/user_upload/efa/EFA_MDA/SSR_Drafts/CentralAsia_SSR_FINAL.pdf)

for their daughters. The role of women as a mother and wife in Tajikistan is becoming very similar to the role of women in the developing world. Women in Soviet Tajikistan had enjoyed equal work opportunity. Chlebowska (1990) notes that “sending a girl to school is rarely perceived essential, especially when there are household chores she could be performing which, in the eyes of parents, especially of the mother, are more important

than education” (p. 73). In addition to doing household chores, girls are more likely to do agricultural work to help their parents earn extra money. “Girls do not go to school, they work in the fields and they look after younger siblings” said an expert on gender issues in a BBC interview (Newman, 2006). They are preparing to be future mothers and wives. Formal education is not considered a top priority for women in rural areas of Tajikistan. “[T]he education of girls is treated as a matter for the family and community; religious leaders are opposed to schooling for girls; and there is a fear that the girl may be better educated than her future husband” (Chlebowska, 1990, p. 76). Therefore, there is a growing tendency for girls in rural areas to only study the Quran and pray five times a day. The government believes that such cases are rare. The government considers lack of school attendance to be illegal, and believes that “only one or two percent of girls do not attend school” says Abdujabor Rahmonov, the Minister of Education (Newman, 2006). Parents whose children miss school are fined between 800 and 1000 somoni (\$180-\$200). However, the assessment of international organizations shows a completely different picture. The gender parity index, a socioeconomic index usually designed to measure the relative access to education of males and females, from 2000 to 2005 went down from 1.0 to 0.97 in Tajikistan. The lowest index of gender parity is observed in urban areas (Sogd 0,83 and Dushanbe 0,89). Even these numbers in urban have been decreasing since 2005. The lowest representation (36%) of girls among students who progress to grade 10 is noted in Hatlon, southern region of Tajikistan. Experts worry that this number continues to drop every year. It is ironic that the gender parity rates in Hatlon are lowest, because Hatlon supported the pro-communist government during the civil war. People in Hatlon once believed that education and equality were the main drives to success.

However, in the years since independence, government officials have mainly come from Hatlon and are not trusted by the common people. “While the government has overall responsibility to implement the Constitutional and legal provisions for basic education, the rest of the society must be ready and willing to support the push toward universal education” starts the 2003 United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Assessment report of Millennium Development Goals (MDG) in Tajikistan (UNDP, 2003, p. 19). “Communities are not involved enough in the management of general education schools, claims the government” (UNDP, 2003, p. 19). The alarming symptoms of reduced respect for and value of knowledge in Tajik society are the low skill level of the working population as well as the moral and cultural decline resulting in negative trends such as predisposition to conformity, social apathy, and eventually, corruption. Therefore, people seek refuge in religious piety, which includes sending their children to madrasahs (religions schools) to study. The situation of gender disparity is not much brighter in other regions of Tajikistan. According to a UNDP Report on MDG achievement in the Republic of Tajikistan (2005), the country will not be able to eliminate gender inequality in primary and secondary education by 2015. No equality has been attained at any stage of education in Tajikistan. The UNESCO (2008) recommends that the government of Tajikistan address the following negative tendencies:

- Unequal access for males and females to the different stages of education; the higher the stage of education, the lower the representation of females.
- Considerable decrease in the number of females in senior grades of secondary school, especially in rural areas and in institutions of higher education. (UNESCO, 2008, p. 122)

### Summary

This chapter discussed the conditions of education system of Tajikistan today. It examined in depth three main factors that hinder economic and educational development in Tajikistan: government, corruption and incompetence of the government, unfavorable conditions for educational development, and revival of conservative religious beliefs. The chapter provides answers to why Tajikistan cannot have high literacy rates claimed by the government and reported by UNESCO.

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The current state of education in Tajikistan does not leave much hope for its people. Well-entrenched corruption in the government and incompetent government officials are leading the country to a more chaotic state day by day. Tajikistan relies on foreign aid for a good part of its budget (ICG, 2009). The government is unable or unwilling to address existing and arising problems. It is unable to provide for basic state services such as education and healthcare. The international community knows that “the government is not fulfilling the basic role that the West hopes for – an islet of stability on Afghanistan’s northern borders” (ICG, 2009, p. 20). The donor countries are aware of the situation in Tajikistan. However, they turn their attention to Tajikistan only when it becomes “the epicenter of a major crisis” (ICG, 2009, p. 20).

The Tajikistan that in recent history enjoyed high literacy rates is falling into illiteracy and joining the ranks of developing Asian and African countries. Current government claims of high literacy rates in Tajikistan should not be taken as valid. According to an Open Society Institute education specialist who has worked in Tajikistan’s education field for the past eight years and wishes to remain anonymous, the literacy rates are not as high as official figures report. She states

...the literacy rate is not as high as official figures state, and [I] believe from classroom observations that it is going down. I think that Tajikistan is considering participation in PISA [Program for International Student Assessment]. This would

certainly show much lower functional literacy rates. I would expect it to be like Kyrgyzstan, where 68% of students scored below the minimum functional level. (Anonymous, personal e-mail, October 7, 2009)

The government of Tajikistan and the international community are well aware of declining literacy rates. The government acknowledges that

the lack of up-to-date methods and complete and reliable social statistics in Tajikistan is creating enormous difficulties with regards to performing systematic analysis of the situation in the social sphere. (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) n.d., p. 3)

According to Abbas, “since the authorities cannot assure reforms and upgrading, they tend to draw attention to and satisfaction from literacy figures and enrollment ratios” (N. Abbas, personal communication, October 7, 2009).

