

# **Educational Reforms in Saudi Arabia, 1995-2010**

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**DECLARATION**

I declare that the dissertation entitled “**Educational Reforms in Saudi Arabia, 1995-2010**” submitted by me in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy** of Jawaharlal Nehru University is my own work. The dissertation has not been submitted for any other degree of this University or any other university.

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We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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# Chapter One: Introduction

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The Saudi education system attracted enormous international attention after it came to light that fifteen out of the nineteen hijackers who carried out the 11 September attacks on the US were the citizens of Saudi Arabia (Johnston, 2002). Even though they were mostly Western educated, they were the products of the Saudi education system, in the sense that they completed their school and college education in the Kingdom and set out to Western universities for higher education. The Saudi education system has impacted their young minds, it was argued, which later in their life led them to taking the extreme path of terror.

The constant focus on the education policy and education system afterwards may not have helped much to change the system, but have certainly made the monarchy work for cleansing the system of its extremist tendencies. Academic writings and scholarly debates on the subject during this period, both within and outside the country, indicate that educational reforms remained a key agenda of the policy makers for almost the entire century since Al Saud have taken over the Arabian Peninsula. However, the new found interest in the education policy and system among scholars and common people after the 11 September attacks on the US, has forced the rulers to re-look the policy of promoting puritanical Islam through its education system that at times leads to intolerance and also clashes with modern idea of equality within the diversity of faiths.

In this age of globalisation and fast exchange of information and ideas, the Kingdom cannot remain isolated from modern ideas particularly when its nationals could get a closer look at the modern, open and free societies in the West and other parts of the world. These interactions and intermingling are bound to create extreme reactions especially among those fed with an highly glorified understanding of religion that divides human beings on the basis of faith. In addition to a radical education system at home, the

happenings around the world particularly a feeling that Islam and Muslim societies are under attack from the West, have aided in creating the kind of siege mentality in the collective conscience of youth which in turns results extreme reactions.

What the fifteen years of reforms has done to the Saudi education system cannot be understood without a broad understanding of earlier educational reform measures. When Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was established in its present form in 1932, schools and colleges were non-existent in the region and the only exceptions were some private schools on Ottoman patterns in Hijaz region. First ruler of Saudi Arabia, Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Rahman Al Saud (Ibn Saud), realised the importance of education for the development of the nascent state and set out a detailed plan to establish schools which were modelled on Egyptian education system, which in turn was influenced by the French model of education. Since then many reforms have been implemented to improve the education system within the framework of prevailing socio-economic and political environments. As the Kingdom was founded, an extensive programme to establish schools was started and a centralized educational policy was entrusted to the Directorate of Education. The country at that time needed more schools and colleges and an organised system of education and the education system was thus designed to “observe the teachings of Islam, disseminate knowledge and construct schools” (MoE, 2006).

Since the founding of the state, its education system has been heavily dependent on religion, that is, Wahhabi version of Islam.<sup>1</sup> The Wahhabi ideology and scholars play a pivotal role in deciding the educational curriculum. The development of the education system and the formulation of the policy are aimed at preserving the Wahhabi foundation of the regime. According to the Ministry of Education, “the objectives of Saudi educational policy are to ensure that education becomes more efficient to meet the religious, economic and social needs of the country.” It also states that, “education in Saudi Arabia has four special characteristics; an emphasis on Islam, a centralized education system, separate education for men and women and state financial support” (MoE, 2006). The oil boom in the 1970s saw rapid growth of business and industries. Driven by the need for skilled manpower and influx of oil revenue, the education system

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed understanding of Wahhabism see Wahhab, 1996; and Commins, 2006.

witnessed enormous growth. Education and human resource development were given high priority.

During the reigns of King Faisal (1964-1975) and King Khalid (1975-1982), Saudi Arabia witnessed two five-year plans that promoted education to develop human resource through education and training and to facilitate the nation's economic infrastructure. The education system was redesigned to accommodate an increasing number of elementary and intermediate school students. In addition to creating comprehensive universities, Islamic schools and universities were also established and were funded generously. This was due to several reasons including, an attempt by the members of the ruling family to appease the leaders of the religious establishment at home and, at the same time, to underscore their Islamic credentials abroad. The policy further gained momentum and strength after the 1979 *Kabah* siege by Juhayman al-Uthaiby and his followers.<sup>2</sup> The regime started giving more funds and allocations for religious establishments and religious universities, thus strengthening the hold of religious leaders on education policy.

Since the early 1990s, Saudi Arabia has taken a number of steps towards reforming its education system. These were an outcome of realisation on part of the authorities for the need to improve the quality and infrastructure of education. The education system in the country has to grapple with many problems including, the involvement of religion and religious leadership in formulation and implementation of education policy, inability to generate adequate skilled manpower for the growing economy and inequitable reach of education to various sections of society.

Two major incidents that pushed Saudi Arabia to take the path of reforms in the field of education was the 'Petition Movement' after the 1991 Kuwait war and the 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States of America. Apart from these, the willingness on part of King Abdullah to take the difficult path of reforms in education despite opposition from within the Al Saud family and from conservative section of society is also an important factor for these reform measures.

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<sup>2</sup> For details see, Trofimov, 2008.



The 'Petition Movement' in the early 1990s was the outcome of long-felt desire for political participation that manifested itself in the form of petitions and memorandums by intellectuals, businessmen, academicians, journalists and other prominent citizens. Apart from demands for political participation and introduction of constitution, the petition movement also included demands for educational reforms. The reform measures were later accelerated due to external pressure in the aftermath of 11 September attacks. This also brought to the fore the question of religious content in the Saudi school curriculum, which was blamed for harbouring intolerance towards Shias, Jews and other 'unbelievers'.

Over the years, education budgets have continuously increased and resulted in huge rise in the number of schools and decline of illiteracy. The budget allocation for 2002 was SR 53 billion and rose to SR 61.7 billion in 2004, to SR 69.9 billion in 2005, to SR 104.6 billion in 2008 and to SR 122 billion in 2009 (MEP, 2010). A consistent increase in the budget allocation can be recognised from the above figures and simultaneously literacy rate has also increased. According to the United Nations *Arab Human Development Report*, in 2005 Saudi adult literacy rate stood at 82.9 percent (UNDP, 2009). As per the *Ninth Development Plan Report* of the Ministry of Economy and Planning, 28 percent of total population was perusing education at various level in 2008 (MEP, 2010).

According to the Ministry of Education, in 2005-06 there were 28,225 (13,386 for boys and 14,839 for girls) schools functioning in all the districts of Saudi Arabia. This was a huge increase as there were only 226 schools in 1951, most of being concentrated in the Hejaz province. A total of around 4.3 million students were studying in these schools during the academic year 2005-06 with approximately identical number of boys and girls. The first university, which is now known as King Saud University, was established in 1957 but by 2009 there were around 50 government and private universities in the Kingdom. Most of the universities focus either only on sciences and technology or religion and theology. The social science subjects do not figure in the development plan of the government and thus are not taught in these universities.

From the time Crown Prince Abdullah took over the reins of power due to the illness of King Fahd in 1995, he has promised to bring reforms. The 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States revived the demands for reforms, including educational reforms. This time however, the Saudi monarchy also had to face external criticisms over educational curriculum in the Kingdom and the United States exerted pressure on the government to reform the system and remove all derogatory remarks against Jews and Christians as well as Shias and other Muslims (those not following Wahhabi Islam) from the school texts (Prokop, 2003). It was alleged that the school texts and school curriculum foment extremism (CRFHI, 2008). Such external criticism evoked sharp reaction from elements within the Kingdom and the Islamic as well as liberal opposition alleged that the government is budging to the external demands rather than taking into consideration the genuine demands of people. As Abdullah became the King in August 2005, he again promised reforms including educational reforms.

Thus ever since he became the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia in 1995, Abdullah has taken a number of steps to bring educational reforms. Ten year 'Strategic Plan' (2004-2014) has been introduced in 2004 with the aim to improve educational standards in the Kingdom. Teachers training and monitoring plan have been launched and educational curriculum and school text books have been revised. Plans have been made for regular evaluation and up gradation of educational materials. King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz Public Education Development Project (*Tatweer Project*) was launched in 2005. The National Intellectual Dialogue was introduced by Abdullah (the then Crown Prince) in 2003 to promote the culture of debate in the society and to arrive at a consensus for reforms in various aspects of life. A new co-education university the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) has been established in 2010 and a woman, Norah al-Fayez, was appointed Deputy Education Minister in charge of girls' education in 2009.

In pursuing his reform agenda, King Abdullah is trying to strike a balance between the need and demand for reforms and opposition to these reforms from conservative sections of society. For example, the government was criticised by many religious scholars for allowing mixing of sexes in the newly inaugurated KAUST. Such criticisms have come

from prominent figures such as Sheikh Saad al-Shithri, a member of Council of Senior Ulema, but his outspoken criticisms eventually led to his removal from the council by the King (Al-Mufadhali, 2009). Similarly, many of the steps taken towards reform have invited criticism from conservative religious leaders. For example, the initiative for revision of school curriculum was criticised by scholars including Abdullah Ibn Jibrin, who earlier held various posts in the government. Jibrin together with 150 scholars signed a petition against changing the school curriculum and stated that any change in books written by Islamic scholars is a divergence from the faith (Abu Taleb, 2005).

### ***Survey of the Literature***

A huge quantity of literature is available in both Arabic and English on Saudi education system and educational reforms in Saudi Arabia. The available literature has been reviewed within the framework of three broad themes; Religion and Education, Educational Reforms and Changing Trends in Education. The first theme deals with the influence wielded by religion and religious authorities upon the education policy and education system and looks into the impact of such influence on the society. The second theme looks into the educational reforms brought about by the ruling family, taking into consideration the compulsions that led to these reforms. The response of the common people as well as religious leaders to these reforms makes an important aspect of study of these reforms. The third and final theme deals with the changing patterns of education system in Saudi Arabia, including, the shift in formulation of educational policy that has gradually brought about changes on the ground.

### **Religion and Education**

Religion, that is, Wahhabi Islam plays a very important role in Saudi Arabia in every aspect of life including education. The education system has been shaped and used by religious as well as political forces. Religion has a huge influence on the education system and religious scholars play a very important role in the education system and education policy of Saudi Arabia (Prokop, 2003). Therefore, the education system and education policy go hand in hand with religion in Saudi Arabia. If one goes into the genesis of the Kingdom, the country emerged as a result of marriage between a political

and a religious family. One of the areas that continuously remained under the influence of religious authorities is education, which is administered by the religious authorities and Wahhabi Islam is the basis of formulation of education policy of Saudi Arabia (Al-Sumbul, 1998; Al-Aqil, 2005).

This heavy emphasis on religion in education has its effect both on economy as well as society. The Saudi human resource lacks professional skills. The focus on religion, on the other hand, has not helped much to reign in the rise of fundamentalism in Saudi society. Religious extremism has emerged as a major challenge in Saudi Arabia. The 11 September attacks on United States, Riyadh bombing in 2003 and the popularity of Osama Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda have forced the Saudi authorities to take steps to reign in extremism. This, in turn, has led to a relook at the religious contents of school texts as well as monitoring of schools and colleges. This happened because of the realization that the religious content in the educational curriculum indeed has played its role in fomenting extremism in the society (Prokop, 2003; Dekmijian, 2003).

It has been asserted by certain scholars that the interplay of religion with the education system has not helped much in improving the rampant unemployment in Saudi Arabia (Rugh, 2002). On the contrary, some argued that Saudi education system is very much capable of fulfilling the economic requirements of growth and development and is well equipped to produce skilled manpower for the growing needs of the Saudi market (Saleh, 1986). However, in comparison to the education system of other Arab countries, the education system of Saudi Arabia lacks on many fronts, including the economic aspect, mostly due to a heavy tilt towards religion (Bahgat, 1999).

The ruling family has strong links with the religious authorities and this in turn make it easier to have a close link with the people. Religion has worked as a force, which helped the ruling family in the foundation and administration of the Kingdom (Al-Yassini, 1985). Religion has been used not just to legitimise the family rule but also to further the interest of the Kingdom in the world. Saudi Arabia has tried to spread its influence in the Islamic world by using religion. As one of its education policy goals, the government has funded many Islamic educational institutions all over the Muslim world and beyond

(MoE, 2006). Thus the education system of Saudi Arabia has an influence all over the Islamic world, particularly in those areas where the quality and infrastructure of education are highly deficient (Prokop, 2003).

In general, religion as an institution had always had political influence, with support from power brokers of the society. The traditions and laws have also played an important role in giving high priority to religious doctrines in various fields of life in every society. Likewise, institutionalised religion, with political support, can have influences on education, a common phenomenon among Western European countries till early twentieth century (Russell, 2010). Saudi Arabia, however, still has to deal with religious influence on education, more than any other aspect of life.

Even though religion plays a very important role in education system and education policy of Saudi Arabia, the schools and higher education institutions have evolved significantly in the past three decades. The quality and standard of existing educational institutions have improved, while new universities and institutions have also been established. The improvement in the education system, however, has not translated into educational self-sufficiency, nor has it fulfilled the requirement of Saudi market economy (Ball and Halwachi, 1985). The institutions of higher learning have not been able to make Saudi Arabia self-sufficient in education but they have improved a great deal and have come a long way from what was the situation in the early twentieth century.

### **Education Reforms**

The need for educational reforms was initially felt in Saudi Arabia after the economic potential of oil reserves were realized in the 1950s. Modern schools and universities were founded and the General Directorate of Girl's Education was created in 1961 that also saw some resistance from conservative elements. The oil boom of the 1970s paved way for increased investment in the field of education to develop human resource. At the same time, concerns over increasing religious dissent forced the rulers to accept the demands for more Islamic schools and universities. The 1980s, however, could not see much progress on educational reforms as the Kingdom had to grapple with many other internal and external issues. The initial reforms had to face resistance from the conservative and

fundamentalist elements of the society which were backed by the *ulemas*. The recent reforms, however, have not seen the same resistance though a section of religious leadership still opposes such reforms. Scholars argue that certain areas of education like religious education, Islamic jurisprudence, theology and girls' education are a "no go area" as far as reforms are concerned. Saudi Arabia has always faced some kind of resistance or opposition to educational reforms from the religious elements (Prokop, 2003).

Following the Kuwait war of 1991, the demands for educational reforms, along with larger political reforms in the form of 'petition movement', took Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries by storm (Ansari, 2004). These demands for educational reforms came from both liberal and religious elements of society (Dekmijian, 2003). However, these demands for educational reform could not get much attention and were put into cold storage, as the Kingdom was also facing much larger demands for political reforms (Lacroix, 2004; Raphaeli, 2005). The need for educational reforms finally had to be prioritized in the wake of the 11 September attacks. This brought external pressure as well for a revision of education policy and wider educational reforms. Initiatives were taken to revise the school curriculum and text books, which in turn was criticised by intellectuals and religious authorities alike on the ground that the rulers were succumbing to the external pressure while not giving due consideration to domestic demands (Al-Rasheed, 2006). Indeed, demands for educational reforms did not get much attention until external pressure was exerted on the ruling family.

First as Crown Prince and then as King, Abdullah promised to bring reforms and emphasised particularly on the need for educational reforms. He took a number of steps in this direction. Educational curriculum was reorganised, schools text books were revised, initiatives were taken for teachers training and monitoring of classes. National Intellectual Dialogue was initiated in 2003. The new ten-year strategic plan was introduced in 2004. A new education policy was formulated in 2005 with an emphasis on more investment in higher education and encouraging private investment in the field of education at all levels. Plans were made to increase the participation of women in general and professional education, in particular, to help enhance their share in the economy.

Initiatives were taken in 2008 for inter-religious dialogue for address and curtail growing extremism in the society. Many Saudi and foreign scholars appreciate the steps taken by Abdullah to further the cause of changes in educational standard and quality in the Kingdom (Al-Hamid, 2004, Montagu, 2010).

However, there is a flip side to this. Not all the sections of Saudi society are very receptive towards these reforms in the field of education and termed the efforts for modernisation of education as *fitna* (evil) initiatives. While, on the other hand, some sections of the population are not satisfied with the pace of educational reforms and is critical of the authorities for their failure to bring the required reforms. Though the King was very keen on reforms in educational front (MoE, 2003), his efforts have not produced the desired result as the schools still grapple with the question of quality and standard while colleges and universities faced problems in maintaining international standards and producing required human resource. Amidst rampant unemployment, the Saudi economy increasingly depended upon foreign hands to fulfil its professional demands. Scholars argue that the need of the hour was a complete overhaul of the system rather than the piecemeal approach of the government (Prokop, 2003). Saudi Arabia still, after decades of educational reforms and huge expenditure, lacks behind in most fields of study, including science and technology, politics and economy (Al-Eisa, 2009). Some have vehemently argued for a total revamp of educational curricula (Sager, 2004).

The authorities, at the same time, face opposition from traditional and religious elements who demand Islamization of education on the ground that Saudi Arabia is an Islamic country and it needs to stick to its culture and tradition. Apart from that, there are many other factors that hinder smooth and fast paced educational reforms. The recent socio-economic and cultural changes have also proved to be a hindrance for bringing educational reforms. Inadequate training for teachers, lack of awareness for technical education, lack of desire on part of the ruling family to allow advancement of social sciences and the decay in education system, have impeded educational reforms. Scholars have argued that the educational reforms face major roadblocks in various forms including religious opposition and socio-cultural changes as well as other organisational problems (Al-Sumbul, 1998; Al-Hamid, 2004).

## **Changing Trends in Education**

The formulation of education policy in Saudi Arabia has witnessed a shift in the last two decades, particularly under Abdullah. Earlier the policy used to focus exclusively on the preservation of religious heritage and spread of religious education system. However, a new found enthusiasm can be felt at policy formulation level for bringing in quality education to the masses. Private educational institutions are being given, by Saudi standards, huge autonomy and are encouraged to invest at primary and secondary levels. The establishment of a co-educational university, despite oppositions, is a revolutionary step. A woman deputy minister has been given the charge of girls' education and that symbolises the changing trends in the higher echelons of Saudi polity towards education. The trends in formulation of education policy in Saudi Arabia are changing, new ideas are creeping in and making their impact felt on the ground (MoE, 2006).

This changing trend in education policy has, no doubt, resulted into a new vigour in the education system. Although it still needs huge improvements, Abdullah's period is witness to the process of transformation of the education system. The ruler is doing a balancing act; at one level, he faces demands for change from various sections and, at another level, he would have to accommodate the religious and cultural heritage of the country. It has yet to be seen how much success Abdullah gains in his efforts, but the education system, nevertheless, is looking to adopt a new look not so far in the future (Al-Hamid, 2004; Al-Eisa, 2009).

These changing trends at policy and system level are the cause as well as result of the changing perception of the people towards education. Earlier, education had a narrow meaning and meant only religious education. The economic requirements added the need to learn skills to the existing understanding. The new interactions of the Saudi people with the developed and developing world of Europe, the US and Asia further helped change the attitude of people towards education. Gradually, it has become a norm to achieve higher education in various fields. This, however, has not established an equitable understanding of various fields of education among the new generation of Saudi Arabia. People have contradictory perspectives towards various fields of education in a



society where tribal instincts and loyalty play the most important role in determining the role and understanding of people towards life (Hamza, 1968; Farsi, 1982).

Another area where this changing trend has been observed is the acceptability among the masses for the rights of women and minorities for their right to attain education. It was more than difficult for women as well as minorities to achieve desired level of education within the Saudi system. The Shias, though still are prohibited from maintaining their distinct educational identity, have found some acceptability in the existing education system and policy (Bosbait and Wilson, 2005). Women have for long been given the window of opportunity in a very limited field of study. Women, traditionally, find it easier to pursue the fields of medicine and teaching due to social acceptability. The need for having women as doctors and teachers cannot be undermined. But a woman might face social ostracization for choosing a field of study, which have remained the exclusive prerogative of the Saudi men (Ramazani, 1985; Vidyasagar and Rea, 2004). The trends are changing as far as perspective of women's education is concerned. An example of such change is the newly established King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), which is the first co-educational institution of higher learning in Saudi Arabia. It shows that, some acceptability has been gained, that a woman may also be a part of higher education in the field of science and technology.

Another aspect of the changing educational trends in the monarchy is that people of various hues, including women and minorities, are no longer ready to confine themselves to boundaries set by the authorities. Rather, they are adopting a more demanding attitude to have their share in the society and economy. Religious and gender based differences are no longer acceptable to the people, at least, in the field of education. The new generation of Saudi youth is not ready to take the things as they are and desperately want to change the status quo prevailing and choking the educational ambitions of the youth (Al-Rasheed, 2006; Moaddel, 2006).

The literature surveyed reflects on the existing scholarship in Saudi education system that focuses on aspects like development of education system, economic aspect of education, discriminatory education policy, religious education and its affects and the hurdles for

educational reforms at large. The reformatory steps taken during the last fifteen years have also been discussed by some scholars.<sup>3</sup> However, educational reforms in Saudi Arabia between 1995 and 2010 have not been studied within the context of the challenges faced by the regime. A 'knowledge gap' exists and requires a comprehensive study on the education reform measures taken by King Abdullah with an understanding of prevailing social realities in Saudi Arabia.

### ***Rationale, Research Problem and Methodology of Research***

The proposed research seeks to study the role of religion (Wahhabi Islam) and religious leadership (Wahhabi clergy) in education system and education policy of Saudi Arabia and steps taken for bringing educational reforms. The factors that have mandated these reforms and the resulting changes comprise another aspect of this research. King Abdullah faces a number of roadblocks in his endeavour for educational reforms, which have also been analysed. There are various aspects which the research takes into consideration while analysing the educational reforms including the reach of education among various segments of society. The gap between traditional and modern education is another aspect which has been analysed to evaluate the changes brought about by the reforms. Budget allocations for different fields of education as well as for different levels of education have also been studied in depth to analyse the reforms and its effects.

The research takes a period of fifteen years to understand the educational reforms in Saudi Arabia so as to analyse the changing trends in the field of education. The rationale behind choosing this period is that by and large this was the period that saw a number of demands from within the Kingdom for reforms including educational reforms. The year 1995 has been chosen as this was the year when the current King Abdullah practically took over reign after the deteriorated health conditions of half-brother King Fahd. This research has tried to find out the reasons for religious intervention in education system and education policy in Saudi Arabia and try to locate the gap between modern and traditional education in the Kingdom.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Moaddel (2006), Al-Eisa (2009), Al-Raheed (2006) and al-Aqil (2004).

An education system plays the role of the back bone of socio-economic condition of a society. The Saudi society has remained conservative to a large extent and reforms that are aimed at improving the quality of education have not translated into improving the situation. Therefore, a study of the education policy and education system within the context of reforms would be a valuable addition to the existing research in understanding education system and policy of Saudi Arabia.

The main objectives of the research is to examine the education policy of Saudi Arabia and to understand the role of religious elements in the education system and to study the educational reforms introduced by Abdullah within the context of internal and external demands. The research problem this study seeks to deal with is: Why Saudi Education system has not improved much despite years of educational reform measures and huge spending on education? The research endeavours to test two hypotheses during the course of research:

1. Wahhabi Islam has an important role in formulation of education policy and organisation of education system in Saudi Arabia.
2. The ability of King Abdullah to bring about reforms in the educational system is hampered by conservative forces within Saudi Arabia.

The education policy of Saudi Arabia was analysed on the basis of education policy document available with the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Higher Education. It is mainly a qualitative research and conclusions have been arrived at on the basis of assessment of literature and data available through variety of sources. Data regarding the budget allocation to different branches of education, percentage of budget allocation to education, growth in the number of schools, colleges and universities, number of male and female students in various fields of study etc have been collected and compared as per the promised target in the policy documents. Figures regarding number of religious institutions, percentage of religious teachings at primary, secondary and higher level of education, analysis of religious content in the curriculum of technical institutes have been analysed to determine the religious intervention in education system. Major reform measures are identified and data regarding their target group and aims have been

procured through the primary documents available in Arabic. A comparison of targets and achievements would be helpful in determining the extent of changes and limitations of these reforms. Arabic news portals have been surveyed for gaining information on the ongoing debate within the Kingdom regarding these reform measures and its effects.

## *Chapters*

The dissertation consists of five chapters. The second chapter on *Education Policy and Education System* is divided into two sections. The first section deals with the education policy giving a detailed analysis of educational policy practices in Saudi Arabia. It takes a step-by-step approach to deal with issues on the basis of education policy and examines the tribal and religious nature of the society and their impact on education policy formulation, nature of the state and its influence on the education policy and the people who device the education policy. The role of ruling Al Saud and Al Shaikh families in policy formulation and the role of religious scholars, bureaucrats, intellectuals and academicians in education policy formulation have been discussed. This section analyses the education policy of Saudi Arabia within the framework of question that whether the policy is inherently discriminatory towards any group, tribe or community.

The second section of this chapter deals with the education system. It briefly discusses the educational practices in the Arabian Peninsula before the establishment of the modern Saudi Kingdom. Giving a detailed analysis of the genesis of Saudi education system it traces the evolution of primary, secondary and tertiary education. The current trend in the education system has been discussed in detail paving the way for a detailed analysis of curriculum, courses and teaching methodology as prevalent in the Kingdom.

The third chapter on *Educational Reforms in Saudi Arabia (1995-2010)* analyses the educational reform measures taken from 1995 to 2010. Before a discussion on the reform measures it traces the evolution of King Abdullah from his early life to accession in 2005. A biographical sketch of Abdullah is followed by his handling of important events like the 1979 *Kabah* siege, the Kuwait crisis, 11 September attacks on the US, emergence of Al-Qaeda and war on Iraq in his capacity as head of the National Guard, the Crown Prince and eventually as the King. This helps in contextualising his education policy

initiatives. The chapter further analyses the reform steps in different areas of education, namely, in school education, higher education, educational budget, women's education and minority education in terms of the problems, reform steps and achievements.

The fourth chapter on the *Changing Trends and Limitations* tries to find answers to two principal questions. Firstly, what were the changes brought about by the educational reform measures in the education policy and system of Saudi Arabia? Secondly, what are the limitations of these reform measures in bringing about desired changes? It also looks at the challenges and limitations faced by King Abdullah in effecting the educational reforms within the context of larger political, economic and social reforms. It deals with major reform measures, changes as well as their limitations. Issues such as curriculum development, text-book revision, teacher's training and improvement in school environment programme that the *Tatweer Project* and Comprehensive Educational Assessment Project (Assessment Project) infrastructure development and expansion programme have also been analysed in greater details.

The fifth and final chapter sums up the findings of research testing the hypotheses.

# Chapter Two: Education Policy and Education System

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Saudi Arabia's education system has undergone several changes since the 1920s when modern education was first introduced. The policy adapted at that time has also witnessed transition. It was a time when the region was going through political transition and large part of the Arabian Peninsula came under the rule of Al Saud family.<sup>1</sup> Al Saud were the ruling family of the settlement of Diriyah of Najd who gave refuge to the 18<sup>th</sup> century religious reformer Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab and set out to expand their rule based on his teachings. During the nineteenth century they twice succeeded in establishing their rule in large parts of Arabian Peninsula but were not allowed to prosper by the Ottoman Empire. In 1892 the family had to take refuge in Kuwait after being defeated by the Ibn Rashids. In 1902 Al Saud again succeeded in establishing their rule in Najd by defeating their archrivals Ibn Rashids. Over the next three decades, Al Saud were able to establish a Kingdom incorporating large parts of the Arabian Peninsula including the important region of Hejaz, under the help of the able leadership of Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Rahman Al Saud and aided by the political chaos in the region ensuing with the fall of Ottoman Empire.

The development of modern education system in Saudi Arabia started in 1925 with the establishment of Directorate General of Education and introduction of "secular education was opposed by the *ulema* who feared that it would damage the religious fabric of Saudi society" (Al-Yassini, 1985: 111). The education policy at that time tried to satisfy the

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<sup>1</sup> For further reading on the Al Saud and establishment of Saudi Arabia, refer Holden; 1981, Riyhani; 1928, Anderson; 1977, Armstrong; 1934, Commins; 2006 and Darlow; 2010.

apprehensions of Saudi religious leaders by incorporating the religion in education policy to make it consistent with the “religious character of the society” (Al-Yassini, 1985: 111).

During the past nine decades the education policy and education system of Saudi Arabia has evolved and a variety of changes have been witnessed in the education policy as well as education system. The education policy continues to focus on religion but has realised the need for human resource development and scientific advancement of the society which can be termed as the focal point of educational reform initiatives during the last quarter of twentieth century. The education system, in consistent with the change in policy, has witnessed a huge development. It calls for a detailed analysis of the continuing process of change in the education policy and education system of Saudi Arabia.

This chapter has been divided into two sections; education policy and education system. The former analyses the education policy, the prevailing practices in devising the policy and the problems facing it. It takes a step-by-step approach to answer a few questions like, what is the basis of education policy? What role the tribal and religious nature of the society play in the education policy formulation? How the nature of the state impacts the education policy? Who formulates the education policy? What is the role of Al Saud and Al Shaikh families in policy formulation? What is the role of religious scholars, bureaucrats, intellectuals and academicians in education policy formulation? Is the policy inherently discriminatory towards any group, tribe or community? The second part looks into the education system. The genesis of education system, educational practices, nature of schools, colleges and universities, curriculum, syllabus, teaching methods and teachers training would be discussed in length in this section. The chapter would set the frame work to further analyse the demands for reforms and steps taken in that direction.

### *Education Policy*

Education in relation to state can have three purposes; growth of the nation, development of individuals and citizens training for better governance. But education policy of a state does not “wholly and completely” aims at any one of these purposes (Russell, 2010: 15). An education policy is formulated keeping in mind all three of these objectives in varying

degrees and Saudi Arabia is no exception. The 2006 *Education Policy of Saudi Arabia*, for example, defines,

The education policy is the guidelines that make the basis of the process of education and training to perform the duty of introducing an individual to God and religion, establishment of a system to follow his orders, to fulfil the societal needs and to achieve the objectives of the nation that includes all stages of education, the plans, methods and means of education and its administration and the mechanism to organise education system and its related aspects (MoE, 2006).

The above statement gives an idea that the education policy also based on these three targets hypothesised by Bertrand Russell. However, the 2006 *Education Policy of Saudi Arabia* states that “Saudi Arabia’s education policy flows from Islam” and this is what makes Saudi Arabia a unique case (MoE, 2006). Russell argues that “in so far as education is influenced by religion, it is influenced by institutional religion, which controls ancient foundations and in many countries controls the State” (Russell, 2010: 71). In this case religion is an important tool in the formulation of the education policy. The 2006 *Education Policy of Saudi Arabia* gives an idea about the importance of ‘state religion’ in education policy formulation, whereby the whole education system is based on religious beliefs and doctrines (MoE, 2006). The institutionalised religion influences the education policy due to several reasons. Russell’s argument that it is not the individual religion but institutionalised form of religion that influences education comes true for Saudi Arabia (Russell, 2010). Institutionalised religion in case of Saudi Arabia is Wahhabi Islam, which would be termed as “religion” in the following paragraphs. Two main reasons can be said to be playing its role in this phenomenon; the nature of Saudi society and the nature of Saudi state.

### **Society and Education Policy**

The social structure of Saudi Arabia is one reason for such an emphasis on religion in the education policy, whereby it is difficult for the policy makers to deviate from the set patterns of people’s perception about life and their world view. Tribal nature of society deeply embedded in religion has to be considered while any policy is formulated. For example, the education policy document states,



The life in this world is a phase for acting and cultivating, here the Muslim cultivates for the eternal life of hereafter through faith and good deed, so today it's only action and n accountability while tomorrow it would be accountability and no action (MoE, 2006).

The belief system of people is always kept in mind while a policy is chalked out and this acquires exceptional importance when it comes to education. A tribal society like Saudi Arabia, where according to Madawi Al-Rasheed, knowledge and history was a domain of tribal *sheikhs* (religious leader) who had “a vested interest in the past as a source for explaining power relations, intertribal conflicts and alliances” (Al-Rasheed, 2001: 28). Interpretation of past was an exclusive domain of tribal chiefs, who manipulated this for maintaining their authority. However, even after decades of change and modernisation, the society has not seen drastic change. This had to be kept in mind by policy makers while formulation of education policy. A policy that could challenge the authority of *amir* (political leader/chief) and *sheikh* (religious leader) has to be avoided to ensure co-operation from them and successful implementation of any such policy.

For example, after the *Kabah* siege incident in 1979, the Islamic content of the curriculum was reinforced (Prokop, 2003).<sup>2</sup> The act of rebellion was perceived by the policy makers as a mark of discontent among the population with respect to Islamic credentials of the state, particularly in the field of education. Likewise, earlier the authorities had to face opposition from the tribal and religious leaders when the study of modern subjects was introduced in schools, as it was perceived to be against the teachings of Islam. The religious opposition to modernisation has impeded the process of change in Saudi Arabia since the establishment of the Kingdom.

After the conquest of most of the Arabia, Abdul Aziz bin Al Saud realised the need to modernise the political and social structure to sustain his rule. His aspiration to modify the administrative institutions in the country to achieve his political objectives often

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<sup>2</sup> On 20 November 1979, a group of four to five hundred armed rebels led by Juhaiman al-Uthabi, took over the *Kabah*, the holiest Islamic site in Mecca. They declared Muhammad bin Abdullah al-Qahtani, the brother-in-law of al-Uthabi to be the Mahdi (redeemer of Islam whose coming at end times is foretold in prophetic traditions). The siege finally came to an end after two weeks of military operation led by Saudi Army with the help of Pakistani Commandoes and French Paratroopers, in which most of the rebels including al-Uthabi were killed.

clashed with the understanding of state by the *ulema* (religious scholars) who insisted “that answers to contemporary situations be sought in the *shari’ah* (Islamic jurisprudence) and traditional Islamic institutions” (Al-Yassini, 1985: 42). Al-Yassini mentions that,

In June 1930, the *ulama* met in Mecca to discuss Ibn Saud’s educational policies. They issued a *fatwa* protesting the inclusion of foreign languages, geography and drawing in the curricula of the newly founded Directorate of education. They objected to the study of foreign language because they believed that this would enable Muslims to learn the religion of unbelievers; to geography because it proposed that the earth is round, while a *Quranic* verse indicates that it is flat; and to drawing because, with painting it reproduces God’s Creation (Al-Yassini, 1985: 50).

The *ulema* acted as the protector of the conscience of the people who follow religion in all aspect of life and refer and contact their religious leaders on the religious suitability of any action. The religious structure of the society has been one of the main reasons for slow change and modernisation process in the country.

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The nature of society along with human psychology, international trend and dominant educational pattern are the main sources of education policy in Saudi Arabia (Al-Aqil, 2005). Further to enhance the religious credentials of education, the policy looks to emphasise on Islamic past and Islamic heritage of the country (Al-Aqil, 2005). Why is it that the policy makers are so sensitive about societal sentiments as far as education policy is concerned, while the same society and its aspirations vis-à-vis other aspects of life are overlooked continuously? Political aspiration, for instance, is not valued at all (Al-Rasheed, 2006).

The answer to this may lie in another question: is the society very sensitive about the educational practices in the country? Scholars argue that Islam gives a much esteemed position to education and seeking of knowledge. For example, the *Quran* says, “Do they not contemplate the Kingdom of Heaven and the things which God has created?” (The Holy Quran, VII: 183). Religious sermons always invoke people to achieve education as the *Quran* and *Sunnah* (Prophet’s tradition) have put so much emphasis on seeking of knowledge. Prophet’s tradition like, “The seeking of knowledge is a duty incumbent on



every Muslim, man and woman” that highlights the need and importance of education, makes the population sensitive towards education system and policy. The policy is very sensitive towards society because people are very sensitive towards education policy, which in turn has been cultivated in the minds due to high degree of emphasis on education in religious scriptures. According to Saleh, education is valued, encouraged and supported by Islam and that “Saudi Arabia follows an Islamic philosophy of education and the seeds of its education system are founded in Islam” (Saleh, 1986: 18).

The tribal nature of society is another factor that influences the education policy formulation with its heavy emphasis on religion. Education in Saudi Arabia, unlike other parts of the world, is not a tool for social mobility and much prestige is not attached to education as far as social stratification is concerned. The tribal system is such that hierarchy and respect within comes with stereotypical prestige; more number of wives, more children, wealth and religious knowledge and outlook brings more respect and opportunities. In such a scenario, the policy makers try to attract people towards education while keeping a high degree of religious fervour in the system. The need for education is emphasised with respect to religious importance and the emphasis in religion on attaining education is highlighted. The policy gives an impression that it is a religious duty that is being fulfilled by establishing educational institutions and not in pursuit of knowledge.

However, with technological advancements and investment in science and technology education, the attitude of the population towards science and technology has changed. High degree of prestige is attached to science education that can bring good job particularly in government sector and newly established universities and institutes. On the other hand, social science education does not attract many students because of low prestige involved and the policy also does not encourage people to pursue social sciences. Religious education attracts huge numbers due to the kind of job opportunities it provides in government departments. Respect and prestige are also attached with religious scholars.

Thus education policy is designed keeping in mind the religious and tribal nature of society; social acceptability becomes a criterion for proper implementation and success of any policy. The education policy is formulated with the aim to protect the society from the onslaught of globalisation and modernity (Al-Aqil, 2005). The society, according to the policy makers, is not ready for change as yet, as far as education is concerned.

### **Nature of the State and Philosophy of Education**

The other major factor which causes such high degree of religious intervention in education policy is the nature of the state. According to Madawi Al-Rasheed, “the Saudi state extracts legitimacy from its populace using a combination of variables, the most dominant being tribalism, Islam and the expanding state bureaucracy” (Al-Rasheed, 2001: 25). The state uses education as a tool for bestowing this legitimacy. The development of modern education is a recent phenomenon in Saudi Arabia, attributed mainly to oil revenues. The old method of dissemination of knowledge was tribal in nature, meaning the religious *sheikhs* and tribal *amirs* had a monopoly on the construction of past for creating legitimacy for their power and leadership,

This historical tradition was undermined with the establishment of the state, the formalization of the education system and the growth of state monopoly over the production of historical narrative, facilitated by oil wealth. The ruling elite was keen to establish an uncontested past and continuity with the past, to justify its present role in politics; the traditional historical genre was altered in favour of master narratives, pregnant with moralization, mystification and enchantment. The primary objective of these narratives was the enforcement of the legitimacy of the state and the strengthening of its internal security by persuading the population of the natural and inevitable development that led to the creation of the state and the consolidation of Saudi rulers (Al-Rasheed, 2001: 29).

The state’s monopoly over education serves the purpose of legitimising the family rule. Religion provides the tool for utilisation of education for creation of this legitimacy, thus the education system looks towards giving an “Islamic understanding of life” (MoE, 2006). The same philosophy works behind the high emphasis on Islam in the policy. The education policy targets to create an ideal Islamic society with the help of individuals who believe in Islam and confide their loyalty to Al Saud. The education policy invokes

religious symbols to reaffirm the religious credentials of the ruling family. According to the *2006 Education Policy of Saudi Arabia*, the main goal of education is:

True and complete understanding of Islam, cultivation and spreading of Islamic belief, arming the students with Islamic teachings and worldview and high values gaining variety of knowledge and expertise and development of fraternal feelings, economic and cultural development, making the individual an useful part of society (MoE, 2006).

It further states that, “One should not forget that the common goal of all the stages of education in the Kingdom is an Islamic education to the students, complete and balanced from all spiritual, mental, emotional, social and physical aspects” (MoE, 2006).

Michaela Prokop argues that “Islam continues to be the main legitimating source for the al-Saud family” and so the policy has been “circumscribed by the concern to preserve the religious foundations of the regime” (Prokop, 2003: 77). The education policy looks to preserve the Islamic past and religious heritage of the society, individuals are trained to behave within the parameters of Islamic way of life. Obedience to authority is emphasised by that policy.

This emphasis on religion, as explained above, is not just used for legitimacy of Al Saud rule in the country, but it also plays a role in determining the leadership role of Saudi Arabia within the Islamic world. Education again becomes an easy tool for enhancing this role of the Kingdom. For example, the latest education policy document states that the Islamic University is open for the students of other Muslim countries so that they can preach Islam after they return to their countries upon completion of their education (MoE, 2006). It also says that the universities in the Kingdom enter into partnership with universities in other Islamic countries to look for the goals of the Islamic community on the basis of Islamic civilisation (MoE 2006). The education policy is overtly conscious that Saudi Arabia is the leader of the Islamic world and that it should act in a way to enhance this position.

However, Gawdat Bahgat implies that the religious fervour in education policy is due to lack of well articulated development plan. According to him:

Unlike other countries, the expansion of education system in the Gulf monarchies was not part of a slow and gradual process of social and economic development. Instead, it was part of a newly-created welfare state where most of the social services, including schools, were offered to indigenous population either completely free or for a minimum charge. The goal was to share oil revenues among the local population (Bahgat, 1999: 129).

The ruling families who earned their legitimacy on the ground of tribalism and religion fear losing their legitimacy after influx of huge oil revenues. The people were not happy with the fact that all the benefits of newly found wealth were being enjoyed exclusively by the ruling family. This forced these monarchies to turn into a kind of welfare state and education development followed. Since the education policy was not a result of well-articulated planning, the religious element constituted a large part of the policy. This view as articulated by Bahgat, does not take into consideration the religious intervention in the education policy formulation since the foundation of the state. The state, since its inception, has used religion as the basis of its legitimacy and education has provided a tool for this. The phenomenon of expansion in public system of education with the rise in oil revenues was again to emphasise the legitimacy of the ruling family. Earlier it was religion alone which was being used but later oil wealth helped the Al Saud enhance their legitimacy.

The nature of the state along with nature of the society are two factors that play an important role in having such emphasis on religion in the education policy. Religious foundation gives legitimacy to the state and education becomes an easy tool for emphasising the religious credential of the rulers. The oil revenue has further helped the state to enhance its legitimacy. On the other hand the society, which is tribal and religious in nature, also has its share in determining the education policy and its religious emphasis.

### **Principal Players**

Al Saud and Al Shaikh are two most important families of the country. Al Saud is the ruling family that hailed from the Najdi town of Diriyah and whose leader Muhammad Ibn Saud gave refuge to Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab in 1744 after he was expelled by the ruler of al-Uyayna due to his religious activities. One of the princes from the family,

Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Rahman Al Saud, later captured Riyadh in 1902 and the current ruling family are the descendants of Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Rahman Al Saud. Al Shaikh is the religious family who belong to another Najdi town of Uyayna, where Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab was born in 1703 in a prestigious family of theologians and judges. Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab dissented from the established norms of religion and preached reform and criticized the practices of shrine worship, intercession in worship and innovation in religion. Al Shaikhs are the descendants of Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab who took refuge in Diriyah to propagate his religious beliefs.

The Kingdom came into existence with the alliance between Al Saud and Al Shaikh families that started in eighteenth century and Saudi Arabia, in its current form, was founded in 1932.<sup>3</sup> Since then the two families have effectively ruled the country through co-option and forcible rejection of dissent. Religion, custom and the need for consensus are the limiting factors for the monarchy which otherwise enjoys absolute power (Cordesman, 1997). To analyse the role of different sections of the ruling hierarchy in education policy formulation, one must understand the nuances of the political system. Saudi Arabia, according to Ayman Al-Yassini, has a patrimonial political system where the ruler rules the state as his “private or personal affair”, like guardian of a family (Al-Yassini, 1985: 36-37). The administration is used selectively without set rules and division of labour. The leader or the King remains the centre of power and authority.

Monarchy is the central institution of the government, whereby the King is both the head of government and head of state and decisions are taken with consultation among senior princes. The monarchy is followed by *Majlis al-Wuzara* (Council of Ministers), which was first appointed in 1953 by Ibn Saud, to advise the King on general policy and to administer the bureaucracy (Cordesman, 1997). The Council of Ministers is headed by the King as Prime Minister and includes the Crown Prince, who is Deputy Prime Minister, the second Deputy Prime Minister, who is second in line of succession and a

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<sup>3</sup> Most of the central Arabia came under the rule of Saud family by 1775 and by 1806 the Saud family captured almost entire Arabian Peninsula and parts of Syria and Iraq. They were expelled by Muhammad Ali of Egypt on behalf of Ottoman Empire, but the Saud returned, then eliminated again by the Rashids of Shammar in 1890. Abd Al-Aziz Al-Saud revived the Saud rule in 1902 and finally in 1932 Saudi Arabia was established under the leadership of this military and political genius.

number of Ministers, Ministers of State, advisors and Head of autonomous organisations. The composition of cabinet has changed with time. While in 1950s and 1960s most of the ministers were from the Royal family, the cabinet of King Abdullah has only five (out of 19) members from Al Saud family excluding the King; nevertheless, important portfolios have Al Sauds as Ministers. For example, Crown Prince and Deputy Prime Minister Sultan bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud is Minister of Defence and Aviation, Prince Na'if bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud is the Second Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister, Prince Saud Al-Faisal Al Saud is in-charge of Ministry of Foreign Affairs, while Prince Faisal bin Abdullah bin Muhammad Al Saud, son-in-law of King Abdullah is Minister of Education. Another important portfolio of Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs is under Prince Mansour bin Met'eb bin Abdul Aziz Al-Saud.

The *Majlis al-Shura* (Consultative Council) came into existence after a number of reforms measures were announced by King Fahd in 1992 following demands for political reform that intensified in the aftermath of 1991 Kuwait crisis. The first council was formed in 1993 with 60 and a Speaker. The number of members was subsequently increased to 90, 120 and the present council consists of 150 and a Speaker (CC, 2011). The *Majlis al-Shura* is a deliberative body whose members are appointed by the King. "Beyond its general advisory role, the *Majlis* is permitted to assume a potentially important role between the authorities and the people" (Dekmejian, 1998: 207). The Consultative Council works with the help of its eight committees, which also include a committee for Education, Culture and Media Affairs (Dekmejian, 1998: 206). The members and Speaker of the Consultative Council are chosen from among the prominent figures in various professional fields. The current Speaker of *Majlis* is Abdullah bin Muhammad Al Shaikh, a member of Al Shaikh family, (CC, 2011).<sup>4</sup>

The role of *ulema* is very important in the Saudi political hierarchy. The *ulema* led by Al Shaikh family, descendant of Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab, effectively share power with the Al Saud. They exercise a decisive influence on key political matters. Education policy is one field that has seen a lot of intervention and influence by the religious leaders

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<sup>4</sup> Al Shaikh family, the descendants of Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab, have smoothly shared power with Al Saud since the establishment of first Saudi state in 1774.



who have deep penetration in various departments and directorates in the two ministries that oversee all the educational activities in the country.

Education comes under two ministries, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Higher Education, which device policies and take steps for its implementation through its various departments. Earlier there was a separate General Directorate of Girl's Education, but it was merged with the Ministry of Education in 2002 (Prokop 2003). Prince Fahd (later King) was appointed Education Minister when the Ministry of Education was established in 1953 (Wahibi, 1978). These two ministries control education at both school and higher levels. Most of the ministers in Ministry of education, since its inception in 1953, have been the members of Al Saud family, while Ministry of Higher Education saw mostly ministers from among prominent scholars and academicians. However, most of the policy formulation is done by the ruling family with consultation with the influential Princes from among the ruling family and with *Hia`t al-Ulema al-Kibar al-Saudiyah*, the Saudi Council of Senior Ulema (CSU). Members of the al-Shaikh family had always headed the CSU. Currently the Ministry of Education is headed by Prince Faisal bin Abdullah bin Muhammad Al Saud (the son-in-law of the King) while the Ministry of Higher Education is led by Dr. Khalid bin Muhammad al-Anqari.

The CSU has a huge influence on the education policy of Saudi Arabia. Any policy on education and cultural aspect is discussed with the CSU and their opinion is taken into consideration. The CSU is an official body, created in 1971 during the reign of King Faisal, comprised of senior religious scholars. The CSU provides a kind of religious-legal cushion to the government on important policy matters in return for official recognition of their religious authority. They employ considerable influence on policy matters related to socio-cultural factors including education. This body is led by the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia and comprise of the members appointed the King. The CSU was restructured in February 2009 and constitute 20 members excluding the chairman. While the chairman serves for life other members have a four-year term. Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdul Aziz Bin Abdullah Bin Muhammad Al Shaikh is the chairman, the other members are of the CSU are: Sheikh Saleh Bin Mohammed Al-Lehaidan, Sheikh Saleh Bin Abdulrahman Al-Hussein, Sheikh Dr. Saleh Bin Abdullah Bin Humaid, Sheikh Dr.