The majority of people in Tajikistan who are 24 years and older had attended Soviet schools, and as a result are highly literate. If the government were more prudent and resourceful, it could have used its internal resources to educate the younger generation, especially in rural areas. Abbas continues by questioning the government on “why despite high literacy the potential of educated cadres remains mainly underutilized, at times unutilized” (personal communication, 2009). Tajikistan has a growing population that is very young: 40 percent of its people were born after independence in 1991. They had limited to no access to quality education during the five-year civil war. Rural areas of Tajikistan account for 75 percent of the total population, and some people there have never attended school. As things stand now, it seems impossible to have literacy rates as high as 99.9 percent for youth 15-24 years old (UNESCO, 2009b).

## Recommendations

In order to tackle the problem of illiteracy in Tajikistan, the Tajik government and the international community should come together once again. With a population of only seven million people, Tajikistan has the capacity to prevent the waves of illiteracy that threaten its educational system. The following are recommendations that could help prevent a further decline in Tajikistan's literacy rates. They include both external recommendations addressed to the international community, and internal recommendations addressed to the government and people of Tajikistan.

### ❑ External Recommendations to UNESCO and Other Donors

1. UNESCO should explore different avenues to evaluate the accuracy of reported figures by governments that provide weak and unreliable statistics. For example, UNESCO could establish an Independent Review Board that would work closely with governments to oversee reported data. UNESCO should not publish inaccurate data that misrepresent literacy rates.

### ❑ Internal Recommendations to the Government and People of Tajikistan

1. The Tajik government should make basic improvements to schools that are in very poor condition, such as providing heaters for use in the severe winters and fixing broken windows. The role of teachers should be improved by increasing their status in the society. The government should increase teacher salaries, and create favorable conditions for learning by eliminating corruption in schools. Parents and Teacher Associations should be reinforced to engage parents in the education of their children.

2. School administrators should involve parents in reading activities with their children. Children should be read to when they are young. Special time should be allocated for reading both at home and in schools. Reading hours will benefit all communities.

3. Many international organizations believe that “village-run schemes hold promise for delivering benefits” (ICG, 2009, p. 20). The national government should provide more freedom to local districts, enabling them to take charge in their communities. Local authorities should be trained in managerial skills, so they can mobilize their communities to support literacy programs. They should take extra measures to establish literacy programs in rural areas.

4. The Tajik government and people should encourage a national revival of free reading. Free reading is voluntary reading that is not imposed upon children. Free reading leads to high literacy rates. It is a powerful means of developing and maintaining literacy: those who read more also read better, write better, and have larger vocabularies (Krashen, 1993). Back in the 1920s, the Soviet Union organized literacy programs in order to eradicate illiteracy in all its republics. People read everywhere: in clubs, in offices, homes, and schools. Similar efforts need to be reinstated.

5. If free reading leads to literacy development, a major issue is how we can encourage children and adults to read. We should make sure children have access to good books. The Tajik government should support publishing books for children and adults. Maintaining literacy or “progressing forward from that stage of basic literacy is a matter of practice and opportunity” (Jeffries, 1967, p. 120).

Therefore, local publishing houses should be producing books in local languages to make reading accessible to both children and adults.

6. One of the recent innovations in developed countries is recording audio books. This type of project on a national scale would be costly for countries like Tajikistan. However, small projects to record audio books should be initiated by the government or people of Tajikistan on a voluntary basis. Audio books could be extremely useful for students during the cotton-picking season, for example. When students are in the field, they could take advantage of audio books to continue learning while out of the classroom. Small radios should be provided to students picking cotton so they could listen to recorded educational materials or radio news and stories.

7. “There is a powerful circumstantial case for the role of the library in helping children develop literacy” (Krashen, 1998, p. 1). If the Tajik government is unable to revive the traditional libraries built during Soviet times, it should introduce the concept of mobile libraries in villages used in many countries with developing economies. A mobile library is a library housed in a large van that provides books to those without functioning local libraries. Mobile library services were initiated by the National Library Board of Singapore in 1960 (National Library Board of Singapore, 2004). This was mainly to ease the overwhelming demand on main libraries. Tajikistan should adopt the concept to provide service to people in rural areas who do not have access to education and books. Mobile library services could be a temporary solution before the government is able to reestablish and maintain traditional libraries in Tajikistan.

8. Since Tajikistan is experiencing a resurgence of conservative Islam, separate schools should be established for male and female students in rural areas. This will give families a chance to choose between traditional and non-traditional schools. Once students learn to read and write, they can make a choice about whether or not to pursue further education. At the same time, the government should increase quotas for female students in higher education.

9. Women in rural areas are not allowed to work in order to look after their children, or due to traditional and religious beliefs. Their daily schedule is demanding (Chlebowska, 1990). They start their day at 5 a.m., before the rest of the family awakes, and finish after 10 p.m., when the rest of the family is going to bed. They usually miss the opportunity to study due to family traditions or religious beliefs. National and local governments should take measures to provide opportunities for these women to learn to read and write. The organization of literacy programs for women in rural areas is essential. If these women are able to read and write, they can read to their children and teach them how to write.

Tajikistan enjoyed high literacy rates of almost 100 percent during the Soviet times. There is a literate and educated pool of human resources in the country. If these recommendations can be implemented, perhaps the dream of literacy can again become a reality in Tajikistan and the promise of education a right for all Tajiks.

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