Abdullah Bin Abdulmohsen Al-Turki, Sheikh Abdullah Bin Abdulrahman Al-Ghedayyan, Sheikh Abdullah Bin Sulaiman Bin Muni', Sheikh Dr. Saleh Bin Fauzan Al-Fawzan, Sheikh Dr. Abdulwahab Bin Ibrahim Abu Solaiman, Sheikh Dr. Abdullah Bin Mohammed Bin Ibrahim Aal Al-Sheikh, Sheikh Dr. Ahmad Seir Mubarak, Sheikh Dr. Abdullah Bin Mohammed Al-Mutlaq, Sheikh Dr. Yaqub Bin Abdulwahab Bin Yousef Al-Bahussein, Sheikh Dr. Abdulkarim Bin Abdullah Bin Abdulrahman Al-Khudair, Sheikh Dr. Ali Bin Abbas Bin Othman Hakami, Sheikh Abdullah Bin Mohammed Bin Saad Al-Khaneen, Sheikh Dr. Mohammad Bin Mohammad Al-Mukhtar Mohamed, Sheikh Mohammed Bin Hassan Bin Abdulrahman Bin Abdullatif Aal Al-Sheikh, Sheikh Dr. Saad Bin Nasser Bin Abdul Aziz Al-Shathri, Sheikh Dr. Qais Bin Mohammed Bin Abdullatif Aal Al-Sheikh Mubarak and Sheikh Dr. Mohammed Bin Abdulkarim Bin Abdul Aziz Al-Issa (RESA, 2009).

Ayman Al-Yassini argues that the religious and tribal leaders who played a very important role in the administration earlier have lost their control and a new secular-educated elite has emerged (Al-Yassini, 1985). This may be true in part as technocrats, bureaucrats and new professional leaders from different walks of life have increased their penetration in society. But to say that the religious and tribal leaders have completely lost their control on society and in administration would be incorrect. As would be discussed, when it comes to education, their role has gone up leaps and bounds.

### **Nature of Education Policy**

The religious nature of education policy is clear from the 2006 *Education Policy of Saudi Arabia* which states: "Seeking knowledge is obligatory for all according to Islamic doctrines and it is incumbent on the state to facilitate and spread education at different stages as much as it is capable of" (MoE, 2006). It further explains: "... the religious education is the basis for all years of education at elementary, intermediate and secondary level and the Islamic culture is a basic subject for all years at higher level" (MoE, 2006). Another clause says that the basis of education policy is to, "benefit from all useful knowledge under the light of Islam" (MoE, 2006).

The education policy is based on Islam and is not based on the principles of liberty and freedom. Education policy, in fact, has been prepared with the “concern to preserve the religious foundation of the regime” (Prokop, 2003: 78). The government takes advice from the *ulema* in education policy formulation and the religious leaders exercise major clout on the education policy matters in the Kingdom.

The other aspect of education policy is that it completely misses out on the need for special educational requirements of the Shias. Saudi Arabia has an estimated 10-15 percent of Shia population, who are mainly concentrated in the oil-rich Eastern province. The education policy does not take into consideration the concerns of the Shias for their need to have specific syllabus, schools and institutions. The Shias also have to use the study material prescribed by the state, whose contents at times, are completely discriminatory against them (Prokop, 2003). Rather than giving its minority the freedom to device their own educational materials, the education policy is discriminatory against them.

Education policy prescribes special status to women and identifies that women are equal to men, so much so that, women also have the right to education to attain a dignified life under the light of Islamic *Shari'a* (MoE, 2006). However, the education policy further recognises that the educational needs of women are different from men and should suit their nature.

In part, this is the result of cultural norms that see women as simply being childbearers. At the same time, it is the result of Traditional ideologies (that is motherhood and/or religious fundamentalist views) where women are considered primarily in charge of domestic chores and child rearing and therefore literacy and certainly advance schooling do not appear as prerequisites for performing those traditional roles (Morrow and Torres 1995: 390).

The above assessment regarding educational practices and gender comes true for Saudi Arabia as well. The education policy talks about suitable education for women; the suitability here is, linked to the stereotypical image of women, embedded in the socio-cultural traditions, that they should be educated so that the children can get better upbringing. The purpose of women education is reduced to benefitting the Muslim society by rearing their next generation.

However, the practice regarding women education among the masses has changed significantly in recent times. Accordingly the education policy makers of Saudi Arabia have woken up to the fact that women should be treated at par with men and should be given liberty to choose their field of education and way of life. Even though the policy is discriminatory as far as women are concerned, changes have started to take place as the state has taken some strong steps in this direction.<sup>5</sup>

The education policy of Saudi Arabia is based on religion, is formulated with the concern to preserve and enhance the legitimacy of the ruling family, is sensitive towards the requirements of Saudi population but fails to give equal and adequate opportunities to all sections of society. There are several intricacies involved as far as the people who device the education policy are concerned and no one section of the ruling elite have a dominating say in education policy matters. The winds of change have started to blow as far as education policy is concerned which would be the subject matter of the coming chapters.

### *Education System*

Education system is an important determinant of the social and cultural advancement of a country apart from playing substantial part in economic growth, which makes it an interesting subject of study. The Saudi education system, like any other, has evolved from the historical methods of imparting education. Education system of a country depends upon a number of variables like, history, society, culture and civilisation, globalisation, science and technology, economy etc, which shape the education system in the country. The education system of Saudi Arabia, on the one hand, has its basis in the traditional system of learning, while on the other hand it has also accepted influence from modern Western system of education. It is a curious mixture of Arab and foreign systems as well as traditional and modern ways of teaching and learning processes. This is the reason why many other Arab countries including Egypt, Qatar, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, Iraq, Libya, Mauritania, UAE and Oman, follow similar education system (Al-Sumbul, 1998).

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<sup>5</sup> This aspect would be further discussed in the fourth chapter.

Saudi education system is unique in the sense that the geographic area has remained the centre of Islamic educational activities following the birth of Islam in 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Since the formation of the Kingdom in 1932, it has strived to maintain this identity while also trying position itself as the leading light of modern education in the region.

### **The Genesis of Education System**

For centuries the most common form of education in the Arab world was the *Kuttab* (centre of imparting education run by individual scholars with small group of students), where students were taught to recite the Quran and sometimes learned basic writing and arithmetical skills (Husen, 1994). Education was not prevalent in the Arabian Peninsula before the establishment of Saudi Arabia, except in Hejaz region. The cities of Mecca and Medina were the main centres of educational activities. Abdullah Al-Aqil classifies the traditional education system before the establishment of Saudi Arabia into three types; Mosque education, *Kuttab* and School education (Al-Aqil, 2005).

According to Al-Sumbul, “there was no official institution to oversee the educational activities before the formation of Saudi Arabia” in the Arabian Peninsula (Al-Sumbul, 1998: 64). Independent teachers used to organise classes for different subjects in mosques or homes. As mentioned earlier only Hejaz had some schools, which was initially established only after the region came under the Ottoman influence. The first school in the city of Medina was established only towards the end of eighteenth century (Al-Aqil, 2005). Some more schools soon followed in the same pattern under the patronage of Hashemite rulers of Hejaz and also by some independent scholars. By all accounts, before the foundation of Saudi Arabia, only the cities of Mecca and Medina had tradition of schools for imparting education, while other places followed the old system of *Kuttab* for educating children since the establishment of Islamic government in Medina during the time of Prophet Muhammad.

As the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was proclaimed in 1932, the need for organising the education system and introduction of modern education was felt by its visionary founder, King Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Rahman Al Saud. The ground work for establishment of an education system was carried out during 1902-1932, the period when Saudi Arabia, as in

its current form, came under the rule of Al Saud. In 1925 when Hejaz came under the Saudi rule, the *Amir* (Abdul Aziz Al Saud)<sup>6</sup> held a meeting with the religious scholars of Mecca and the need for spread of education was emphasised upon them (Al-Aqil, 2005). The same year General Directorate of Education was formed, to over look the establishment and operation of schools in various parts of the state, which was later turned into the Ministry of Education in 1953.

Between 1925 and 1953, an extensive programme to establish schools in the Kingdom was started and a centralized education policy was entrusted to the Directorate of Education. The system was modelled on the Egyptian system, which, in turn, was heavily influenced by the French model. The 1930s and 1940s witnessed the establishment of a number of schools and colleges. As of 1951, there were 226 schools in Saudi Arabia spread across the country, but Hejaz had the highest concentration of schools. Gradually other provinces also saw an increase in the number of schools.

When oil reserves were found in 1930s and its economic potential was realised, the Kingdom also realised the need for skilled manpower. The monarchy, that had already started the modernisation of education system to aid necessary change in the political and social structure of the state, set out to speed up the expansion of modern education system to help the economic advancement of the country. The discovery of oil proved to be an important factor in pushing for the establishment of new educational and professional institutions. The monarchy realised the need to improve the education infrastructure of the country to cater to the need of growing economic activity owing to the commercial production of oil in 1945.

The first university now known as the King Saud University was founded in Riyadh in 1957. The following year, the Kingdom adopted a uniform educational policy in co-operation with other Arab states that provided for a six-year compulsory elementary education, a three-year optional intermediate education and a three-year optional secondary education for men only. In 1961, education for women became mandatory, with the responsibility being given to the newly-created General Directorate of Girls

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<sup>6</sup> Saudi Arabia was proclaimed a Kingdom in 1932 when the ruler adopted the title of *Malik*, before which the ruler used the title *Amir* which meant the ruler of an Emirate.

Education. There was considerable resistance to female education within the Kingdom, but it abated gradually. However, segregation of sexes and discrimination at various levels in the field of higher education persisted till very recently.

### **Elementary, Intermediate and Secondary Education**

As a result of consistent effort on part of the government to promote elementary education, the 1950s and 1960s saw huge rise in the number of schools and enrolment of students. Even though initially people were apprehensive about sending girls to schools, within years the enrolment for girls in schools came was on par with boys. The Saudi government has been mindful of the need to expand and improve the education system in the country to ensure the need for an educated and quality human resource. Investment at elementary, intermediate and secondary levels of education saw huge rise during the decades after the establishment of Ministry of Education.

According to Ayman al-Yassini,

In 1948 there were only 182 primary schools, with an enrolment of 21,409 students. By 1952, the number had risen to 301 schools with an enrolment of 39,920 students. In 1960-62, the Saudi education system began to experience even more rapid changes. These changes were evident in increasing public expenditure; the number of schools, teachers, student enrolments and graduations; a new emphasis on technical training and higher education; and women's education (Al-Yassini, 1985: 111).

The educational infrastructure in the country improved rapidly. The system was expanded to provide basic education to children under the age of 16, apart from improving the quality of teaching and learning process. Accordingly, the number of schools for boys and girls grew and also spread in different parts of Saudi Arabia, including in the Eastern and Northern provinces. As noted above, there were 226 schools in 1951 and 301 in 1952 and with huge increase in the next two decades, the number of school rose to almost 3,000 in 1969-70 and more than 5,000 in the year 1974-75 (MoI, 1998). In the next ten years huge rise in number of intermediate and secondary schools were recorded and in 1984-85, almost 14,000 schools were functioning in the country (MoI, 1998). It further increased to 27,229 schools in during the year 2000-2001 (MoE, 2010a).

**Table 2.1: Number of Schools in Saudi Arabia, 1967 - 2001**

Academic Year	Kindergarten	Elementary		Intermediate		Secondary		Special Education		Adult Education		Grand Total
		Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	
1967/68	26	266	1,278	22	241	8	90	4	14	2	554	2,502
1968/69	37	320	1,365	22	300	5	107	5	16	2	606	2,782
1969/70	45	378	1,446	22	333	6	110	5	21	2	611	2,976
1970/71	49	390	1,518	27	371	6	118	5	22	4	613	3,120
1971/72	46	488	1,666	69	418	15	127	6	22	4	628	3,486
1972/73	65	587	1,880	95	465	18	135	11	29	25	743	4,050
1973/74	85	721	1,990	98	490	19	141	11	31	74	852	4,509
1974/75	91	881	2,147	117	532	26	156	11	31	350	1,075	5,414
1975/76	103	1,008	2,489	136	584	35	177	11	34	471	1,272	6,317
1976/77	104	1,147	2,731	164	660	48	209	16	37	628	1,519	7,260
1977/78	123	1,270	3,174	198	792	58	273	18	36	696	1,819	8,454
1978/79	150	1,471	3,512	273	937	85	322	23	39	875	2,091	9,775
1979/80	169	1,655	3,658	350	1,027	113	343	23	40	997	2,360	10,732
1980/81	195	1,877	3,867	430	1,109	138	375	21	37	1,078	1,913	11,037
1981/82	244	2,204	4,083	515	1,212	175	463	9	18	1,340	2,567	12,827
1982/83	324	2,515	4,277	604	1,318	220	497	9	18	1,427	1,800	13,007

Cont...



1983/84	377	2,836	4,423	710	1,388	270	533	9	17	1,461	1,553	13,576
1984/85	436	3,200	4,517	819	1,502	308	583	10	18	1,699	1,560	14,651
1985/86	492	3,310	4,502	875	1,512	335	593	10	17	1,585	1,433	14,663
1986/87	551	3,370	4,642	899	1,557	366	624	11	19	1,462	1,402	14,902
1987/88	534	3,619	4,807	1,027	1,744	448	722	11	19	1,569	1,325	15,824
1988/89	500	3,754	4,877	1,103	1,843	499	763	12	21	1,588	1,361	16,320
1989/90	551	3,832	4,976	1,135	1,975	520	735	12	23	1,053	1,290	16,101
1990/91	646	3,930	5,167	1,194	2,095	581	773	15	23	1,014	1,246	16,683
1991/92	727	4,194	5,296	1,358	2,224	685	852	16	30	1,067	1,288	17,736
1992/93	680	4,674	5,556	1,600	2,409	795	937	17	37	1,264	1,266	19,234
1993/94	751	5,014	5,697	1,822	2,609	875	1,040	13	44	1,375	1,288	20,527
1994/95	795	5,164	5,707	1,955	2,643	948	1,054	18	48	1,451	1,258	21,040
1995/96	837	5,379	5,838	2,099	2,799	1,064	1,254	20	50	1,598	1,238	22,175
1996/97	894	5,576	5,933	2,223	2,931	1,171	1,347	21	69	1,749	1,220	23,133
1997/98	936	5,847	6,011	2,437	3,071	1,361	1,482	25	95	1,954	1,197	24,415
1998/99	962	6,086	6,148	2,637	3,267	1,497	1,622	25	118	2,107	1,155	25,623
1999/2000	992	6,206	6,209	2,716	3,391	1,571	1,721	24	180	2,228	1,107	26,344
2000/01	1,029	6,318	6,267	2,814	3,516	1,650	1,804	47	321	2,394	1,070	27,229
2001/02	1,075	6,452	6,363	2,935	3,631	1,784	1,920	61	371	2,494	1,152	28,237

Compiled from data available at the website of Ministry of Education, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (MoE, 2010a)

At the turn of twenty-first century the Kingdom, that started with a few schools could boast of more than 27,000 schools spread all over the country (See **Table 2.1**).<sup>7</sup>

The number of enrolment for both boys and girls also grew consistently during the same period. There were around 400,000 students studying at various stages in schools during 1969-70 which also saw huge increase and grew up to approximately 800,000 during 1979-80 (MoI, 1998). Almost a twofold increase in enrolment was seen in one decade, mainly due to rising awareness among the population about importance of education. Remarkable increase in number of teachers together with good infrastructure gave boost to school education, which in turn, saw corresponding rise in the demand for higher education.

The need for technical education for training the population to work in the oil sector was realised with the rise in Saudi population and the expansion of oil industry during the 1970s. The Technical and Vocational Training Corporation was established in 1980 to overlook the growing technical and vocational colleges in the country (TVTC, 2011). The vocational and technical colleges provide training at secondary level in the fields of industries, agriculture and trade. Technical and vocational colleges provided training to Saudi citizens for job in various sectors. In 2000-2001 there were over 30 technical and vocational colleges in Saudi Arabia, which rose close to 70 in 2008-09. Currently there are 37 technical colleges and 30 vocational colleges operating in different parts of the country (TVTC, 2011).

### **Growth in Higher Education**

Meanwhile, the authorities woke up to the need for higher education and many universities and professional colleges were established. Between 1957 and 1981 seven universities were established in Saudi Arabia (See **Table 2.2**). These universities grew rapidly and their enrolment increased mainly due to rise in demand for higher education

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<sup>7</sup> Figures includes all types of schools, that is, kindergarten, elementary, intermediate, special education and adult education.

**Table 2.2: State Universities in Saudi Arabia**

S. No	Name of the University	City	Province	Region	Year of Establishment	Enrolment (2010)
1.	King Saud University	Riyadh	Al-Riyad	Najd	1957	66,174
2.	Islamic University	Medina	Al-Madinah	Hijaz	1961	6,445
3.	King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals	Dhahran	Al-Sharqiyah	East	1963	8,693
4.	King Abdul Aziz University	Jeddah	Makkah	Hijaz	1967	69,919
5.	Imam Muhammad Bin Saud Islamic University	Riyadh	Al-Riyad	Najd	1974	37,401
6.	King Faisal University	Hasa	Al-Sharqiyah	East	1975	16,945
7.	Umm Al-Qura University	Mecca	Makkah	Hijaz	1981	30,624
8.	King Khalid University	Abha	Asir	South	1999	12,705
9.	Taibah University	Medina	Al-Madinah	Hijaz	2003	20,000
10.	Taif University	Taif	Makkah	Hijaz	2003	13,700
11.	Qassim University	Buraidah	Al-Qasim	Najd	2004	40,000
12.	University of Ha'il	Ha'il	Ha'il	Najd	2005	16,000
13.	Al-Jouf University	Jouf	Al-Jouf	North	2005	15,000
14.	King Saud Bin Abdulaziz	Riyadh	Al-Riyad	Najd	2005	850

Cont...

	University of Health Sciences					
15.	Jazan University	Jazan	Jazan	South	2006	28,500
16.	Al Baha University	Baha	Al-Baha	Hijaz	2006	14,000
17.	University of Tabuk	Tabuk	Al-Tabuk	Hijaz	2006	10,024
18.	Najran University	Najran	Al-Najran	South	2006	11,917
19.	Northern Borders University	Arar	Al-Hudud Al-Shumaliyah	North	2007	7,735
20.	Princess Nora bint Abdulrahman University <sup>1</sup>	Riyadh	Al-Riyad	Najd	2007	52,308

Source: Compiled from information available on Ministry of Higher Education Website (MoHE, 2010e).

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<sup>1</sup> The university was established in 2007 by adjoining several colleges spread over Al-Riyad province. Its new residential campus in Riyadh with a capacity of 50,000 students has been inaugurated on 15 May 2011.

and need for qualified manpower (Saleh, 1986). The Ministry of Education was bifurcated in 1975 and a new Ministry of Higher Education was established to focus exclusively on higher education requirements of the Kingdom, which was till then supervised by Ministry of Education (Saleh, 1986).

During the reigns of Kings Faisal (1964-1975) and Khalid (1975-1982), Saudi Arabia established two five-year plans that promoted education to develop human resource needs through education and training and to facilitate the nation's economic infrastructure. The education system was redesigned to accommodate an increasing number of elementary and intermediate school students in higher education. This helped in increasing the enrolment in higher educational institutions. According to Ministry of Higher Education a total number of 63,563 students were studying in these universities, including Girls colleges, during the academic year 1981-82 (Saleh, 1986). According to Ministry of Education, the decade 1970-80 saw an average annual rate of 21.3 percent increase in student enrolment every year (Saleh, 1986).

It would be appropriate here to quote Mahmoud Abdullah Saleh, who says, “In the last few decades Saudi Arabia has made tremendous progress in education, probably unmatched during this period for any nation” (Saleh, 1986: 23). The oil boom period saw increase in oil revenues. This translated into increase in investment in the field of education, particularly higher education. Educational programmes to develop quality of higher education were formulated. Programmes for eradication of illiteracy among adults were introduced. Primary and secondary education also got a boost and many more schools were opened to cater to the need of growing awareness for education at all levels.

### **Education System: Current Trend**

Saudi Arabia now has a huge educational infrastructure, as a result of persistent effort by the government to boost the Saudi education system and to bring the Saudi education system at par with education system of developed countries. The budget allocation for education has consistently increased during the past three decades, for example, education budget for 2002 was SR 53 billion and rose to SR 61.7 billion in 2004, 69.9 billion in 2005, 104.6 billion in 2008 and SR 122 billion in 2009 (MEP, 2010).

**Table 2.3:** Distribution of Schools<sup>1</sup> in the Thirteen Provinces of Saudi Arabia, 2007-08

Name of Province	Total Number of Schools in Each Province
Riyadh	7,081
Makkah	6,291
Madinah	2,438
Qasim	2,415
Eastern Province	3,376
Asir	3,937
Tabuk	1,039
Bahah	1,064
Northern Borders	406

<sup>1</sup> Schools include kindergarten, elementary, intermediate, secondary, special education, adult education, night schools, schools for Quran memorization and schools for adult woman.

Jawf	734
Jizan	2,619
Najran	781
Ha'il	1,287
Total	33,468

Source: Compiled from data available at Ministry of Education Website (MoE, 2010a).

By 1989 Saudi Arabia had an education system with more than 14,000 education institutions, including seven universities and eleven teacher-training colleges, besides schools for vocational and technical training, special needs and adult literacy (MoI, 1998). The system was expanding so rapidly that in 1988-89 alone, 950 new schools were opened to accommodate 400,000 new students (MoI, 1998). General education consisted of kindergarten, six years of elementary school and three years each of intermediate and secondary (high) school. All instruction, books and health services to students were provided free of cost by the government, which allocated nearly 20 percent of its educational budget, or US\$ 36.3 billion, to human resources under the Fourth Development Plan, 1985-90 (MEP, 2010). The Fifth Development Plan, 1990-95, proposed a total expenditure of about US\$ 37.6 billion (MEP, 2010). According to the Ministry of Education, in 2005-06 there were 28,225 schools (13,386 for boys and 14,839 for girls) functioning in all the districts of Saudi Arabia. This was a huge increase as there were only 226 schools in 1951, most of being concentrated in the Hejaz region. A total of around 4.3 million students were studying in these schools during the academic year 2005-06 with approximately identical number of boys and girls (MoE, 2011a).

Government funding for higher education has been particularly high. During the 1980s and 1990s, the number of university students increased from approximately 58,000 to about 113,000, a 95 percent increase (MHE, 2009). The enrolment for women also increased dramatically at the university level during the same period. In 1989 almost identical number of men and women graduated from all the colleges and universities in the Kingdom. The year 2008-09 saw a huge rise of 400 percent in the number of university and higher educational institute's passouts (MHE, 2009). Interestingly the number of girl students has been growing remarkably and percentage of women in higher education has crossed the percentage of male students. According to the Ministry of Higher Education, in 2009 women accounted for 56.6 percent of the total number of students who graduated from all universities and colleges in Saudi Arabia and 20 percent of the students going abroad were women (MHE, 2010a). Individual universities have also grown and have expanded to accommodate the large number of students completing



secondary education. In the year 2008, existing and newly opened universities absorbed 88 percent of the students who passed out from secondary schools (MHE, 2009).

The new campus of the King Saud University (KSU) in Riyadh built in the early 1980s, was designed to accommodate 25,000 male students. The original university buildings in central Riyadh were subsequently converted into a campus for the women's branch of the university. King Saud University included colleges of administrative sciences, agriculture, arts, dentistry, education, engineering, medical sciences, medicine, pharmacy and science. Of these, the only course of study that excluded women was engineering, on the premise that a profession in engineering would be impossible to pursue in the context of sex-segregation practices. In the early 1990s, the university offered postgraduate studies in sixty-one specializations and doctorates in Arabic, geography and history. In 1984 there were 479 graduate students, including 151 women, which had grown to 38,109 students during 2008-09 (KSU, 2010).

Similarly, the King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM) in Dhahran, founded in 1963, offers undergraduate and graduate degree programmes in engineering and science, with most programmes of study being offered in English. Dhahran has another university, King Faisal University, founded in 1976, with colleges of agricultural sciences and foods, architecture, education, medicine and veterinary medicine. In 1984 some 40 percent of its 2,600 students were women. The King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah, founded in 1968, had about 15,000 undergraduate students in 1990, of whom about one-third were women. It consisted of nine colleges, including arts and sciences, environmental studies, marine sciences, medicine and meteorology. The university has further been expanded with an investment of US\$ 2 billion and has established new colleges of education, environmental design, pharmacy and planning and technology in addition to the existing ones. The University can accommodate more than 25,000 students, with a medical complex to include a hospital, a health services centre and a medical research facility.

The establishment and growth of faculties of arts and sciences, medicine and technology have been accompanied by the growth in religious institutions of higher learning. The

Islamic University of Medina, founded in 1961, is a premier Islamic university. The university is founded and designed to play an important role at global level in imparting Islamic religious education. The university has five faculties; Faculty of Islamic Law, Faculty of Islamic Preaching and Theology, Faculty of Holy Quran and Islamic Studies, Faculty of Prophetic Tradition and Islamic Studies and Faculty of Arabic Language, which offer courses on different Islamic theological subjects, like *fiqh* (jurisprudence), Islamic politics, Islamic history, creed, *Dawah* (preaching), *Quran*, *Hadith* (Prophet's tradition) and Arabic language (IUM, 2009). The University also offers scholarship for international students from Muslim countries. In 1985 the University had 2,798 students including several hundred graduate students that rose to 6,500 students in 2008-09 (MHE, 2010e). Currently there are three Islamic universities in Saudi Arabia; Islamic University of Medina, established in 1961, Imam Muhammad Bin Saud Islamic University at Riyadh that was established in 1974 and Umm Al-Qura University, Mecca which was established in 1981. These universities cater to the need of research and higher education in theological subjects, not just for Saudi population but also for Muslims all around the world. A large number of foreign students, mainly from the Muslim countries, come to these universities for pursuing higher level of education in Islamic studies. This serves the purpose of Saudi rulers for the propagation of 'religion' in Muslim countries and helps the monarchy in enhancing its leadership position within the Islamic world.

According to the Ministry of Higher Education, "education system in Saudi Arabia has undergone a tremendous growth over the last five decades" (MHE, 2010d: 3). As of 2010, Saudi Arabia had more than 50 government and private universities; around 150 professional colleges and institutions including teacher's training colleges and more than 30,000 boys' and girls' schools that cater to the need of Saudi population for elementary, intermediate, secondary, higher and professional education. This huge infrastructure is a testimony to the success of Saudi authorities in providing educational opportunities to the Saudi populace in all parts of the country.

**Table 2.4: Elementary School Curriculum Distribution**

Subjects	Hours Per Week					
	First Grade	Second Grade	Third Grade	Fourth Grade	Fifth Grade	Sixth Grade
Islamic Studies	9	9	9	9	9	9
Arabic Studies	12	9	9	9	8	8
Social Studies	0	0	0	2	2	2
Science	1	2	2	2	3	3
Mathematics	2	4	4	5	5	5
Art Education	2	2	2	1	1	1
Physical Education (Boys) / Feminine Education (Girls)	2	2	2	2	2	2
Total Hours	28	28	28	31	31	31

Source: Al-Sunbul 1998; 152

## Curriculum, Courses and Teaching Methodology

An analysis of the courses, curriculum and teaching methodology shows that “religious education is emphasised at all levels of education in Saudi Arabia” (Prokop, 2003: 78). Saudi Arabia has in the recent times seen furious public debate on the issues such as the curriculum development, religious content in the courses and teaching methods that do not prepare the students for facing the harsh realities of world (Abu Taleb, 2005).

This emphasis on religious education is highest at elementary and intermediate level, but most of the religious subjects are continued to be taught at university level. **Tables 2.4 and 2.5** give the detail about division of class hours per week for different subjects at elementary and intermediate levels respectively. In elementary schools, 21 out of 28 hours per week are devoted for Arabic and Islamic studies for first grade students where 17 out of 31 weekly hours are dedicated for these subjects at sixth grade. Similarly at intermediate level 14 out of 33 weekly hours are dedicated for Arabic and Islamic studies for the students of all three grades.

According to Micahela Prokop, around 35 percent of weekly hours are dedicated for religious subjects at secondary level for students in the *Shari'a* and Arabic language branch, while 14 percent for those in technical and basic sciences (physics, chemistry, botany, zoology and mathematics) branch (Prokop, 2003). At secondary level, the students get the opportunity to choose their area of study. They can take admission in one of the six areas of specialisation from among *Shari'a* (Islamic Law), *al-Lugha al-Arabia* (Arabic Language), *al-Tijara* (Business Administration) or *al-Ulum al-Ijtimaia* (Social Sciences), *al-Ulum al-Tabiyia* (Sciences), *al-Riyadhiya* (Mathematics and Statistics) branches. However, students who choose to do specialisation in science, social sciences and business and mathematics also have to compulsorily study religious subjects. She further specifies

The main religious subjects taught in Saudi schools are: *Quran*, *Tawhid* (declaration of oneness of God), *Tajwid* (recitation), *Tafsir* (interpretation, commentary on *Quran*), *Hadith* (record of the sayings and doings of Prophet Muhammad and his companions) and *Fiqh* (jurisprudence) (Prokop, 2003: 79) (Italics added).

**Table 2.5:** Intermediate School Curriculum Distribution

Subjects	Hours Per Week		
	First Grade	Second Grade	Third Grade
Islamic Studies	8	8	8
Arabic Studies	6	6	6
English	4	4	4
Science	4	4	4
Mathematics	4	4	4
Art Education	2	2	2
Physical Education (Boys) / Feminine Education (Girls)	1	1	1
History	2	2	2
Geography	2	2	2
Total Hours	33	33	33

Source: Al-Sunbul 1998; 198

At university level as well religious subjects are taught not only for those doing specialisation in religion and history but also to science, engineering and business students. Michaela Prokop (2003) points out that, about 40-45 percent of teaching hours are dedicated for religious subjects in departments like art, history and administration. According to her, graduate students even at King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM), a university dedicated for technical subjects with English as medium of instruction, have to take 14 credit hours each semester in Islamic and Arab Studies and this accounts for approximately 10-15 percent of the curriculum (Prokop, 2003).

School text books, have a high degree of religious content particularly with a tilt towards official version of Islam. Religious courses are offered even for science students and the teaching method is also traditional, which focuses on recitation and memorization. Teachers lack training to make the classes more interactive and do not have a tendency to have a creative way of imparting knowledge. The issue of hate content in school text books<sup>8</sup> together with the issues of curriculum and courses has been a raging matter of discussion and debate throughout the country particularly in the aftermath of 11 September attacks and the US pressure on Saudi Arabia for reforming the education system (Abu Taleb, 2005). Since 2001, the Saudi school text-books and school curriculum came under intense scrutiny in the Western media, academia and think-tanks (Rugh, 2002; Shea, 2006; Wurm, 2008). This propelled debate on the subject in Saudi Arabia as well. The issue of religious content in school text-books became one of the most discussed and debated topic in the media, particularly the online Arabic media in Saudi Arabia. Scores of articles and write-ups both in favour of keeping the content intact and against it were published on various websites, which showed that the citizens of Saudi Arabia are forthcoming to discuss a subject and make a discussed opinion about a matter as important as religious content in the school text-books (Shaker, 2005; Al-Rasheed, 2006; Al-Salmi, 2010). But it also showed that navigating the challenges of education reform is not easy for the Saudi monarchy as this evokes strong reaction from different section of opinion makers in the country.

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<sup>8</sup> This issue has been discussed in detail in third chapter.

William A. Rugh argues that, “the persistence of Islamic education is a reaction to the growth of secular education by conservatives who want to foster Arab and Muslim civil society in the face of Westernisation” (Rugh, 2002: 404). This could be true to a large extent in Saudi Arabia as well. The Saudi experience shows that the Islamic content of the curriculum saw a rise particularly during the 1960s, which was a reaction to secular pan-Arabism according to some scholars. However, the Saudi authorities have woken up to the effect of such a high degree of religious content in educational curriculum, particularly due to US pressures following 11 September attacks.

### ***Conclusion***

The education policy of Saudi Arabia is based on Wahhabi Islam, mainly due to religious and tribal nature of Saudi society and due to patrimonial nature of state. This heavy emphasis on religion in education policy works as a legitimising tool for the ruling family. Apart from the King and Council of Ministers, influential individuals from the ruling family, the leaders of the main religious family, the Council of Senior Ulema (CSU) along with influential section of academia and technocrats in the Ministries of Education and Higher Education have influence on education policy formulation of Saudi Arabia. The Saudi education policy is religious in nature and is prejudiced towards minorities and women.

The education system in Saudi Arabia has seen unprecedented growth in recent decades. The education system, which started to develop only after formation of Saudi Arabia in 1932, grew rapidly in the 1940s and 1950s. The next three decades saw developments in both school and higher education owing mainly to the influx of huge oil revenues and economic requirement of skilled manpower. Religious education at higher level also grew mainly due to the government policy of extracting legitimacy through religion. Courses, curriculum and teaching methods are also heavily influenced with religion. The education infrastructure due to continuously higher budget allocation has improved manifold and Saudi Arabia now has one of the finest higher education infrastructure in the region. The attitude towards women’s and minority’s education has also changed a lot, even though, a lot more needs to be done to create an environment of ‘equal opportunities for all’.

Saudi Arabia's education system has witnessed various phases of development and education policy has evolved with time, but the country faces persistent questions of quality human resource, Arabization and Saudization of workforce, equal opportunity for all and rising religious extremism. These problems put probing questions in front of the Saudi policy makers compelling them to bring reforms in the education sector. The Saudi government and King Abdullah are not oblivious to these issues and have taken a number of steps to bring reforms in Saudi education policy and education system which would be the subject matter of the next chapter.



# Chapter Three: Educational Reforms in Saudi Arabia (1995-2010)

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King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia is seen as a monarch who is pushing hard to bring reform in all aspects of Saudi life, including education (Dickey, 2009). In his reform initiatives, Abdullah faces several challenges and roadblocks from extremist ideologies and domestic and international pressures. The Kuwait crisis (1990-91) and subsequent unrest in the region became an excuse for ‘petition movement’ and demand for reforms. This trend challenged the monarchy in the early 1990s. In addition, the 11 September 2001 attacks on the US strained the Saudi-US relations and forced the Kingdom to deal with the accusation of extremist Islamic ideology being nurtured on its soil. The Iraqi instability after the US invasion in 2003 caused concern for Saudi Arabia especially due to the rising Iranian influence in the region and growing extremism in the neighbourhood. Al-Qaeda challenges the Saudi legitimacy to rule the country based on the same Wahhabi ideology which has given legitimacy to the Saudi rule for more than two centuries intermittently and for the past seventy-eight years continuously. Terrorism has become a major challenge for the Kingdom after several terrorist strikes within and outside the country by people who take their ideology from the extremist version of Wahhabi Islam. These put severe constraints on the ability of King Abdullah in pursuing his reform agenda not just in the field of education but also in pursuing larger political and social reforms.

This chapter tries to locate the educational reform initiatives within the broad reform measures taken during Abdullah’s reign. The analysis of gradual development of King Abdullah as a reformer from being the “conservative” Commander of the National Guard, facing several constraints and challenges, would help in contextualising the

educational reform initiatives taken during the period. The policy initiatives of Crown Prince/King Abdullah on various aspects of education during this period would be examined within the context of consistent demands for educational reforms.

### *From the Head of Saudi National Guard to King*

Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud was proclaimed King of Saudi Arabia on 1 August 2005, upon the death of his half-brother and predecessor King Fahd; but he was practically ruling the country as Crown Prince and First Deputy Prime Minister since Fahd fell ill on 29 November 1995, thus this research covers the period from 1995 to 2010. Abdullah began his political career as the Commander of Saudi Arabian National Guard, where he was appointed by a royal decree in 1962 and took charge on 26 January 1963. He was then appointed Second Deputy Prime Minister in 1975 upon accession of King Khalid and became the Crown Prince and First Deputy Prime Minister in 1982 when King Fahd took over the reigns.

Abdullah was born in 1924 to Fahda bint Asi al-Shuraim and Abdul Aziz Al Saud, the then Amir of Najd, in Riyadh. His mother belonged to Ibn Rashids of Shammar tribe, who were political rivals of Al Saud but became ally through inter-tribal marriage. Not much is known about his earlier life, apart from the fact that he received formal religious education at the Royal court and spent his initial years living in the desert with Bedouin tribes along his maternal grandfather due to his mother's death when he was six (Dickey, 2009). This lifestyle "taught him the values of honor, simplicity, generosity and bravery and instilled in him the desire to assist in the development of his people" (RESA, 2011). He has extensive reading on various subjects but has more interest in Arab history, religion and politics, which was partly responsible for the "traditionalist" and "Arab nationalist" tag he earned during his early political life.

During the reign of Khalid when Abdullah was second in line of succession after Fahd, there were speculations that Prince Abdullah may be overlooked in favour of Prince Sultan who was third in line of succession due to strong influence wielded by the Sudairi brothers within the ruling family (Cordesman, 1997: 24). There were other theories and speculations regarding the succession issue but Abdullah, who had strengthened his

position within the family and among larger public with the help of the National Guard, became the Crown Prince in 1982 and eventually the King in 2005, putting all speculations to rest.

He has helped the National Guard becoming a modern army from its traditional militia origin (SANG, 2011). His handling of the National Guard and his involvement in cultural and traditional life of the Bedouin tribes had won him many admirers. He started the annual National Heritage and Cultural Festival in 1985 that takes place every year in Jenadriyah near Riyadh. This festival organised by the National Guard attracts huge participation and spectators from all over the country and includes events like camel race, folksongs and folk dance.

The National Guard played a very important role in maintaining his support base among the Bedouin tribes of the Najd, which is still the stronghold of King Abdullah. Another support base for him is the Bani Shammar, because of his family links with them from his mother's side. He won admiration for his deft handling of the *Kabah* siege incident in 1979 by Juhaiman al-Uthaibi and his supporters as head of the National Guard. Abdullah became popular as an Arab nationalist with his opposition to allow the stationing of the American forces on Saudi soil in 1991 and his criticism of Israel and its action against Palestinians gained him more support among "traditionalist and conservative Saudis" (Cordesman, 1997: 25).

Since 1990s, the Saudi monarchy was facing a lot of opposition from the Islamists over its foreign policy, handling of Kuwait crisis, alliance with West, the stationing of the US forces on the Saudi soil and also over the legitimacy of Al Saud to rule the country. The country also witnessed the 'petition movement' immediately after the Kuwait crisis, in which demands from both spectrums of opposition, the Islamists and the secularists, were raised to bring about reforms. In the aftermath of the petition movement, on 1 March 1992 King Fahd had issued a royal decree announcing the establishment of a *Majlis-al-Shura* (The Consultative Council) and issued *al-Nidham al-Asasi li al-Hikam* (The Basic

System of Governance).<sup>1</sup> The Kingdom also had to face terrorist strikes in the form of Riyadh bombing (13 November 1995) and Khobar bombings (25 June 1996).

Around the same time, Osama bin Laden formed the Advice and Reform Committee, “an umbrella organisation for many radical groups in Saudi Arabia that have been active since the early 1980s” (Fandy, 1999: 179). Bin Laden later formed Al-Qaeda and was instrumental in the 11 September 2001 attacks on the US. These threatened to destabilise the Saudi-US relations and brought pressure on the monarchy to assess the course, curriculum and text-books which was held responsible for fomenting extremism. Later, the 2003 invasion of Iraq became a major concern for Saudi Arabia as it threatened to destabilise the region. Abdullah saw more petitions for reform, including from women and Shias. All these incidents have shaped the policies of the Saudi government during the past fifteen years and have put huge constraints on Crown Prince/King Abdullah’s ability to take major socio-political reform measures.

### **The Kuwait Crisis and the Demands for Reform**

The petition fever engulfed the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in the early 1990s, in the aftermath of Kuwait crisis and this was also felt in Saudi Arabia. The invasion and annexation of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein and the way the crisis was handled by the Saudi rulers, paved the way for intellectuals and opposition leaders to raise their voice for democracy and reform (Dekmejian, 1994). People felt threatened from these dictatorial monarchies and understood that they were incapable of leading the country to peaceful and inclusive development. Thus, they stood to raise their demands for sharing of power through political reforms.

The 1979 Iranian Revolution prompted Iraq to attack Iran to stop the ‘spread of revolution’. The eight-year long war left both Iran and Iraq gasping and their economy completely destroyed. Saddam then attacked Kuwait with a calculation that it will solve Iraq’s economic problem and the US would not act against Iraq. Finally, it led to

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<sup>1</sup> The Consultative Council was thus inaugurated in September 1993 with one speaker and sixty members which was subsequently increased to 90 in 1997, 120 in 2001 and to 150 in 2005.

'Operation Desert Storm', which further left Iraq bleeding. As far as Saudi Arabia was concerned, the Kuwait crisis paved the way for direct US presence in the Kingdom, rise of Al-Qaeda and the petition movement.

The way the Kuwait crisis was handled, both during the Iraqi invasion and its aftermath, became a major embarrassment for the Saudi rulers and the public lost faith in their government's ability to protect the people and state. They started to raise their demands for the introduction of constitution and political representation. The demands for political participation had been raised from time to time by intellectuals and progressive elements as well as from within the ruling family.<sup>2</sup> This time, however, the people found an interesting way to raise their demands and several groups submitted petitions to the rulers.

This demand for political participation was mainly led by two conflicting groups, the religious clergy on the one hand and liberal intellectuals on the other. The first petition was sent in the form of an open letter to King Fahd on 12 April 1991 (Nehme, 1995: 162). Even though, this document was under circulation since December 1990 it was submitted to the King only after the end of Kuwait crisis (Dekmijian, 2003: 403). This petition titled *Petition for Change* was signed by 43 public figures, prominent businessmen, writers and journalists. They demanded the formation of a Consultative Council, implementation of the Law of Provinces, investigation of the Judicial system, enforcement of rule of law, freedom of expression and press, equal rights for women and curbing the role of the notorious religious police (that is, Committee for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vices).

They also demanded a comprehensive reform of the education system and pressed for limiting the involvement of *ulema* in education policy formulation and education system. It was argued that the education system should be more secular and free from intervention by the *ulema*, the amount of religious instructions in class should be reduced

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<sup>2</sup> Free Princes led by Prince Talal fled to Egypt in 1964-65 and started raising voices against the Saudi monarchy with backing from Nasser of Egypt, they later abandoned their campaign and returned to Saudi Arabia and were given official pardon.

and religious subjects should be limited to religious schools. These liberal signatories however, were “careful not to be perceived as opposing the regime or deviating considerably from Islamic tenets of the state” and, thus, throughout the text they tried to emphasise their Islamic credentials and justified their demands on the basis of Islamic law (Al-Rasheed, 1996: 362). Their main aim, however, was to reduce the influence of religious authority on the society. The petition succinctly articulated the demand for introduction of a written constitution. According to Aba-Namay:

According to these liberal views, the Koran and the traditions of the Prophet are too general to apply precisely to the sophistication of modern government and failing to yield to the irresistible force of social and economic change will produce acute tensions. Pragmatism and a flexible approach will produce more satisfactory results for both religion and the state. A written constitution clarifying and detailing the function of the government is appropriate. It will prevent government from going beyond the limits prescribed by the written law and regulate the working of the government to overcome its deficiencies (Aba-Namay, 1993: 302).

The second petition titled *Memorandum of Advice* was submitted on 18 May 1991 by a group of about 500 religious scholars led by Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdullah Bin Baz, Sheikh Safar al-Hawali and Sheikh Salman al-Oudah (Pasha, 1999a: 33). This was nevertheless, a reaction to the earlier petition, but in the words of Michel G. Nehme, was a “daring step by Saudi standards” (Nehme, 1995: 161). The petition was published and circulated in mosques in advance, which was obviously not liked by the regime and King Fahd expressed his astonishment for the way it was pursued, which later led to disapproval by the board of Council of Senior Ulema that ironically included the then Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdullah Bin Baz (Aba-Namay, 1993: 302).

The petition reflected the fear among religious establishment of their marginalisation and, thus, it focussed on “reiteration of the tenet that *Shari’a* (Islamic law) was the guiding principle of government in Saudi Arabia” (Al-Rasheed, 1996: 363). In addition, they also demanded an overhaul of the system, some restriction on the power of monarchy and creation of *Majlis al-Shura* (Consultative Council), with its member chosen from the most competent candidates without any kind of exception and distinction and empowered to debate and decide on all domestic and foreign affairs. The demands also

included Islamization of all social, economic, administrative and educational systems as well as of the army to create a strong Islamic army. The petition also called for introduction of a comprehensive social justice based on Islamic laws, curbing of corrupt elements within the system, equitable distribution of wealth, reform of media to ensure a “strong, independent Islamic press”, dismantling of all non-Islamic pacts and treaties, reorientation of Kingdom’s embassies abroad on Islamic lines and Judicial reforms (Aban-Namay, 1993: 301).

The interesting aspect of this petition was that the petitioners demanded the Islamization of education system as against the demand from earlier petition that demanded reduction of religious intervention. The domestic demands for educational reform go back to early 1990s when there were conflicting demands. One ‘liberal’ group demanded lessening of religious intervention in education while the other ‘Islamist’ group demanded more Islamization of education system. The Saudi government has been grappling with this problem for long and it has been very difficult for the rulers to heed to these demands due to strong position of both these groups. On the other hand these conflicting demands also provided an escape route for the rulers to start reform measures particularly in the field of education, which was the most contested area by the two parties.

Through this petition, the *ulema* wanted to get closer to the people. The *ulema*’s standing among people had fallen because of their unquestioned service to the ruling family. For example, the *ulema* justified the stationing of foreign soldiers during the Kuwait crisis, by issuing *fatwa* (religious edict) in favour of the King’s decision regarding the stationing of the US military units on the Saudi soil. Earlier in 1979, during the *Kabah* siege incident, the *ulema* issued *fatwa* allowing foreign “infidel” soldiers to enter the Grand Mosque. There was a strong feeling that the *ulema* had detached themselves from ground realities and the cause of common people. The people had started feeling that the *ulema* is a part of the ruling elite giving religio-legal legitimacy to the Al Saud rule.

As the gap between the House of Saud and people was widening, the *ulemas* was seen to be siding with the King. A tussle between senior and young *ulema* came to the fore through this petition and subsequent political demonstrations. Reversing his earlier stand,

the senior *ulema* led by Sheikh Bin Baz even issued a *fatwa* against repetition of any such petition. The young *ulema* were vehement in the opposition to the stationing of foreign 'infidel' military in Saudi Arabia and massive campaign was started against it. The regime cracked down on those who were on the fore front of this movement and threatened to take stricter actions against any dissent activities.

These petitions resulted in the introduction of three statutes by the King on 1 March 1992; *al-Nidham al-Asasi* (the Basic System), *Nidham Majlis al-Shura* (System for Consultative Council) and *Nidham al-Manatiq* (System for Provinces). These three statutes, as Madawi al-Rasheed says, "meant to re-establish the basis for government and regulate political participation through the establishment of a consultative council and regional government" (Al-Rasheed, 1996: 363). These were modest reforms initiated to accommodate the aspiration of people. In March 1992, King Fahd had remarked that the prevailing democratic system in the world is not compatible for Kingdom and that Islam favours consultative system between the ruler and the subject.<sup>3</sup>

The announcement of these reforms by the King was a welcome step, but there was widespread apprehension among people regarding the implementation of these measures. This was not completely misplaced as no steps were taken to implement the announced reforms for almost one year when finally the *Majlis al-Shura* was inaugurated in September 1993, with one speaker and sixty members. The Kingdom was going through a volatile political situation during this period. On the one hand, the regime was taking measures to curb dissent and to co-opt the opposition while, on the other hand, opposition leaders from both religious and liberal orientation were not ready to sit idle. The Saudi monarchy and Saddam Hussein and Ayatollah Khomeini were critical of the 'non-Islamic' nature in the stationing of the US military units in Saudi Arabia.

In the backdrop of such conditions and the regime facing internal and external challenges over the very root of its legitimacy, another petition was presented to the King in September 1992. The petition was signed by over hundred leading figures from the Kingdom's three main Islamic groups, namely the extremely conservative Salafis,

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<sup>3</sup> King Fahd's Interview to Kuwaiti newspaper, *al-Siyasa*, on 28 March, 1992, cited in Pasha 1999a: 42



moderate Muslim Brotherhood and Wahhabi scholars. This was a 45-page document termed as '*Nasiha*' (advice) that covered most areas of the country's political life, including foreign relations, monetary policies, social services and high oil production rates. It was very critical of the Al Saud and demanded annual audit of government expenses accusing of rampant corruption in the rank and file of the Saud family (Pasha, 1999a: 42).

Crown Prince Abdullah took over the reign of the Kingdom in November 1995, at a time when the Saudi monarchy was grappling with political opposition from Islamists. The political discourse revolved around Islam and the principal opposition to the regime was led by Islamists. Personalities like Sheikh Safar al-Hawali, Salman al-Auda, Muhammad al-Masari, Saad al-Faqih, Sheikh Hasan al-Saffar and Osama bin Laden emerged as prominent figures who questioned the legitimacy of Al Saud. Their central argument was that "Islam and its values are under attack both globally and locally and that the Saudi government has failed to protect Islam and Muslims" (Fandy, 1999: 3). The Kuwait crisis brought to the fore the demands for political and social reforms in Saudi Arabia. Abdullah as Crown Prince had to face major challenges from the Islamist opposition leaders. During the relatively peaceful period from his taking over the monarchy till the 11 September attacks on the US, Abdullah tried to tide over these demands through the policy of giving patient hearing to all demands and with promises to bring reforms.

### **11 September Attacks and External Pressure**

Abdullah's initial years at the helm witnessed Islamist and liberal demands for democratic change within the Islamic framework and highlighted through manifestos and petitions (Lacroix, 2004: 345). The 11 September 2001 attacks on the US had a profound impact on the political reform discourse in the Kingdom. It pushed the Islamists on the back foot who had earlier wrestled the position of main opposition from the liberals. The government then loosened control over public discourse which led to the burst of demand for the implementation of political, economic and social reforms from intellectuals and leaders from various spectrums of ideological leanings (Dekmejian, 2003: 404). This

demand was not just for socio-political reforms but also for religious reforms. As Madawi Al-Rasheed writes:

The ongoing public debate in the twenty-first century is no longer the one that dominated the second half of the twentieth century. Previously Saudis discussed how to modernise while remaining faithful to the authentic Islamic tradition. Today, the debate moves on to more complex and focused questions relating to increasing political participation, social justice, the rights of women and minorities, freedom of speech, an independent judiciary and other urgent issues which many Saudis feel are neither properly addressed nor fully applied by the current regime. These concerns have emerged from the bottom up rather than as a result of royal patronage or outside pressure (Al-Rasheed, 2006: 15).

Another important factor which led to the mild loosening of control over freedom of expression was the pressure felt by Crown Prince Abdullah who was facing stiff opposition within the family by from ‘Sudairi Brothers’ on the question of accession. Abdullah, in trying to further his reformist agenda and enhance his standing in the society, allowed the expression of social discontent.

The major challenge Abdullah faced after the 11 September 2001 attacks was straining of Saudi relations with the US due to involvement of its citizens in the attacks. The monarchy faced immense pressure from the US and the West to overhaul the education system of the country, which was held responsible for fomenting extremism and terrorism. Studies like *International Crisis Group Middle East Report* (2004) and *Center of Religious Freedom Report* (2006), highlighted the problems facing the Saudi education system. These reports, even though termed as propaganda, highlighted the fact that Saudi school curriculum and text-books contained substantial reference of hatred towards “infidels” and “idolators.” It was also argued that Saudi text-books have contents that arouse hatred towards Jews, Christians, Shias and other Sunni Muslims.<sup>4</sup> Saudi Arabia faced enormous pressure from the US to bring about reforms in the education system and to remove hateful references towards other religious and sectarian groups from the curriculum.

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<sup>4</sup> Not adhering to Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, particularly in the matters of faith.

Abdullah took initiatives, to tide over the external pressure, to bring reforms in the system and to make changes in the school curriculum. He ordered the review of school curriculum and text-books and a committee headed by Prince Sultan bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud (now Crown Prince) was formed to cleanse text-books of negative references (Khashoggi, 2006). However, external pressure alone did not force Crown Prince Abdullah to take educational reform measures. Domestic demands for large scale socio-political reforms and his willingness to take reform initiatives also played an important role in bringing the educational reform question to the fore.

For example, in January 2003 a group of 104 intellectuals including writers, academicians and journalists met Crown Prince Abdullah and handed him the *Strategic Vision for the Present and the Future* (Dekmijian, 2003: 404). Through this petition, they demanded the development of constitutional institutions and separation of power structure into independent legislative, executive and judicial bodies. Women's right, equitable distribution of wealth, freedom of speech and human rights were highlighted in the document (Raphaeli, 2005: 522). The petition got a favourable reaction from Crown Prince Abdullah and a large section of Saudi society. At the same time, it also invited criticism from Interior Minister Na'if bin Abdul Aziz (second Deputy Prime Minister and second in the line of succession since March 2009), which showed the sharp difference within the ruling family over the question of reforms (Doran, 2004).

This petition was followed by another petition three months later. This petition was unique in the sense that it was submitted by the Shias, who were completely marginalised in the social, political and economic discourse in Saudi Arabia. In April 2003, 450 Shias, including 27 women, presented a petition titled *Partners in One Nation* to Crown Prince Abdullah. The acceptance of the Shia petition can itself be termed as achievement and the willingness of Crown prince Abdullah in taking the difficult path of reforms. The petition highlighted the condition of Shias in Saudi Arabia and the discrimination they face in every walk of life. It urged the government to take immediate measures to stop discrimination against Shias and allow them to participate in the nation building process. The right to practice Shia festivals, lifting the ban on Shia publications and allowing them

to have their own religious education were some of the demands made through this petition (Dekmijian, 2003: 411).

Another petition, *In Defence of the Nation*, was submitted to the Crown Prince by a group of 300 intellectuals and businessmen, including 51 women in September 2003. The petition reminded the regime of its promises of political reform and asked them to take affirmative action in this regard. The petition highlighted the need for popular participation in decision making process and argued that any further delay in introducing political reform would lead to more unrest in the Saudi society which already is going through a crisis like situation. It criticised the government for handing over a huge chunk of power to religious clerics and accused them of being not open for dialogue. The petition also urged the government that, “confronting terrorism cannot only be done through security means and security solutions, but by a thorough diagnosis of political, social, economic and cultural factors that have led to it” (Raphaeli, 2005: 525). The petition further pointed out the need to develop “a pluralistic intellectual environment” through allowing, in addition to other things, “cultural and educational diversity” (IDN, 2003). The petition demanded educational reform by allowing diversity in the field of education, which meant making it free from Wahhabi influence.<sup>5</sup>

As happened after the Kuwait crisis, the demands for political, social, economic and educational reforms started to echo again publicly in the aftermath of 11 September 2001 attacks. Crown Prince Abdullah responded positively to these demands by personally meeting with the petitioners and assuring them to take measures in this direction.

### **Al-Qaeda and Saudi Legitimacy**

It was not just these external pressures and peaceful internal demands that pushed the Saudi monarchy to take the path of reforms. The violent terrorist activities not only threatened Saudi legitimacy to rule but made it imperative for the ruling family to take

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<sup>5</sup> The influence of *Wahhabi* Islam on education system and education policy has been discussed in the earlier chapter.

reform measures in all aspects and prioritise educational reforms that had been accused of fomenting extremism in Saudi society.

During 2003-04, Saudi Arabia was rocked by many terrorist attacks (Zuhur, 2005: 1). For example, on 9 November 2003, two truck bombs exploded in Riyadh, killing 17 and injuring 122 people (MacFarquhar, 2003). On 21 April 2004, a car bomb devastated security forces headquarters in Riyadh and four people were killed and 148 were injured (Cornwell, 2004). These terrorist attacks by Al-Qaeda and their open challenge to Saudi legitimacy convinced the rulers of the threat it poses to the country and forced them to take measures against these elements. However, Abdullah was convinced that an overall reform in education system is imperative to counter the root cause of spreading extremism in the society.

Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda were not only engaged in terror acts inside and outside Saudi Arabia but they also challenged the Al Saud's legitimacy to rule the country. The more troublesome aspect was that Al-Qaeda posed this challenge based on the same Wahhabi ideology which gave Al Saud the religious legitimacy to rule. Al-Qaeda posed two major challenges to the Saudi monarchy: "lack of commitment of the regime to the teaching of Sunni Islam" and dependence on the non-Muslim "infidel" states for defence and economy (Fandy, 1997: 186). Based on this ideological understanding of failure of the Saudi monarchy in fulfilling the requirements of 'representative of Allah' on earth, Al-Qaeda openly challenged its legitimacy to rule the country, which made the Saudi rulers as well as the US feel threatened.

Al-Qaeda did not demand reforms, like other opposition, but challenged the legitimacy of the rulers and vowed to root-out the rule of Al Saud and vowed to pursue this objective violently if needed. This was one of the biggest challenges faced by the Saudi monarchy since its establishment, which necessitated the strengthening of security apparatus of the country and enhanced military ties with the US.

## **Iraq War and Challenges to Abdullah**

Another major challenge for Abdullah was the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. The invasion and removal of Saddam Hussein and subsequent political chaos due to sectarian violence in Iraq threatened to spiral into a regional problem and destabilise the volatile political situation in West Asia. Rising Iranian influence in Iraq, growing extremism and political and sectarian violence became a major headache for the Kingdom. It, together with the US, was not happy to see Iran strengthening its position in Iraq. The monarchy sees the rising Shia buoyancy in the region as a threat to Sunni political superiority not only in the region but also in the Islamic world (Lacey, 2009). It is also perceived that this could make inroads in Saudi territory particularly in the Eastern Province, which has large Shia population.

Al-Qaeda saw an opportunity in Iraq, after it was destroyed in Afghanistan, when the US invaded in 2003. They tried to capitalise on the instability in Iraq to strengthen their hold in the country (Kostiner, 2009). Al-Zawahiri and Al-Zarqawi emerged as the leaders of Al-Qaeda in Iraq. According to Joseph Kostiner,

The U.S. incursion into Iraq provided *al-Qae`da* with room to maneuver and opportunity. After the defeat of the Iraqi military, the U.S. forces found themselves facing a new enemy. Although *al-Qae`da* was not a supporter of Saddam Hussein, they seized the opportunity to fight the infidel invader (Kostiner, 2009: 226).

This rising extremism in its neighbourhood became a major challenge for Saudi Arabia as it posed a threat of spread of extremism into its territory and population, which it was already battling for more than a decade. However, the political instability in Iraq has receded gradually following three rounds of elections, which has come as a relief for the US and its allies in the region; at the same time, pro-Iranian governments in Baghdad have become a bone of contention for the Kingdom.

The Saudi reform agenda has been triggered and affected by mainly four reasons; domestic demands from Islamists and liberal opposition, rising extremism and terrorism, US pressure and questions over Al Saud's legitimacy. Abdullah has been trying to bring reforms including in the field of education despite these challenges and constraints facing

the Kingdom. Since taking over the helm of affairs in 1995, he has taken a number of steps in the direction of educational reforms. To reinforce the Al Saud's legitimacy and to counter the challenge of spreading extremism, it was important for Abdullah to take reform measures. He prioritised the educational reforms through various initiatives and measures in different aspect of the education system that would be the subject of examination in the following section.

### *Educational Reforms*

Education has remained at the core of reform discourse in Saudi Arabia since the 1990s. Domestic demands from Islamists and liberal opposition, rising extremism and terrorism, the US pressure and the question over Al Saud's legitimacy are linked to educational reforms. The moderate Islamists and liberal intellectuals have always emphasised on the need for bringing educational reforms to tackle the socio-political problems facing the Kingdom, while the US put pressure to review and reform its education system after the 11 September 2001 attacks. It has also been argued that education in Saudi Arabia foments extremism due to religious intervention in education policy formulation and organisation of education system, while the ruling family has reinforced its legitimacy among the population through education and Wahhabi Islam.

The educational reform measures taken during the last fifteen years have tried to address the above mentioned issues through various means. During this period, Crown Prince/King Abdullah has taken several steps to improve the educational infrastructure in the country. Immediately after taking over the helm of affairs, Abdullah launched the *Comprehensive Educational Assessment Project* in 1996 (Al-Eisa, 2009: 60). The main idea behind the project was to assess the entire education system in the country and find out areas that need improvement. This project, however, failed in its goal to assess the problems facing the education system due to a lack of clear vision and direction and differences among the highest echelons of authority (Al-Eisa, 2009: 61). Since then many initiatives have been taken to bring reform in the field of education by the monarchy and many areas of education have seen multiple changes.

After becoming the King in August 2005, Abdullah has stepped up his efforts to reform the school education, but has also faced resistance from the clerical establishment (Alsharif, 2009). King Abdullah, in a move to speed up the education reform, appointed a new team to lead the Ministry of Education in February 2009. Prince Faisal bin Abdullah Al Saud, who is also the son-in-law of King Abdullah, has taken over the charge of Ministry of Education. A woman, Norah Al-Fayez, was appointed Deputy Minister of Education in-charge of girl's education for the first time in history of the Kingdom. This shows the willingness on the part of King Abdullah to go the extra mile for bringing change in the education system. The Council of Senior Ulema, which is an official body of religious scholars and has considerable influence on the policy matters related to educational and cultural areas, comprises mainly of *ulema* from Al Shaikh family or those allied to it. In addition, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Endowment, Dawah and Guidance, which has considerable influence on cultural matters especially religious education, is by precedent, led by a member of Al Shaikh family.<sup>6</sup> Seen in this wider context the appointment of his son-in-law as Minister of Education by King Abdullah can be termed as a step to keep the education policy within his influence and not leave it on the mercy of others in the ruling family or to the Al Shaikh family that has had a major influence on the education policy formulation of Saudi Arabia.

On taking over the Ministry of Education, Prince Faisal bin Abdullah Al Saud had remarked that, "current and future national educational efforts are characterised by focussing on the quality through developing what will be provided to our children at school and continue on improving it." Further he observed that "the country needs to adjust its education system in accordance with the changing requirement of the world we live in today" (MoE, 2010). This shows that the authorities are very much aware of the need to improve the basic education system and are willing to take the path of reform to create a much better educational environment at the school level.

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<sup>6</sup> Currently the Minister of Islamic Affairs, Endowments, Dawah and Guidance is a senior member of Al Shaikh family, Sheikh Saleh bin Abdul Aziz bin Muhammad bin Ibrahim Al Shaikh, who has held the post since 1999.



One of the areas of education that has seen major initiatives for improvement is school or basic education. The basic education in Saudi Arabia faced major problems like, lack of trained teachers, an overdose of religious content in course and curriculum, negative references to other religious, sectarian and theological groups in school text-books as well as lack of quality training of students for higher education and practical life. To deal with these problems a number of steps like King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Public Education Development Project (*Tatweer Project*), curriculum development programme, teacher's training initiatives, text-book revision programme and monitoring of classes, have been taken to improve the basic education in the country.

Another area of education that has been addressed by the reform measures taken during this period is higher education. Infrastructure development in emerging new fields of education and for equitable distribution of higher education institutions throughout the country have been a major target of Abdullah's reform initiative. A major problem facing higher education is the lack of generation of quality human resource to support the economy and compliment the Saudization plan of the government. King Abdullah has tried to find a solution for this problem by improving the quality of higher education through various means including tie-ups with reputed international higher education institutions in respective fields.

Yet another area that has seen improvement through these years is the budget allocation for education. The allocation has been consistently increasing for the past one and a half decade, which would be discussed in detail later in this chapter. It is an example of the monarchy's readiness to improve the education system. This surge in funds have been utilized for investment not just in development of existing infrastructure but also for venturing into new and emerging areas of science and technology.

Women's education has seen improvement in terms of quality, infrastructure as well as social acceptability. Even though, till very recently, segregation in higher education was the norm, things have started to look slightly brighter for women's education. The confinement of women in certain fields of education still persists and women still face a lot of problem as far as higher education is concerned. By appointing Norah al-Fayez as

**Table 3.1:** Subject-wise study plan for Elementary School (Boys and Girls) in Saudi Arabia, 2003

Area of Study	Subject	Number of Classes per Week					
		Grade One	Grade Two	Grade Three	Grade Four	Grade Five	Grade Six
Theology	<i>Quran</i>	7	7	7	7	3	3
	<i>Tajwid</i> (Recitation)	-	-	-	-	1	1
	<i>Tawhid</i> (Oneness of God)	-	1	1	1	2	2
	<i>Fiqh</i> (Jurisprudence)	-	1	1	1	2	2
	<i>Hadith</i> (Prophet's Tradition)	-	-	-	-	1	1
	Discipline and Conduct	2	-	-	-	-	-
Total		9	9	9	9	9	9
Arabic Language	Reading, Writing and Understanding	12	11	3	3	2	2
	Rhymes and Memorization			2	1	1	1
	Dictation	-	-	2	2	1	1
	Handwriting	-	-	1	1	1	1
	Expression and Sentence Formation	-	-	1	1	1	1

Cont...

	Grammar	-	-	-	1	2	2
Total		12	11	9	9	8	8
Social Sciences	Geography	-	-	-	1	1	1
	History	-	-	-	1	1	1
Total		-	-	-	2	2	2
Mathematics		2	4	4	5	5	5
Science and Health Education		-	1	2	2	3	3
Drawing and Activities		2	1	2	1	1	1
Physical Education		3	2	2	2	2	2
National Education		-	-	-	1	1	1
Total Number of Weekly Classes		28	28	28	31	31	31

Source: Al-Aqil, 2005: 86

Deputy Minister of Education in charge of girl's education, Abdullah has made a major political statement in favour of women's education.

For long, minorities in Saudi Arabia have been demanding improvement in educational opportunities. Crown Prince Abdullah, by meeting a Shia delegation in 2003, showed the way forward for granting minority rights and giving an ear to their aspirations including in the field of education. However, it needs to be examined how far the monarchy can go in fulfilling the educational aspirations of Shias.

The following pages would discuss in detail the areas of education which have seen reform measures namely, school education, higher education, budget allocation for education, women's education and minority's education. The target and motive behind these reform measures, their effectiveness and utility would also be analysed.

### **School Education: Challenges and Achievements**

School education acquires the most important place in any education system. It is that stage of education where the future citizens of a state are trained and, hence, the state cannot afford to undermine its importance. Likewise, the education policy gives a very high priority to basic education. The policy formulators have set specific targets for each phase of school education. Saudi Arabia has a very high density of government and private schools in different parts of the country with improved infrastructure, particularly after consistent increase in budget allocation for basic education.

School education in Saudi Arabia is divided into three phases: elementary school, middle school and secondary school. The elementary school comprises of six years of education, where the child is eligible to get admission in first grade at the age of six years. This stage of education focuses on child development through Islamic and Arabic language education in addition to child's personality development through cultural and scientific studies (Al-Aqil, 2005: 81). The target of primary education is to instil 'good conduct', improve linguistic capabilities and give the students a strong base for further stages of studies. Major subjects taught at this stage are *Quran*, reading and memorization and arithmetic (see **Table 3.1**). There are seven classes every week for *Quran* from grades

**Table 3.2:** Subject-wise study plan for Middle Schools (Boys and Girls) in Saudi Arabia, 2003

Area of Study	Subject	Number of Classes per Week		
		Grade One	Grade Two	Grade Three
Theology	<i>Quran</i>	1	1	1
	<i>Hadith</i> (Prophet's Tradition)	1	1	1
	<i>Tafsir</i> (Interpretation of Text)	2	2	2
	<i>Tawhid</i> (Oneness of God)	2	2	2
	<i>Fiqh</i> (Jurisprudence)	2	2	2
Total		8	8	8
Arabic Language	Grammar	2	2	2
	Text	1	1	1
	Reading	1	1	1
	Expression	1	1	1
	Dictation	1	1	1
Total		6	6	6
Social Sciences	History	2	2	2
	Geography	2	2	2
Total		4	4	4

Cont...

General Subjects	Health Education	4	4	4
	Mathematics	4	4	4
	English Language	4	4	4
	Fine Arts	2	2	2
	Physical Education	1	1	1
	National Education	1	1	1
Total		16	16	16
Total Number of Weekly Classes		34	34	34

Source: Al-Aqil, 2005: 90

one to four, while for grades five and six it comes down to three classes. Children of six to twelve years of age have to study theology even if they do not choose to do specialisation in religious subjects at a later stage.

On passing out of this stage the child gets a certificate for completion of elementary school, which enables the student to take admission in middle school. In middle school students spend three years, where the main focus is laid on preparing the student for secondary education and an Islamic upbringing of the children to reaffirm the Islamic faith and character (Mutawalli, 2004: 108). This stage aims to improve the mental and physical abilities of students and to develop their understanding of Saudi society. English language education is also introduced at intermediate level to give students a broader understanding of the world and to make them comfortable in English language to be able to face the challenges of modern education (Al-Aqil, 2005: 91). Again, the students of the age of twelve to fifteen years take eight classes per week on religious subjects of *Quran*, *Hadith* (Prophet's Tradition), *Tawhid* (Oneness of God), *Tafsir* (Interpretation of Text) and *Fiqh* (Jurisprudence) apart from six classes every week for Arabic language (see **Table 3.2**).

The successful completion of middle school makes the students eligible for admission in secondary school. Secondary school phase is again for three years, where boys can choose to do specialisation in four branches (Arabic and *Shari'a*, Social Sciences and Administration, Natural Sciences and Technical Education) in the last two years, while girls can choose to do specialisation in two branches, that is, Arts and Science (Mutawalli, 2004: 117). The curriculum at secondary school also includes subjects in theology even for students doing specialisation in science, social science and technical education (see **Table 3.3**).

On the other hand, girl students can choose to do specialisation only in Science or Arts and need to take mandatory classes in theology and home economics (see **Table 3.4**). The students can choose to enrol in professional courses at secondary level in 'Professional Institutions' in a variety of fields, like teachers training, business and trade, health etc.

**Table 3.3:** Subject-wise study plan for Secondary Schools (Boys) in Saudi Arabia, 2003

Area of Study	Subject	Grade One	Arabic and Shari'a Branch		Social Science and Administration Branch		Natural Science Branch		Technical Branch	
			Grade Two	Grade Three	Grade Two	Grade Three	Grade Two	Grade Three	Grade Two	Grade Three
Shari'a	<i>Quran</i>	1	3	3	2	2	1	1	1	1
	<i>Tafsir</i> (Interpretation of Text)	1	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	1
	<i>Hadith</i> (Prophet's Tradition)	1	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	1
	<i>Tawhid</i> (Oneness of God)	1	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	1
	<i>Fiqh</i> (Jurisprudence)	1	3	3	1	1	1	1	1	1
Total		5	12	12	6	6	5	5	5	5
Arabic Language	Syntax and Morphology	2	3	3	2	2	2	2	2	2
	Rhetoric and Criticism	-	2	2	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Literature	2	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Reading	1	1	1	1	1	-	-	-	-
	Composition	1	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total		6	9	9	4	4	3	3	3	3
Administration	Administration	-	-	-	2	3	-	-	-	-
	Economics	-	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	-

Cont...



	Accounting	-	-	-	2	2	-	-	-	-
	Total	-	-	-	5	6	-	-	-	-
Social Sciences	History	1	1	1	2	2	-	-	-	-
	Geography	1	1	1	1	1	-	-	-	-
	Psychology	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	-
	Sociology	-	-	1	1	1	-	-	-	-
	Total	2	3	3	5	4	-	-	-	-
Sciences	Physics	2	-	-	-	-	4	4	Technical Subjects	Technical Subjects
	Chemistry	2	-	-	-	-	4	4		
	Biology	2	-	-	-	-	4	4		
	Geology	-	-	-	-	-	1	1		
	Total	6	-	-	-	-	13	13	14	14
	Mathematics	5	-	-	4	4	6	6	5	5
	English Language	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
	Computer	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1
	Library Science	1	1	1	1	1	-	-	-	-
	Physical Education	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
	National Education	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Activity	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	-	-
	Total Number of Weekly Classes	33	33	33	33	33	35	35	35	34

Source: Source: Al-Aqil, 2005: 95

**Table 3.4:** Subject-wise study plan for Secondary Schools (Girls) in Saudi Arabia, 2004

S. No	Subject	Grade One	Grade Two		Grade Three	
			Arts	Science	Arts	Science
1.	Theology	4	4	4	3	3
2.	Arabic Language	9	11	4	11	3
3.	Social Sciences	4	8	-	9	-
4.	Mathematics	5	-	7	-	7
5.	Sciences	6	-	11	-	11
6.	English Language	4	4	4	4	4
7.	Home Economics and Fine Arts	2	2	2	-	-
8.	Library	1	1	-	1	-
	Total Number of Weekly Classes	35	30	32	28	28

Source: Mutawalli, 2004: 119

The School education comprises a total of twelve years of study that prepares the student to enrol in higher education in respective fields (Al-Aqil, 2005: 91).

The government schools follow the curriculum plan as shown in tables in respective phases of schools. Apart from that, there are exclusive religious schools for children to learn and memorize Quran at every stage except nursery classes and they are called *Madaris li Tahfeez Quran al-Karim* (Schools for Memorization of *Quran*) (Al-Aqil, 2005: 90). These schools cater to the need of religious education of the people who dedicate their children for religious studies. Likewise, there are dedicated schools for other field at the secondary stage like, School of Agriculture, School of Business etc which focus on specific areas of study.

The reform in school education during the last fifteen years has focussed on improving the quality of education for preparing schools graduates to be able to sustain and excel in higher education. Similarly, curriculum development, text-book revision, teacher's training and monitoring of classes have been done to improve the quality of school education. The Ministry of Education that monitors school education has tried to find out grey areas and problems pertaining to school education and has tried to improve the situation through proper channelization of fund, implementation of programmes and monitoring of schools through regional departments. It would be important to look at the problems, facing school education, together with trying to analyse the reform measures taken for improvement of basic education.

School education faces several problems; the most important being the curriculum which has seen intense debate in the country during the last decade. Curriculum became the central point of debate and discussion particularly after the 11 September 2001 attacks, even though 'the matter of developing the curriculum is as old as the education system itself' (Abu Taleb, 2005). The raging debate on educational curriculum became more intense after the US criticisms which termed it as backward. The *Democracy and Partnership Initiative* launched by the then American Secretary of State Collin Powell in 2005, also included initiative for development and modernisation of education that suffers from lack of state support corresponding to population growth and cultural ideas

affecting girl's education (Abu Taleb, 2005). Through this initiative the US administration wanted to push the Kingdom for a change in school curriculum, however, this was not taken very favourably by all sections of the population. A report published by Arab Education Bureau of the Gulf States argued against the claim that Arab education system is responsible for producing terrorism (Abu Taleb, 2005).

A major aspect of concern as far as school curriculum is concerned is that a large part of it is dedicated to religious and Arab studies. Despite having specialised schools for religious studies at all levels of education, theological subjects comprise major portion of school curriculum not just for students who are doing general subjects but also those specialising in science, humanities and technical subjects. For example, students at secondary school studying in the Natural Science and Technical branch have to study theological subjects like, *fiqh* (jurisprudence), *Quran*, *tafsir* (interpretation), *tawhid* (oneness of God) and *Hadith* (prophetic traditions) (for details refer to **Table 3.3**). This overemphasis on subjects that may not be relevant for students shows the kind of insecurity which the Saudi monarchy has not been able to overcome. The dependence on Wahhabi Islam for legitimacy prevents any major overhaul of the school curriculum.

On the other hand, the *ulema* also oppose such moves because of the fear of losing their social relevance and political importance. For example, in 2003, 150 scholars led by Sheikh Abdullah bin Jibreen, petitioned the government against changing the school curriculum which is based on Islam (Abu Taleb, 2005).<sup>7</sup> Sheikh Jibreen stated that any deleting or distorting of books written by Islamic scholars is against the faith. He further felt that schools should follow the old curriculum and theological subjects should continue to be taught at all levels of education and subjects like algebra, physics and foreign languages should not be obligatory (Abu Taleb, 2005).

The government, however, pledges to have recognised the need to revamp the school curriculum. In 2003 the Ministry of Education developed a 'Ten year Strategic Plan,

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<sup>7</sup> Sheikh Abdullah bin Jibreen was a prominent religious scholar who preached faith independently. He belonged to the Al Rashid clan of Bani Zaid Tribe of Najd. He was a member of *al-lajna al-Daa'imah li al-Buhuth al-Ilmiyah wa al-ifta'* (Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Fatawaa). He has authored a number of books on Islamic jurisprudence and religious edicts. He died in 2009.

2004-2014', which aimed at making a difference in the field of education by incorporating effective changes in the curriculum (MoE, 2003). It was also argued that the Ministry of Education would play an important role in developing the national curriculum in the Kingdom (Abu Taleb, 2005). The 'Strategic Plan' aims at "developing the school curriculum as per the Islamic values that would prepare the students to fulfil the goal of achieving knowledge and scientific thinking and lifelong expertise" in the respective subjects (MoE, 2003: 14). Likewise, the Ministry of Education launched *Tatweer Project* in 2007 that aimed at curriculum development apart from improvement in other areas like teacher's development and improvement of schools (Al-Eisa, 2009: 63-64). The Ministry of Education has also launched a programme under the same *Tatweer Project* that aims at improving the teaching of science and mathematics subjects through harmonising the course and curriculum in these subjects throughout the country (MoE, 2010).

An analysis of educational curriculum in Saudi schools makes it clear that the curriculum focuses more on religious subjects. The highest regulatory body which looks after the school education is Ministry of Education. The curriculum followed in schools is devised by the Ministry through its various departments. The Ministry, in trying to modernise the curriculum, has started plans to develop a uniform curriculum for the country to be followed by all schools through *Tatweer Project*. One of the objectives of the project is to develop a national curriculum for school education through consultations and discussion which is part of "community partnership" programme. In this endeavour, in December 2010 the Minister of Education received the final report of the discussion panels and workshops on the future vision of the development of education and promised to "formulate a future vision for education and to identify future directions" for the project (Tatweer, 2010).

Another area of major concern with respect to school education are the text-books, which were found to have contents that foment hatred towards non-Muslims and Muslims who follow different interpretation of the Holy Texts. The text-books, it was accused, justified the killing of non-Muslims and "promoted the idea of cleansing Muslim countries from Western cultural influences" (Alsharif, 2009: 1). The history text-books in schools focus

mainly on Saudi-Wahhabi history and do not take into account the history of non-Najdi regions, like the history of Hejaz, the Asir and the Shias (Prokop, 2003: 80). Michaela Prokop also observed that the history text-books contain no mention of contemporary and recent international developments, even in the Arab world. She further argues that, the content of official text-books are heavily influenced by the Wahhabi ideology that sees the world through the binary 'us' vs. 'others' framework (Prokop, 2003: 80-81).

It was also accepted by authorities that the school text-books are a major cause for extremist tendencies in Saudi Arabia. For example, writing in *USA Today* in June 2006, Saudi Arabia's Ambassador to the United States Prince Turki al-Faisal observed:

Saudi Arabia is a nation undergoing dramatic self-examination. Every aspect of Saudi Arabia's society and culture is being openly debated. We have recognized that a comprehensive, modern and open educational system -- with new and revised textbooks -- is fundamental to the growth and prosperity of our country. A thoughtful revision of this system is necessary and indeed well underway (Khashoggi, 2006).

The 11 September 2001 attacks, subsequent US pressure and further terrorist strikes on Saudi soil in 2003-04 by Al-Qaeda almost convinced the monarchy of the need to revise the school text-books and quarantine it from the contents that may cause hatred towards 'others'.

Subsequently, school-text books have been revised and it was claimed by the Saudi authorities that they have completely removed any objectionable reference to 'others' and have quarantined it from contents that may cause any kind of hatred towards other religious, sectarian domains and schools of thought (Abu Taleb, 2005). A royal study group constituted in 2004 recognised the need for revision of Saudi school text-books and later Prince Turki al-Faisal, on his appointment as Ambassador to the US, said that "the Kingdom has reviewed all of its education practices and materials and has removed any element that is inconsistent with the needs of modern education" (Shea, 2006). Earlier, it had been stated by the authorities that the government recognises the need to review the education system saying that: "It has recently done an audit, which determined that about five percent of school textbooks and curriculum guides contained possibly offensive

language. A programme is now in place to eliminate such material from schools” (RESA, 2003).

Further, the *Tatweer Project* also included the improvement of educational material particularly in science subjects. The Ministry of Education has tied up with a national publishing house to develop school text-books in the subjects of science and mathematics (Al-Eisa, 2009: 128). Abdullah, as Crown Prince and later as the King, showed urgency to deal with the questions regarding the quality and content of school text-books. Swift actions were taken to revise the text-books. The King also tried to allay the concerns of common people that Saudi government is budging under the US pressure through initiatives like “National Dialogue” and “consultation programme” (RESA, 2003).

Along with school curriculum and text-books, teacher’s training and monitoring of classes are other areas of major concern that have been addressed in the educational reform endeavour of Crown Prince/King Abdullah. One of the major problems facing school education was the quality of teaching due to lack of trained teachers. The philosophy of teaching in Saudi schools “inculcates passivity, dependence” and it was complained that there is too little emphasis on developing creative and analytical skills (Prokop, 2003: 80). Apart from teaching methodology the interaction in class between teachers and students was also argued to be adding to the extremist tendencies of the system. For example, if a teacher has extremist ideas about religion and faith, even if the texts in school books are moderate, students can be influenced by the teachers in extremist direction. The monitoring of classes and regular interaction of teachers with parents and guardians was incorporated in the system to deal with such problems.

In the same vain, the Kingdom adopted the “Education for All Week” programme, scheduled by UNESCO each year in its commitment not to neglect the role of teacher in improving the education system of the country. In 2006, the occasion was organised with the theme *Every Child Needs a Teacher* “in affirmation of the role of the teacher and importance of the teacher being suitably qualified pedagogically to implement the educational process and achieve its goals” (Al shaer, 2007: 1). Similarly, the “Ten Year Strategic Plan, 2004-2014” that was launched in 2003, aims at improving teacher’s

support programme to promote involvement of citizens in the field of education (MoE, 2003: 15). The strategic plan further envisages the development of teaching methodology adopted in the schools (MoE, 2003: 15).

Further, the *Tatweer Project* that was launched in 2005 has also designed a programme for improvement of teaching in the schools, which would assess and develop the teaching capabilities of school teachers (Al-Eisa, 2009: 63). “Qualification and Training Program” endeavours to,

Attaining an effective professional system of qualification and development that makes educational cadres able to embody educational values and possess efficiency at educational work. The system should depend on skilful human efficiency that embodies the internal sufficiency and it should be based on international standards and takes part in apprenticing the education process and improving its outcomes (*Tatweer*, 2010a).

This programme has been instituted with the aim to generate a professional human resource to fulfil the needs of Saudi schools. Through this programme the Ministry of Education not only wants to provide qualified professional teachers in the schools but also wishes to do continuous assessment of the education system and regular monitoring of classes which eventually should lead to the improvement of teaching methodology in schools.

During the last fifteen years Abdullah has taken a number of steps to deal with the challenges in improving the school education. It can be argued that the monarchy has achieved success in many areas. But the larger question of overemphasis on religious subjects and Arab history remains intact. The utility of teaching of religious subjects and theology to school children have been questioned time and again by intellectuals and academicians within Saudi Arabia (Khashoggi, 2006). This emphasis on religious subjects and focus on Arab history based on rote learning and memorization ill equips the students to face the challenges of globalised world. Lack of knowledge about larger history of nations and a narrowed down approach towards life due to exposure to only one dominant ideological philosophy of life is a major cause for the continued spread of extremist tendencies among sections of Saudi population. Globalisation and modern



means of communication keep people informed about the happenings all over the world; but lack of broader understanding of the world, due to the constraints mentioned above, prevent them from venturing into innovative practices to move forward in life.

It can be argued that the school education has made considerable advancements in various ways but the pertinent question of the system's inability to produce high quality human resource free from extremist tendencies remains. This problem may not be completely done away with until and unless the whole system is completely revamped and religious curriculum and teaching are restricted to specialisation in theology. The monarchy is very much aware of the problems precipitating in the school education and has taken major steps forward to rectify it.

### **Development in Higher Education**

The reform measures in higher education in Saudi Arabia are driven more by economic than social and cultural considerations. The demographic pressure and labour market difficulties have necessitated reform in the higher education. The demands for educational reform in the early 1990s were driven by the need for review of education mainly from economic perspective. In one such petition, prominent businessmen demanded education reform stating,

We believe that the education system of our country is in need of comprehensive and fundamental reform to enable it to graduate faithful generations that are qualified to contribute positively and effectively in building the present and the future of the country and to face the challenges of the age, enabling us to catch up with the caravan of nations that have vastly surpassed us in every field (HRW, 1992: 50).

The higher education sector had seen enormous expansion since oil boom of early the 1970s, but the problems of quality education and production of quality human resource has remained. The rulers were also planning Saudization of workforce due to demographic increase and rampant unemployment among the local population. The population is growing fast and in 1999 it was around 15 million (excluding expatriates) and is estimated to grow up to 30 million by 2020 (Prokop, 2003: 87). Simultaneously rate of unemployment also increased. The 2010 rate of unemployment among Saudi

males is estimated at 10.8 percent but some estimates range as high as 25 percent (CIA, 2011). But the rate of unemployment among youth is staggering at 30.2 percent for men and women between 20 to 24 years of age (ILO, 2010). There is huge gap between the output of education system and requirements of the domestic labour market, which is fulfilled by the expatriate workers. The lack of skilled indigenous human resource and lack of success in Saudization of workforce are attributed to the problems in the education system. These factors have necessitated improvement in quality of the university graduates in the country and improvement in quality of higher education is imperative for such an eventuality.

The Ministry of Higher Education that oversees the higher education sector made plans to improve the quality of higher education and human resource through starting development programmes in existing universities as well as founding new universities (MHE, 2010d: 3). Towards improving the higher education system, the Ministry of Higher Education came out with an “Observatory on Higher Education” in 2010 which endeavours to provide a guideline for the existing universities and professional institutions for improvement in quality of education and research (MHE, 2010d: 8).

Abdullah gave priority to improvement of higher education and as a result the Kingdom now has 21 government (for detail see **Table 2.2**) and seven private universities in addition to more than 20 professional institutions of higher education in various area of study like medicine, teacher’s training, etc (MHE, 2009: 1). In the same vain, the Ministry has developed a strategic plan to improve the condition of higher education. The plan aims for capacity building of higher education institutions, harmonising the university education with the developmental needs of the country, improving the quality of education, development of scientific research, establishing strategic partnership with international higher education institutions of repute, facilitating modern administration and expanding the financial resources of higher educational institutions (MHE, 2009: 2).

In pursuance of the roadmap provided by the Ministry of Higher Education, the King Saud University in Riyadh signed a Memorandum of Understandings with universities in France, the United States, Britain, India, China and Germany. Similarly, King Abdulaziz

University in Jeddah and King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals in Dhahran also entered into understandings with universities abroad. The government in its goal to improve quality of education and improvement of human resource supports aspiring students to go abroad for higher education in its “Study Abroad” programme. Accordingly, in 2008 approximately fifty thousand Saudis were enrolled in universities abroad for pursuing quality education and research (MHE, 2009: 15).

In 2001 in his ambition to improve the quality of higher education and to provide equal opportunities for pursuance of higher education to entire population, Abdullah allowed the establishment of private universities and institutions of higher education (MHE, 2009: 15). These institutions were given ample autonomy in matters of financing and curriculum but are regulated by the Ministry of Higher Education. As a result, there are a huge number of students, male and female, studying in these institutions. In 2008-09, 76 districts of Saudi Arabia had higher educational institutions in comparison to only 16 districts in 1998-99 (MHE, 2009: 13).

Saudi Arabia also endeavours to create a knowledge economy and society through improvements in higher education. Under the leadership of Abdullah, it is very much aware of the fact that 60 percent of the population comprises of youth. The Ministry of Higher Education has developed a plan to improve the condition of higher education and development of a knowledge society, defining it as “a society where knowledge is taken as the first source of production in place of capital or work force” (MHE, 2010b: 10). It has taken a number of initiatives in pursuance of formation of a knowledge society, like improvement of the educational environment in the country, establishment of new universities, improvement of the standard of science and technology education in the country, strengthening of the capabilities of students and improvement in quality of scientific research (MHE, 2010b: 11).

These efforts have yielded result and comparatively Saudi Arabia has improved the standard and quality of education particularly in the field of science and technology. This is evident from the fact that new universities and institutions of higher learning were established during the past one decade. The number of scientific publications per million

population has increases from 61 in 2002 to 71 in 2008 (UNESCO, 2010: 265). King Saud University, which was established in 1957, won a UN award in recognition of its e-services for 2010 (KSU, 2010a). Likewise, the number of scientific articles published has increased from 1,321 in 2000 to 1,745 in 2008; and the number of patents achieved by Saudi citizens also recorded an increase from 19 in 2003 to 30 in 2008 (UNESCO, 2010: 266). These are small improvements but indicate the growing interest in science and technology education in the Kingdom.

However, the fields of social sciences and humanities (except religious education) have not seen much improvement. For instance, the number of colleges offering social sciences has not increased much during the last decade, while on the other hand the colleges offering, science, medicine, engineering etc subjects had witnessed enormous expansion. Accordingly, in 2009, there were 138 colleges offering science and technology subjects while only 52 colleges offered social sciences (MHE, 2009: 17). Among these 52 colleges very few offer mainstream social science subjects like politics and sociology and their focus is more on cultural and religious subjects. The condition of research in humanities and social sciences is also not encouraging. According to the *World Social Science Report 2010*, “in the social sciences and humanities, an instrumental approach to research dominates: sociology effectively takes the shape of social engineering, economics is primarily business-oriented and Islamic philosophy or law dominates dominant within the humanities” (UNESCO, 2010a: 68).

It can be said that the authorities are well aware of the need for higher education reform and have put forth a dynamic plan for improvement of higher education. These plans have yielded results and the quality and environment of higher education has improved. But a lot more needs to be done in order to achieve the demands of quality human resource and skilled workforce for the economy. The Ministries of Education and Higher Education have put in place a number of plans and programmes to achieve this goal but only proper implementation of these plans and programmes can ensure their success. It is also important to ensure productive utilisation of the plans in place through proper and regular assessment of the plans and their implementation.

## **Budget Allocation and Foray into New Areas**

Budget allocation and funding of educational institutions is one of the major areas for bringing reform in the field of education in any country. Until 2001 only government institutions of higher learning were allowed. Since then private individuals and organisations have established institutions of higher learning; but most of the educational institutions both at basic education and higher education levels depend on the government for their finances. Thus, budget allocation for education becomes an important tool of educational reform requirements. A consistent increase in educational budget has been witnessed in the Kingdom during the last fifteen years. Attempts have been made to foray into emerging and new areas of education particularly in the field of science and technology.

The budget allocation for education has continuously improved from 2001-02; for example, education budget for 2002 was SR 53 billion, rose to SR 61.7 billion in 2004, 69.9 billion in 2005, 104.6 billion in 2008 and SR 122 billion in 2009 (MEP, 2010: 361). In 2006, Saudi Arabia spent 6.2 percent of its GDP on education (MEP, 2010: 361). During the eighth development plan (2004-2009) human resource development was one of the focus areas. As a result of consistent inflow of funds and efforts to improve the quality of education and Saudization of workforce, the number of indigenous workforce employed in government and private sectors increased from 3.3 million in 2004 to 3.9 million in 2009 (MEP, 2010: 15).

Likewise, the ninth development plan (2010-2014) also envisages developing the human resource and it states that,

The educational system is a central focus of development in the Kingdom, where the impact of education is linked to the aspirations of individuals and their educational needs, at the same time it is directly linked to the needs of society and its development in productivity and knowledge sector. According to this perspective exploring the future of education and identification of trends that govern it and the content and strategies for development becomes the main tasks of this development plan (MEP, 2010: 361).

This is a testimony to the commitment towards educational and human resource development and its place in budget allocation. During the ninth development plan

(2010-2014), the government proposes to invest a sum of SR 498.4 billion on basic education while another SR 200.2 billion on higher education (MEP, 2010: 361-390). In the ninth development plan that proposes to spend SR 1.44 trillion on various projects, manpower development including education has got the highest share of 50.6 percent of the total allocation for welfare plans (Ghafour, 2010).

The government, in its educational reform initiatives, does not wish to lag behind due to budgetary constraints. It gives high priority to budget allocation for education and human resource development. To achieve the national objective of academic excellence and improving universities, the government is extending full support through budget allocation (Fatany, 2007). It also plans to enhance the share of local workforce in the public and private sectors from 47.9 percent to 53.6 percent in 2014 (Ghafour, 2010). Similarly, it plans to open more schools, universities and professional institutions to cater to the needs of the growing population and the requirements of the market economy.

In addition to increasing the budgetary allocation for improving the condition of education, efforts have been made to foray into emerging new areas of study. King Abdullah consented to the establishment of the “King Abdullah Institute of Nanotechnology” that would work under the King Saud University of Riyadh and would start functioning in November 2011 (Al-Harithy, 2011). Pharmacy, adult education, biotechnology, information technology are areas where the government wants to invest for further expansion. Apart from improvement in existing areas through consistent investment, the government is also pumping funds in the development of infrastructure for new and emerging areas of study.

The budget allocation for improvement of the quality and infrastructure of existing educational institutions and establishment of more schools, universities, professional colleges and specialised institutions have been one of the corner-stones of the educational reform initiatives in the last fifteen years. Through consistent increase in budgetary allocation and supported by GDP growth, the monarchy wants to achieve success in eradication of illiteracy, unemployment, Saudization of workforce and wishes to establish a knowledge based economy in the country.

**Table 3.5:** Distribution of Students in Higher Education in Saudi Arabia, 2008-09

Area of Study	Percentage of Male Students	Percentage of Female Students
Education	13	87
Arts and Humanities	47	53
Social Sciences, Economics and Law	53	47
Natural Sciences	52	48
Engineering	98	2
Agriculture	67	33
Health and Medicine	52	48
Other professional courses	100	0

Source: (MHE, 2010c: 21)

## Advancement in the Field of Women's Education

Gender equality is one of the major debates in Saudi Arabia that attracts global attention. An educated, professional Saudi woman has to live with ancient traditions and modern values at the same time. The discourse on gender equality is sharply divided between call for more freedom for women and keeping the status quo of limited public participation of women and segregation of sexes. According to Kathrine Zoepf,

Public separation of the sexes is a strongly distinctive feature of Saudi Arabia, making it perhaps a logical area for fierce debate. Since women have such a limited role in Saudi public life, however, it is somewhat surprising that it is their rights that have become a matter of open contention in a society that keeps most debate hidden (Zoepf, 2010).

The question of equality between sexes evokes strong emotions from both sections of opinion makers. On the one hand, there are liberals who demand complete freedom for women, end of public segregation of men and women, allowing women to drive and move alone without any male *Mahram*<sup>8</sup> accompanying them as well as allowing them to go abroad alone. There are Islamists who have a completely contradictory view on all these issues and demand a limited role for women as home-makers, mothers and wives. In between these two, "Islam-liberal"<sup>9</sup> section tries to have a balanced opinion on matters of gender equality.

The question of educational reforms for women and providing equal opportunities for women in education cannot be seen in isolation of the larger debate of gender equality and discrimination. Before coming to the reform measures in the field of women's education, one needs to understand the current situation of the Saudi women in education. The status of women in the field of education, as teachers and students, is as complicated and complex as the current discourse on gender issues. According to Nesta Ramazani,

Vigorously pursuing higher education, careers and financial independence, the new Saudi working woman lives in two separate worlds – that of professionalism, as an active, contributing member of society and that of the protected cloistered

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<sup>8</sup> *Mahram* is the family member whom an unmarried woman cannot marry; that is, father, brother and the husband after marriage.

<sup>9</sup> The term "Islam-Liberal" has been used by Stephane Lacroix, for details see Lacroix, 2004.



female, bound by tradition, veiled in public, forbidden to drive a car or travel unless accompanied by a man. She is entrusted with the surgeon's scalpel or the obstetrician's forceps, but not with her own morality. She is entrusted with educating hundreds of members of the upcoming generation, but not with the freedom to come and go as she pleases. Yet in the prevailing climate of Islamisation, many of these women vigorously defend the restrictions imposed on them in the name of Islam and scuff at the "so-called freedoms" enjoyed by Western women (Ramazani, 1985: 259).

It is true for Saudi women in public life as well as in education. Women go to schools, universities and join workforce in various fields but the segregation of sexes starts from the primary school level and continues throughout the life. The country witnessed the inauguration of its first co-educational university, King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, which saw intense debate in the media and criticisms from many prominent *ulema*. For example, the government was criticised for allowing mixing of sexes by many religious scholars including Sheikh Saad al-Shithri, a member of Council of Senior Ulema; such outspokenness however resulted in his removal from the council by the King (Al-Mufadhali, 2009). On the other hand, it was hailed as "a gift to the world" by liberal media and academicians (Ali, 2009). Women's participation in education, which used to be a taboo some decades back, has become acceptable in the society. Indeed, women outnumber men in university enrolment and 56.6 percent of university students were women in 2009 (MHE, 2010a). Women also outperform men in higher education in almost every field but at the same time, women students in higher education are concentrated mainly in subjects like, education, medicine and humanities (see Table 3.5). One can easily see that women are mainly concentrated either in the fields of Education, Arts and Humanities and Medicine, which are considered as "acceptable" fields of study and profession for women.

Women's education has always faced opposition from conservative and traditionalist sections of the society. In 1962, when King Faisal opened the first girl's school in Saudi Arabia, he faced vociferous objections on part of the religious leaders (Ramazani, 1985: 259). Likewise, King Abdullah faced enormous criticism from traditionalist *ulema* when he announced and inaugurated a co-educational university, King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, in 2009 (Al-Mufadhali, 2009). One interesting aspect on both these incidents is the role played by a powerful royal woman; King Faisal was very much

influenced by his wife Queen Iffat in his decision to start girl's education in Saudi Arabia (Kechichian, 2008: 117). Similarly, it is said that Princess Adelah, daughter of King Abdullah who is married to Prince Faisal Bin Abdullah Al Saud (also the Education Minister), has considerable influence upon the King as far as women's issues are concerned (Dickey, 2009).

Even though questions regarding education of women prevail and the status of women in the society has not changed considerably, improvement has been witnessed in participation of women in education and work force during the last fifteen years. In 1967-68, the ratio of girl's school at elementary level was one-fifth of boy's school, it reached half-way mark in 1980-81 and reached parity in 1999-2000. Similar increase can be witnessed at intermediate and secondary levels as well as (for detail see **Table 2.1**). The number of schools for girls has surpassed the number of boy's school at all levels during the past one and a half decade. The ratio of literate women to men has considerably increased from 83.8 in 1995 to 97.9 in 2008 (MEP, 2009: 31). Similarly, the ratio of girls to boys in primary, secondary and higher education has also increase considerably. Likewise, in 2009 women constitute 15 percent of total workforce in Saudi Arabia and 20 percent of those going abroad for higher education (MHE, 2010a). The number of girl's school has increased manifold from the time girl's education was introduced.

This improvement in participation of women in education during the last fifteen years was made possible by consistent effort on part of the monarchy led by Crown Prince/King Abdullah. The first step in this direction was the merging of General Presidency of Girl's Education with Ministry of Education in 2002 (Hamdan, 2005: 44). In fact, one of the predicaments for girl's education since it was started in 1962 was that it remained under religious leaders to ensure that women's education does not deviate from its original purpose to educate women for making them good wives and mothers. In 2002, after demands from general public and intellectuals, girl's education was handed over to Ministry of Education. The immediate trigger being the death of 15 young girls in a fire in March 2002 in an elementary girl's school in Mecca. It was reported in the press that the presence of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, or religious police, contributed in high number of deaths. These religious police did not

allow the firemen to enter into the schools for rescue operations because the girls and women teachers inside the school might not be wearing *hijab* (head scarf) and so it would be sinful for the firemen to approach them. “This caused a widespread public outcry and promoted a debate about the religious police’s role in such cases” (Prokop, 2003: 78). This step proved to be a major stepping stone for girl’s education which until then was seen as less important administratively than boy’s education. After coming under Ministry of Education, the role of *ulema* in girl’s education declined considerably and also resulted into equal budgetary allocation for girl’s schools.

The government also realised the need to improve women’s education and to increase their participation in public life in order to ensure economic survival (Hamdan, 2005: 58). This realisation on part of the monarchy plays a very important role in enhancing the participation of women in education. This has facilitated the increased involvement of women in various professional fields. As a result since the late 1990s “women have been moving steadily into new areas of employment which were unacceptable a generation ago, such as advertising, broad casting and journalism” (Doumato, 1999: 569). The need for Saudization of workforce and productive participation of half of the population in economy has led to opening of various new doors for women.

The Ministry of Higher Education is working on its goal to provide opportunities for women in achieving higher education in their desired field of study and to help in the economic advancement of the country. It has taken a number of initiatives to meet this target including the establishment of Princess Norah Bint Abdul Rahman University for Women in Riyadh, a residential campus for which has been inaugurated on 15 May 2011 by King Abdullah. This would be the largest women university in the world with a capacity for 50,000 students (MHE, 2010a). Apart from that the Ministry has also worked for opening the women extension in existing ‘men-only’ universities like King Saud University. Another important step, as noted above, in the direction of providing equal opportunity for women to achieve higher education in science and technology was the establishment of King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, which is the first and so far the only co-educational university in Saudi Arabia.

All these efforts have yielded results and the number of women students enrolled in graduate programmes in universities have increased to 450,000 in 2009 (MHE, 2010a). In order to encourage women to march ahead in different fields and to take up higher education in their field of choice, Abdullah awarded King Abdulaziz Medal - First Class for the year 2009 to Dr. Khawla Bint Sami Al-Kurie, a cancer research scientist and head of research centre at King Fahd National Center of King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Center in Riyadh (MHE, 2010a). In another bold and politically strong move, King Abdullah appointed Norah al-Fayez as Deputy Minister in charge of girl's education in Ministry of Education in February 2009. She was the first woman to be included in the Council of Ministers in the history of Saudi Arabia. These steps indicate the strong willingness on part of Abdullah to take the country a step forward in women's education in spite of strong opposition from *ulema* and other traditionalist forces in the polity and society.

The Kingdom has witnessed considerable advancement in the field of women's education in the past one and a half decade under the leadership of Crown Prince/King Abdullah. However, lot more needs to be done to further improve the participation and provide equal opportunities for women in education and work. Women's education cannot be seen in isolation of issues of gender equality and women's right. The buoyant debate on these issues has seen one positive trend, that of open participation of women themselves in this discourse, either in favour or otherwise. This makes one realise the remarkable progress from earlier period when women were not even allowed to attend secular education, which was termed as the 'gate' for Western culture. The Saudi women now are making strides in all fields of life including education within the limited freedom they have achieved and within the boundaries of traditional cultural values.

### **Minority Education: Aspirations and Achievements**

The issue of minorities is one of the least debated and discussed issues within the Kingdom. Not much information comes out of Saudi Arabia regarding status of minorities, their population and socio-political aspirations. It is a mono-religious country where public practice of any other religion except that of Wahhabi version of Islam is not

allowed. The minorities are primarily Shias who are concentrated mainly in the Eastern Province and Najran. According to estimates, Shias comprise between 10 to 15 percent of total population in Saudi Arabia (ICG, 2005).

The issue of official discrimination towards Shias is not new. In 1979, after Juhaiman al-Uthaibi's *Kabah* siege, the Shias also protested in Eastern Province and the authorities responded with a crack down on the demonstrators. Likewise, during a pilgrimage in 2009, scores of Shias were killed and injured as a result of clashes between the Shia pilgrims and the notorious religious police, who tried to stop them from performing some religious ritual not in accordance with Wahhabi Islam (Yamani, 2009).

The Shias have long demanded religious and educational freedom. However, the state sees them as a security threat vis-a-vis Iran. The rise of Shias in Iraq after removal of Saddam Hussein has alarmed the Saudi government. The Shias, who sometimes identify themselves with Shias across the border in Iraq, feel inspired with the empowerment of Shias there (Yamani, 2009). The discrimination against Shias is practised in all walks of life and the Shias are not allowed to practise their religious rituals publicly and publish religious literature. They are not allowed to follow their own curriculum in religious studies. In employment also Shias are mostly concentrated in low rung jobs.

Discrimination in education is prevalent. For example, the Ismailis of Najran complain that, "the people of Najran have been deprived for fifteen years from attending colleges, institutes and military training centres" (HRW, 2008: 59). The discrimination in education can also be recognised from the fact that the Eastern Province has only one premier university, the King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals. Educational infrastructure in these areas like schools, colleges and technical institutions are not up to the requirement of the population.

Since Crown Prince Abdullah took over the reign, a number of steps have been taken in this regard to make the education system more inclusive and sensitive towards the needs of the Shia population. "The authorities have taken some measures to promote respect for the Shia religious minority", particularly after the increased unrest among Shias due to regional circumstances since 2006 (HRW, 2009: 7). In 2003 Abdullah began a series of

National Dialogues, which brought together for the first time leading Saudi Shia and Sunni religious figures. Furthermore, since 2005 the authorities eased the prohibition on festivities surrounding *Ashura*, allowing more public processions in Qatif.<sup>10</sup> Between February and April 2005 the authorities conducted elections to half the seats of municipal councils, the first elections in most parts of the Kingdom and did not interfere when Shia won all the six contested seats in Qatif and five out of six in al-Hasa (HRW, 2009: 7-8).

Steps have also been taken to remove derogatory and hateful references for Shias in the school text-books to make it more inclusive. The *Tatweer Project* has plans to open new schools and colleges in areas which have been lagging behind. This means that the authorities are also trying to do away with the official educational discrimination against Shias. However, these small steps may not be able to bridge the gap between Sunnis and Shias. The long held complain of the Saudi Shias that the government is discriminatory towards them is a result of their socio-political marginalisation through official machinery. The Shias claim that the government denies them religious and cultural space and discriminates against them in education, administration of justice and employment (HRW, 2009: 9). In 2003, when Crown Prince Abdullah met a Shia delegation and accepted their petition, it was a major political statement; but all these steps and efforts have not done much to completely end the discrimination of Shias and lot more needs to be done.

### ***Conclusion***

In Saudi Arabia, educational reform is one of the most sensitive issues and during the last fifteen years a number of initiatives and steps have been taken to bring reform in education. Changes have been incorporated through evolution of a national school curriculum for a more inclusive, modern and tolerant educational system. School text-books have been revised and the hateful references about 'others' have been removed. Teachers training programme has also been initiated to make the teaching process more

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<sup>10</sup> It is the 10<sup>th</sup> day of first month of Islamic calendar is commemorated by the Shia Muslims across the world, as a day of mourning for the martyrdom of Husayn ibn Ali, grandson of Prophet Muhammad at the battle of Karbala in 61 Hijri.

effective and improve the quality of education at primary, middle and secondary school levels. The *Tatweer Project*, *Comprehensive Assessment Project* and monitoring of schools have been started to improve the overall quality of education. Steps have been taken to improve the quality of higher education in order to enhance the quality of the human resource. A number of measures are being introduced to reduce unemployment and to implement the Saudization plan. New universities have been opened, old universities are being expanded and more vocational colleges were established to cater to the needs of the population. Budget allocation for education and human resource development has witnessed consistent and considerable increase. These have allowed the authorities to implement the plans for improvement of education system.

The Kingdom is trying to improve the quality of science education in the country. It encourages Saudi citizens to go abroad for pursuing higher education while making efforts to improve the quality of science education and research in the country itself. It has allowed opening of private universities with considerable autonomy in educational and curriculum matters. Institutions are being founded to cater to the new and emerging areas of science and technology. With respect to girl's education, a number of measures have been taken during the period of Abdullah to provide equal opportunity for female students for attaining higher levels in education and career. The General Presidency of Girl's Education has been merged with Ministry of Education to end the authority of religious leaders on girl's education. Educational facilities for women are being improved. Steps have also been taken to make the mainstream education more inclusive towards minorities. Initiatives on part of Abdullah to fulfil the demands of Shias regarding end of educational discrimination have created hope among them.

Steps to bring an end to the intervention of religious leaders at education policy level are not easy but some nuanced measures can be witnessed. The Council of Senior Ulema that had considerable say in the education policy matters does not have the same clout as earlier. The Ministry of Education and Ministry of Higher Education have been given more autonomy and leaders with reformist tendency have been given charge of these Ministries. In fact, King Abdullah has tried to take charge of education policy and

education system away from the first religious family of Al Shaikh to control the religious intervention of *ulema* in education.

These educational reform measures are comprehensive and should go a long way in changing the education system of Saudi Arabia. But a lot more needs to be done to bring substantial reform. Despite all these efforts, the fundamental reality of hegemony of religious establishment over the education policy and system remains unchanged. This problem, imbibed in the system and supported by the socio-political realities, cannot be changed over a short period of time. These reform steps as examined above can help in improving the education system and can be said to be going in the right direction, but cannot be expected to completely overhaul the existing system. Saudi Arabia is a religious monarchy and the education system in the Kingdom is complementary of the political system. A comprehensive and total reform in education system may be beyond the purview of the existing political system in the country.



# Chapter Four: Changing Trends and Limitations

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Saudi Arabia has witnessed a number of educational reform measures during 1995-2010. The earlier chapters examined the education policy, system and reforms at different levels and areas from the point of view of demands made by the people, external pressure for change, changing regional scenario and Abdullah's compulsion to initiate these reforms. It would now be appropriate to examine the impact of these reforms on the education system. The changes brought about by these reforms need to be analysed along with their limitations. This chapter endeavours to study the changes and limitations of the educational reforms in Saudi Arabia during the past fifteen years and analyse their effectiveness in achieving the desired result.

This chapter would try to find answers to two principal questions. Firstly, what changes the educational reform measures have been able to bring in the education policy and education system of Saudi Arabia? Secondly, what are the limitations of these reform measures in bringing about desired changes? The following paragraphs would deal with each of the major reform measures and the changes that these have been able to bring about in the education system as well as their limitations. Curriculum development and text-book revision programmes were launched for the improvement of school-level and higher education curriculum while the text-book revision mainly focussed on removing derogatory and hateful references to others. The teacher's training and improvement in school environment programme has been focussed on improving the teacher's capabilities and improving the learning process for students at schools. The *Tatweer Project* and Comprehensive Educational Assessment Project (Assessment Project) that was launched in 1996 have had specific objectives which would be dealt with in this

section. Infrastructure development and expansion programme have witnessed some success while human resource development and Saudization programme have not been able to take off as desired by the policy makers. Budget allocation and investment in education have consistently increased and quality of science and technology education has also improved. Steps for more inclusive education system would be analysed in a separate section. The second section would analyse the challenges faced by King Abdullah and the limitations of the reform process.

### **Curriculum Development and Text-Book Revision**

Curriculum development during the last fifteen years has been aimed at improving the quality of school and university education for producing skilled and better human resource. This emphasis on skilled manpower was mainly aimed at addressing the need for Saudization of human resource necessary for the economy. The oil boom of the 1970s was followed by a “baby boom” and the Saudi Arabia faced a “population bulge” at the turn of Twenty-first century (Marcel, 2006: 107). The lack of expertise in required fields gave rise to unemployment among youth and the Saudization plan had to be complemented with curriculum development to improve the quality of human resource in the country.

If one looks into the curriculum development programme, one realises that it is a continuous process and has not been planned merely as a response to external pressure after 2001. Saudi Arabia, in co-operation with the United States, invested in curriculum design and development in the 1980s (Shaker, 1980). But this had more to do with human resource development and improvement in the quality of education. The major objective that compelled the authorities to speed up the curriculum development programme after 2001 was to devise a curriculum that remains free from extremist influence. This phenomenon came into debate only after the 11 September 2001 attacks and the involvement of Saudi citizens, which forced the monarchy to start radical changes in religious curriculum of schools and universities.

The quality of education has improved over a period of time as a result of consistent effort for improvement of the school and university curriculum. Science and technology

education in universities have particularly improved in comparison to what it was. Curriculum development focussed more on development of science education. As a result, science and technology education has improved comparatively from the past, mainly in higher education. But the progress is slow and not much visible. In comparison to international standards things have hardly improved. A 2007 study by the *Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)* put Saudi students third from bottom in eighth grade mathematics and in the science category the Kingdom was fifth from bottom among 58 countries that were surveyed (Gonzales, 2009). Saudi Arabia also ranked at ninety-third out of 129 countries in UNESCO's 2008 index assessing quality of education (UNESCO, 2008).

The quality of science education in universities has improved to an extent along with expansion in existing universities and establishment of new institutions and universities.<sup>1</sup> The improvement in quality of education and curriculum has not spread to the fields of humanities and social sciences. The existing universities which cater to social sciences and humanities continue to follow the traditional method of education and research, while much needed curriculum development has not been carried out in these areas of study. Most of the social sciences and humanities research are carried out in the field of theology, religion and Islamic and Arab history. The importance of education and research in these areas cannot be undermined, but acquisition of new methodologies of research and expertise in these areas seems to have been undermined by the authorities and policy makers.

Likewise, the curriculum followed in the schools still emphasises on religious education. The time and resources devoted to religious and theological subjects continue to be higher than science and humanities subject. The changes brought in the curriculum have done very little to improve the approach of studying science through traditional methods. Even though the Ministry of Education has devised guidelines for science and mathematics subjects, but the areas of humanities and social sciences remain ignored (*Tatweer*, 2010b). Moreover, the practice in schools of following the curriculum

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<sup>1</sup> This aspect has been discussed in detail in third chapter. For further study refer to *World Science Report 2010* and *2009 National Report*, Ministry of Higher Education, Saudi Arabia.

focussing more on religious and moral studies, especially in primary and secondary sections, continues. Similarly, the higher educational institutions have continued with a curriculum that has compulsory religious studies even for science and technology students.

It would be appropriate to argue that the reform measures for curriculum development have achieved only partial success, because certain areas like science curriculum have witnessed improvement while overemphasis on religious has not changed (CRFHI, 2008). This raises obvious questions regarding the limitations of reform measures which prevented these from achieving the desired objectives. Why is it that the curriculum development plan, that is going on in Saudi Arabia for decades and has been prioritised in the last one decade, has not been able to achieve much success? Apart from administrative deficiencies in implementation, there are some discrepancies at the policy level as well, which have played a major role in creating the current situation (Al-Sumbul, 1998). For example, curriculum development plans did not care for the need of people and the demands of a modern education system. Science and technology education at universities and higher education level cannot be made excellent unless science education at school level improves; the authorities finally realised this in 2004-05 and started the *Tatweer Project*. But this emphasis on improvement of education focuses only on science education and ignores social sciences.

The Ministry of Higher Education decided to have an *Observatory on Higher Education* for harmonizing the higher education. This “supports, monitors and guides the comprehensive and sustainable process of development of the higher education sector in the Kingdom” (MHE, 2010d: 5). This step would be vital in improving the quality of higher education but seems to have been taken very late and would take time to show results. A number of industrialised countries like Britain, Holland, Belgium, Canada and some Arab countries like, Morocco, Lebanon and Algeria have already put in place such ‘Observatory’, which has helped in harmonising and regulating the higher education system (MHE, 2010d: 5).

Unlike curriculum development, the text-book revision programme was a result of external pressure on the Saudi government after the 11 September 2001 attacks. As discussed earlier this brought to the fore the objectionable contents of school text-books, which were found to have negative and inciting references about Jews, Christians, atheists, Shias and Muslims of other schools of thought than the official Islam. This narrowing down of the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures and religious texts based on *Aqidah* (faith), which is a matter of intense theological debate, were found to be mentioned in school text-books of children as young as 6-7 years (Prokop, 2003: 80).<sup>2</sup>

The first question is what changes have been incorporated in text-books taught in Saudi schools? Even though a thorough study of these text-books is beyond the scope of this study, secondary sources indicate that not many changes have been carried out in these school text-books. For example, as Nina Shea explains:

A review of a sample of official Saudi textbooks for Islamic studies used during the current academic year reveals that, despite the Saudi government's statements to the contrary, an ideology of hatred toward Christians and Jews and Muslims who do not follow Wahhabi doctrine remains in this area of the public school system. The texts teach a dualistic vision, dividing the world into true believers of Islam (the "monotheists") and unbelievers (the "polytheists" and "infidels") (Shea, 2006).

Similarly, Jamal Khashoggi observed that until and unless school children are given lessons in theology and jurisprudence, the problem of inciting and intolerant reference to others would continue, adding that if Catholic theology would be taught to children in schools in Europe that would also evoke similar sentiments in those children (Khashoggi, 2006). In the same vein, Ulf Laessing writes that, "high school literature, history and even science text books regularly quote Koranic verses" (Laessing, 2011). He further adds:

... the changes will only go some way to overhauling the system. Take school textbooks. The government has started to cut comments that urged Saudis to kill "infidel" Christians and Jews. But the books still say Saudis should avoid non-Muslims. A reference in a new religious textbook seen by Reuters says that

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<sup>2</sup> For further reading refer to CRFHI, 2008 and Doumato, 2003.

"Prophet (Mohammed) has cursed Jews and Christians because they have built places of worship around their prophets' tombs" (Laessing, 2011).

In addition not much has changed in the text-books; earlier they used to have reference to violence which has been removed now, also it is not just the text-books that needs to be changed but the entire mentality has to be changed (Laessing, 2011). These assessments show that the reforms intended for bringing abrupt change in the school text-books have also been, at the best, partially addressed. A lot more needs to be done to bring the desired change in the school text-books.

What impedes the desired change in the structure of school text-books in Saudi Arabia? All the steps taken for revision of school-text books do not address the root of the problem. The root of the problem is teaching of theology to school children. Theology and jurisprudence are subjects for specialization that needs training not just in religion but also in modern subjects to make it more relevant for a modernising society. Another problem is traditional and dogmatic references in school text-books of science and social sciences subjects. This brings up the issue of religious influence on education system. Concrete measures needs to be taken to address the real problem of religious intervention in school education. Moreover, there are problems of implementation of these measures because most of the officials and subordinate workers in education ministry, departments and agencies are taken from religious schools and hence the implementation of these measures are also hindered due to lack of interest and understanding of the modern system of education.

It can be said that the educational reform measures taken to address the curriculum development and text-book revision requirement have achieved only partial success. The changes brought about by these reform measures are not enough to improve the education system. These steps, at the best, have achieved limited success in their reform objectives and can have only limited impact on the education system. The major question which the curriculum development and text-book revision intended to answer, that is of religious intervention, remains intact and needs to be addressed with much more emphasis.

## **Teacher's Training and Improvement in School Environment**

In order to improve the quality of education, Saudi Arabia has taken reform measures to improve the environment in schools along with improving the capabilities of teachers. A comprehensive teacher's training programme has been laid down by the Ministry of Education which has also put in place programmes for improvement of environment in schools to make it interactive, friendlier and attractive for students (MoE, 2011). The Ministry of Education accepts a variety of training methods and courses, including those provided by its own supervisors, courses laid out at its training centres and training provided at private centres (Sidiya, 2009). Workshops and in-house training on school premises undertaken by visiting experienced teachers is another method.

What is the main objective of the teacher's training and improvement in school environment programmes? The main idea is to make the learning process more enjoyable for students and improve the quality of education which can be achieved only through well trained teachers. Saudi Arabia has a large number of teacher's training colleges all over the country from where most of the school teachers are drawn. However, teaching methodology is based on rote-learning and memorization which does not inculcate critical thinking and analysing abilities among the students (Prokop, 2003: 87). This along with poor environment of learning in schools has necessitated the improvement in teaching and learning processes.

The teacher's training and improvement in teaching environment programmes intended to address the problems like lack of knowledge and specialisation in concerned subjects, lack of expertise among primary school teachers, tendency among teachers to trivialise critical understanding of the subject, lack of interest among teachers to develop the personality of students, lack of debate and discussion in classes, lack of interest and understanding of the subject as well as disciplinary issues among teachers (Al-Eisa, 2009: 64-65). These problems have to be addressed through measures such as improvement in quality of existing teachers training colleges and through supplementary workshops and training programmes run by the Ministry of Education.

What are the changes these measures have been able to bring in the education system of the country? Have these teacher's training and improvement in school environment programmes yielded any result or succeeded in bringing any positive change? At best, it can be argued that they have achieved very little success. According to reports like *UNESCO Teacher's Training Report 2007*, the environment in schools has not changed much. The teaching methodology also remains traditional and lacks creativity and innovation. Teachers in general are not very enthusiastic about what is being termed as improving their capabilities. Teachers who have been in the profession for the past several years see this as unnecessary burden that is not of much use (Sidiya, 2009). That apart, teachers have to pay for attending workshops and course materials for training, which also prevents them from attending these workshops.

A proposal for centralised system of teaching license that was first discussed in the *Majlis al-Shura* in mid-2007 has not seen the light of the day until now (Sidiya, 2009). According to the system only qualified people having vocation for teaching would be selected and trained and certified for teaching in schools. This proposal, however, has not been implemented yet but has the potential to considerably improve the teaching and learning process in the schools. But lot more needs to be done to make it more effective and to achieve the international teaching standards (Al-Aqil, 2005: 260).

What are the limitations of these reform measures in improving the quality of teaching and schools? The measures taken for capacity building of teachers are not implemented properly due to lack of interest among teachers and within the administration. The programme has run into many roadblocks like less participation among government school teachers as the training programme is not compulsory and is costly (Sidiya, 2009). Lack of awareness among teachers about the need to improve their capabilities and lack of acceptability that the system needs change and improvement are other problems. It has been reported that the teachers find these training programme useless and do not want to attend these expensive training workshops that hardly add anything as far as their growth prospects are concerned (Sidiya, 2009). They do not feel that attending these programmes enhance their teaching skills.



Apart from that there are issues like the qualification for school teachers is intermediate and a diploma in teaching, which leaves a lot more to be desired among the teachers. According to Abdullah Al-Aqil, the eligibility of teachers should be set minimum at a bachelor's degree in the concerned subject to be eligible for teacher's training colleges (Al-Aqil, 2005: 260). More such suggestions for improving the teacher's training programme in the country are advocated by the reformist elements but the authorities are yet to incorporate these suggestions and workout a comprehensive plan to achieve the objective of well trained teachers and good learning and academic atmosphere in schools (Al-Eisa, 2009: 65).

The country faces many problems with respect to improvement of overall teaching environment in schools. The Ministry of Education which controls the school education has yet to devise a comprehensive plan for improvement of schools and their teaching environment. It plans to create a mechanism whereby teachers and schools administration can have regular interaction with parents (Tatweer, 2010a). Another plan proposes to have monitoring of classes (Al-Eisa, 2009). These plans, however, have not been adopted. Most of the teachers, as already discussed, lack expertise in the subject and are poorly trained, teaching methodology lacks innovation and students are not groomed to face the complex demands of life ahead. This affects their future job prospects. It can be argued here that the teacher's training and improvement in school environment programme have failed to take off. The problem of poor quality would continue to hamper educational reform efforts until and unless the issue of teacher's training and improvement in school environment are given more importance and addressed with urgency.

### **Tatweer Project and Assessment Project**

During the last one and a half decade, Saudi Arabia has launched two educational reform projects; the *Comprehensive Educational Assessment Project* in 1996-97 and King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Public Education Development Project (*Tatweer Project*) in 2005-06. Both these projects were launched with much fanfare and lots of hope to bring much needed reform in the education system. The *Assessment Project* could not continue

for long and came to an end without much result. The *Tatweer Project*, which was termed as a pet project of King Abdullah who repeatedly emphasised on the need for educational reform, is an ongoing project and it has to be seen that how much it can help in bringing the desired change in the system.

The *Assessment Project* was launched immediately after Crown Prince Abdullah took over the reign. The main objective of this project was to make a comprehensive assessment of the education system of the country in all its aspects and at all levels and to prepare a report recommending reform measures. A team of 27 academicians, technocrats, bureaucrats and experts from various fields was constituted to carry out the assessment work. The committee took three years in coming out with a report titled *Educational Reform in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia* and submitted it to the Ministry of Education (Al-Eisa, 2009: 61). However, the committee's recommendations were never made public and no action was taken due to differences among the authorities on the assessment of the committee (Al-Eisa, 2009: 61).

The Assessment Project failed to bring any change in the system due to many reasons. The basic reason was lack of clear vision among the committee members about what aspects and what areas have to be assessed (Al-Eisa, 2009). There were clear differences among the committee members as well as the authorities who refused to act on the recommendations of the committee. Mainly there were differences about how to go forward in assessment and suggest recommendations for change. One opinion was to take out surveys on the ground and take opinion of common people, students, teachers, parents, schools and college administrators and come up with a comprehensive assessment outlining the deficiency in the entire education system of the country (Al-Eisa, 2009). Others were of the opinion that the need of the hour is to think about future and give recommendations about evolving a new system that would replace the old system of education (Al-Eisa, 2009).

The Assessment Project entered into turbulent waters right from the beginning and could not make much impact on the policy or system level for bringing educational reform. Its recommendations could not be implemented and it failed to achieve much success in

bringing the required change in the thinking pattern of the education policy makers and faded without much impact on the education policy as well as the education system. The subsequent changes in the Ministry of Education helped completely bury the recommendations of this committee.

The ongoing *Tatweer Project* was launched with much fanfare in 2005 by Abdullah with a budget of US\$ 2.4 billion, promising to overhaul teaching methods, emphasise on science education and provide training to 500,000 teachers to improve the quality of education. The King, since taking over the reign, has repeatedly said that giving young people a better education is at the heart of his plan to build a modern state and fight religious extremism. "Humanity has been the target of vicious attacks from extremists, who speak the language of hatred, fear dialogue and pursue destruction" King Abdullah said in 2009 at the inauguration of the country's first co-educational university (Laessing, 2011).

The *Tatweer Project* aims at developing standards in all aspects of education in Saudi Arabia and development of the entire education system to improve its quality. It also aims at a comprehensive change in the school curriculum of science subjects as well as curriculum development for technical and professional courses. Simultaneously, capacity building among teachers is another area which it aims at. Moreover, it endeavours to improve the overall educational environment in the country, making it one of the best educational destinations not just in the region but the entire world (*Tatweer*, 2010b).

How much the project has been able to achieve and what changes have been made in the education system since its launch? As discussed above the curriculum development and teacher's training programmes, which are also part of the *Tatweer Project*, have not achieved much success. One important objective of this project was to replace the old science and mathematics text-books in schools and introduce new books, developed and prepared with the help of international experts in the area. These books have now been changed and the new books are more interactive and have been designed to increase the interest of the students in the subject (MoE, 2011). The Ministry of Education has developed a dedicated portal for science and mathematics education at schools (MoE,

2011). The portal contains the curriculum, teaching methodology and content of science and mathematics subjects taught at schools from primary to high school level. It is very interactive and has dedicated sections for teachers, students as well as parents to make them familiar with the subject and to make the material on the subject accessible for all (MoE, 2011).

This is a positive step in making science and mathematics more popular at school level. It has the potential to change the way science and mathematics are taught at schools. It has already been discussed that the school education puts more emphasis on Islamic and religious education. The books on science and history also had religious and sectarian justification about nature based on faith and rituals. The new books have avoided such approach towards science. But other subjects like social sciences, languages and moral education still follow a traditional approach of teaching. Another important question is whether the teachers who have been teaching science through religious justification would be able to teach science with a modern approach.

The project also endeavours to develop a practice of involvement in extra-curricular activities among school students for their overall personality development. To achieve this objective the project recommends teachers and schools to inculcate activities like debate, discussion, science and technology games as well as health and hygiene awareness programmes (*Tatweer*, 2010b). *Tatweer* is an ambitious project that has the potential to change the way teaching and learning activity is carried out in the schools. However, it is yet to be seen how much impact it can make in the overall education system of Saudi Arabia. The project has generous funding and is well taken among the school teachers and students who want to see a change in the system (Al-Eisa, 2009).

The project also has limitations like any other programme and falls short on many aspects for overall improvement of the school education. Social sciences and languages have been completely ignored by the project and find no mention of the need to develop the curricula and teaching methodologies in these fields. It fails to realise that these subjects are equally important for the overall development of students and for bringing the much needed change in the school environment. It falls short in giving a clear guideline for the

schools in their approach towards religious education, failing to limit the amount of religious subjects taught in schools.

Apart from that, there are serious concerns about the proper implementation of guidelines and recommendations of *Tatweer Project* by the schools. It is also feared that this project, like earlier projects, would fail in its objectives due to lack of proper implementation (Al-Eisa, 2009: 66). The project has already faced delays in implementation and has run into trouble due to lack of serious interest on part of middle level officials in Ministry of Education. It seems that the limited approach of changing the curriculum of science and mathematics subjects and inclusion of Islamic teaching in the name of moral education has not been able to satisfy those who are against educational reform in Saudi Arabia (*Tatweer*, 2010b). It has to be noted here that serious differences regarding the project have been reported among the authorities at highest level (Al-Eisa, 2009). Even though King Abdullah and his son-in-law, the Education Minister, seem to be completely in control of the education reforms, there are elements who would not wish them to succeed (Alsharif, 2009).

Another important area that this project completely ignores is girl's education. The *Tatweer Project* that pledges to change the school education for better completely fails to recommend measures to improve education for girls in schools. It can be argued that the *Tatweer Project* suffers from serious problems at both policy and implementation level and may not succeed in achieving the desired results despite creating a hype and huge investments by the monarch.

### **Infrastructure Development and Expansion**

Reform measures to develop better infrastructure and to expand the education system for providing educational opportunities to the growing population has been one of the focus areas for the Kingdom since mid-1990s. Saudi Arabia would achieve universal adult literacy by 2015, however its progress is too slow (UNESCO, 2008: 182). The quality of education at primary, secondary and higher education level needs to be improved but providing educational opportunities for all is also an important target. To meet this end the authorities have taken various measures for expansion of the education system.

The number of schools has almost doubled in the last two decades. In 1991-92, there were around 15,000 girl's and boy's schools while in 2010 the number of schools has grown to 32,000 (MoE, 2011a). The country now has more than 50 government and private universities and higher education institutions (MHE, 2010e). Existing universities like King Saud University, King Khalid University and King Fahd University have been developed further to provide higher educational opportunities to more students. King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, a new university, was inaugurated in 2010. A new high-capacity campus for the Princess Nora Bint Abdulrahman University for women, which was established in 2007, was inaugurated on 15 May 2011 in Riyadh (Khan, 2011). An Institute of Nanotechnology would start functioning in 2011 and the consent for which was given by King Abdullah in 2010 (Al-Harithy, 2011).

Saudi Arabia has made strides in its educational infrastructure development and expansion plans during the last two decades. However, the main objective for better infrastructure has been to provide equal opportunities for higher education to all school graduates and achieving hundred percent primary school education. But this objective is yet to be achieved. It has around 90 percent primary school enrolment and dropout rate is also less in primary school (male dropout is nil while female dropout is 6 percent for 2004) but dropout rate increases in middle, secondary and higher education (UNESCO, 2008: 300-301).<sup>3</sup> Apart from that, a study abroad plan has been in place for its students who aspire to achieve higher education in countries abroad. This plan aims at facilitating quality higher education to students to compensate the lack of infrastructure and expertise in specialised subjects at home. Accordingly in 2005, nearly 2,800 Saudi students were provided with financial aid to study abroad (MHE, 2009: 15).

The educational infrastructure development and expansion plan of the authorities have brought good results. The number of schools has increased tremendously in different parts of the country including in the eastern province. A number of new universities, colleges and vocational institutions have been established during the last two decades. Infrastructure for science and technology education has improved. Existing universities

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<sup>3</sup> The dropout level from primary to secondary is 7percent for male and 3percent for female students; for more data please refer UNESCO, *Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2008*.

have established new centres for emerging fields of study and have tied up with international institutions for providing quality education.

This indicates the fact that the country has, to a large extent, achieved its goal towards infrastructure development and expansion plan. It has further plans for expansion of education system through private investment and through partnerships and co-operation with international universities and education centres of repute (MHE, 2009: 11). The education system has grown rapidly due to the efforts of authorities and due to the educational reform measure aimed at providing education for all citizens. Though its impact on the economy is arguably much lesser and it would be interesting to further analyse the reform measures aimed at human resource development and Saudization.

### **Human Resource Development and Saudization Plan**

Economic advancement is one of the driving forces for educational reforms in Saudi Arabia. Education plays a very important role in economic growth helping nations to deal with the problems like poverty, social mobility and helps in improving the quality of life. Saudi oil-based economy grapples with many problems like unemployment, lack of skilled human resource and uneven distribution of jobs, which are directly linked to education and training (World Bank, 2008: 7). The problems of unemployment and lack of skilled labour have been a main concern of the authorities while devising educational reforms policy. Human resource development and Saudization of the workforce have been two major objectives of education reform measures. The vital role of education in economic progress is propelled by the rapid pace of technological advancement and changes in global economy, which demand a human resource with a capacity for leadership, problem solving skills and collaboration and communication in wide range of economic sectors (Karoly, 2010). According to Lynn A. Karoly, in the twenty-first century,

... the countries of the world have been experiencing a transition from production-based economies to ones based on knowledge and information. Just as the shift from agrarian to industrial economies required a new mix of skills for the workforce, so too has this most recent transition changed the nature of jobs and the skills required to be successful. Education, from the earliest ages until the

transition to adulthood and even beyond, plays a role, as it has in the past, in advancing the productive capacities of the workforce, as known as human capital (Karoly, 2010: 5).

The question that can be asked is what are the main objectives of human resource development and Saudization plan as far as education is concerned? The main objective is generating quality human resource to drive the economy in forward direction. Unemployment among the youth, huge population of expatriate workers and lack of skilled human resource are directly proportional to the poor education system in the country. To achieve this twin objective of human resource development and Saudization a number of measures, like expansion of education system, curriculum development and investment in improving the quality of education, have been taken. For example, Saudi Arabia has established many new universities and colleges. It also has invested in the expansion of existing universities and departments and is establishing new institutions of learning and education to cater to the needs of people and for providing them with an opportunity to be a part of the market economy. It has also developed a plan for creating a knowledge-based economy to attain this goal.

If one comes to the changes brought about by these measures, it is realised that the most important achievements of the human resource development and Saudization plan has been the expansion of technical and vocational education. Similarly, curriculum in science subjects has also witnessed improvement during the course of implementation of this plan. Development in the direction of a knowledge based economy is another area that has benefitted from the reform measures. Expansion in general education has also been witnessed during this period. Technical and vocational colleges providing training to the citizens for job in various sectors have increased and science education at the higher level has seen huge investments for improvement of quality and expansion.

The Saudization plan has not achieved much success but it has helped increase the percentage of Saudi citizens in total workforce. The unemployment rate in 2009 was 10.5 percent, but unemployment rate among youth of 20-24 year of age was as high as 30.2 percent during the same year (ILO, 2010). More than 50 percent of the total labour force working in various sectors of the economy was expatriates. A total of 3.83 million male



and female Saudi nationals as against a total of 4.31 million expatriates were engaged in the economy (ILO, 2010). The situation has slightly improved and the Saudization plan has increased the percentage of native workforce; for example it is estimated that in 2003 two-third of the Saudi workforce was of expatriates (Pakkiasamy, 2004).

This change can be partially attributed to the increase in the number of technical and vocational colleges. The country established the Technical and Vocational Training Corporation in 1980 to oversee the development of technical and vocational education (TVTC, 2011). In 2000-2001 there were approximately 30-35 technical and vocational colleges which rose up to 65-70 in 2008-09 (TVTC, 2011). The number of students passing out of these colleges increased substantially, which gave a boost to the number of native workers in blue-collared jobs in private sector and industries which in turn has helped in the decline of unemployment rate.

At the same time, university education has also witnessed improvement. King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM), which is a premier science and technology university, has catered to the need for education and training for complementing the oil industry. The university has understanding and partnership with premier international institutions like Massachusetts Institute of Technology. It is one of the best universities in the region and has emerged as a hub for quality education and research in the Arab world. It attracts students from Arab and Muslim countries particularly in the field of scientific research. Similarly, the newly opened King Abdullah University of Science and Technology has a huge infrastructure and has been founded to improve the quality of science and technology education and to provide more opportunities for the citizens to go for higher education and research in scientific fields. Many new institutions in emerging areas of science have also been opened to achieve the goal of self-sufficiency in science education. But all these measures have not met the desired objective of human resource development and Saudization of workforce completely, as unemployment rate among youth is still very high and the percentage of expatriate workers is higher as well.

One reason that hinders the Saudization plan is the lack of participation of women in the economy. Apart from social problems there are certain lacunas in the policy and system that results in a huge gap between male and female workforce ratio. It is estimated that more than 50 percent of university pass outs in 2008 were women, but only 15-18 percent of total Saudi workforce comprises of women (MHE, 2010a). The reason is that women are encouraged to take up higher education in very limited fields that are deemed suitable for the 'female gender' like medicine, teaching, etc. This results into a large part of population remaining outside the organised economic activity despite having achieved higher education.

The human resource development plan has indirectly helped in improving the curriculum, mainly in science subjects. Curriculum development plan is going on for the past three decades to improve the quality of education, which has resulted in improved science and technology education. The quality of science education in universities has improved to an extent along with expansion in existing universities and establishment of new institutions and universities. However, this development in quality of education and curriculum has not brought much change in the field of humanities and social sciences. The existing curriculum in social sciences and humanities continue to follow the traditional method of education and research and have not been changed as discussed earlier. The core areas of education that has benefitted from these plans are science and technology.

The *Arab Human Development Report, 2003* emphasises on the importance of knowledge economy, which the developed and developing countries are focussing on due to the increasingly importance of human resource in labour market and economy (UNDP, 2003). Saudi Arabia has also put in place a plan for evolving a knowledge society which endeavours to develop a knowledge-based economy and help in development of science and technology education as well as advancement in information and communication technology (MHE, 2010f). Its desire to develop a knowledge society flows from the evaluation made in the *Arab Human Development Report, 2003*.

The plan for formation of a knowledge society comprises all aspects of education including educational environment, programmes for development of higher education,

developing expertise among teachers, providing specialised education for students and progress in scientific research (MHE, 2010f). In 2009, Saudi Arabia was among the top 30 countries in the economic competitiveness index at international level (MHE, 2010c). It has made strides towards formation of a knowledge society due to its educational development but this development has its limitations as well. The claim made in reports like *Towards Formation of a Knowledge Society 2010* and *Higher Education and Knowledge Society 2010*, both published by the Ministry of Higher Education, portray a very glorified picture of educational practices and depict them as modern and developed education system. They however, do not reflect the reality on the ground (MHE, 2010b and MHE, 2010f).

The education system has gained from the plan to improve the human resource. However, these measures have limitations as far as improvement in quality of education is concerned. Some of the major limitations of this plan are: the authorities have not been able to stop the high dropout levels at secondary education which is higher among boys than girls. The dropout ratio among boys at secondary to tertiary level was as high as 45-50 percent (in 2005) while it was 35-40 percent among girls. (UNESCO, 2008: 316). Despite huge investment in improving the quality of education Saudi students are not up to international standards in science and mathematics (Gonzales, 2009). The participation of educated youth in economic activities is not high which can be attributed to the lack of requisite skills that make them less competitive with respect to expatriate workers who bring higher skills and are comparatively less demanding (Károly, 2010). As in other GCC countries, women participation in economic activities, despite achieving higher educational level, is lower in Saudi Arabia and further hinders the Saudization plan.

The quality of education has not improved as much as it should to help the economy. This hinders the improvement in the human resource which has adversely affected the Saudization plan. The impact on education system reflects only in horizontal expansion of education, while the vertical progress is found lacking. The little improvement in education system has helped increase the participation of local workforce in the economy and, in turn, helped decrease the number of expatriates in the last one decade. However, a lot more is needed to develop the quality of education in the country so as to help its

human resource become more competitive in the labour market in order to aid the Saudization plan. Having said that, one needs to analyse the investment pattern in education, the changes it has been able to bring in the education system and the limitations of the high investment in education.

### **Budget Allocation and Public Investment in Education**

Budget allocation is another area that has seen a lot of improvements during the past two decades. The budget allocation for education has consistently increased; the education budget for 2002 was SR 53 billion, rose to SR 61.7 billion in 2004, SR 69.9 billion in 2005, SR 104.6 billion in 2008 and SR 122 billion in 2009 (MEP, 2010). All teaching, books and health services to students are provided free by the government, which allocated nearly 20 percent of its expenditures, or US\$ 36.3 billion, to human resources under the Fourth Development Plan, 1985-90 (MEP 2010). The Fifth Development Plan, 1990-95, proposed a total expenditure of about US\$ 37.6 billion (MEP 2010). During the eighth (2005-2009) and ninth (2010-14) development plan the allocation for education got further boost.

But, according to a World Bank report,

... Middle East and North Africa has made significant strides in the education sector, having started in 1960s and 1970s from very low levels of human capital accumulation. However, it has not capitalised fully on past investments in education, let alone developed education systems capable of meeting new challenges. The education system did not produce what the markets needed and the markets were not sufficiently developed to absorb the educated labor force into the most efficient uses (World Bank, 2008: 2).

The report captures the entire region, but the findings are equally true for the Kingdom. Its investment in education has not led to much change in the education system. The problem of unemployment among youth has continued over the years. The education system remains underdeveloped and lags behind in producing quality human resource to complement the market economy.

The investment in education would be analysed within the framework of questions raised above. One needs to understand that when a country invests in human resource

development through education, it benefits the society in many ways and evidences show that it is associated with lower population growth, healthier and better educated children, strong national identity and high market growth (World Bank, 2008). The main objective of huge educational investments has been to improve the quality of education, to complement the growth of the economy and to galvanise the social development in the country. However, the main focus for this investment has been on the economic aspect of development.

According to a World Bank report, during 1965-74 Saudi Arabia spent 3.6 percent of its GDP on education, which increased to 6.7 percent during 1975-84. It further increased to 7.2 percent during 1985-94, but decreased to 6.3 percent during 1995-2003 (World Bank, 2008). However, the development in education during this period remained limited despite such consistent increase in investments. It is not that no success in improving the quality of education and the access of education has been achieved. The adult literacy rate in has been reported to be 85 percent in 2008 and the youth literacy rate is much higher at 96 percent for males and 93 percent for females for the same year (UNICEF, 2010).

The investment in education has also improved the enrolment rate in primary schools and has helped decrease the dropout rates at primary school level. For example, the dropout rate at primary level in 1970 was 18 percent, which came down to 7 percent in 2003 (World Bank, 2008). Similarly, the enrolment rate in secondary and tertiary education has also improved over the years. The higher investment in education should be able to help improve the economic growth of country, improving the average income and help do away with poverty. However, this has not resulted in overall improvement in the quality of education and human resource. The increased investment has not resulted into desired levels of improvement in quality of technical and vocational education and the lack of interest among the population for the kind of job opportunities vocational education generates has affected the Saudization plan of the government.

The quality of secondary education has not improved much and the results are not corresponding to higher budgetary allocation for education. Saudi Arabia scores even

below the regional average in the *Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study* (TIMSS) score, where it ranks lower than Iran and Lebanon (Gonzales, 2009). It has also not achieved much success in improving the quality of its education despite higher GDP and higher investment in education, in comparison to other regional countries like Jordan, Iran and Lebanon (World Bank, 2008).

Saudi Arabia is an oil-based economy and much of the economic growth has been centred on the oil industry. The oil wealth has helped in huge investment in education but this higher investment in education has, in turn, not helped in economic growth and diversification. This was, however, not even targeted by the policy makers throughout the last one and a half decade and they woke up to the need of diversification of economy only very recently. The economic aspect of investment in education has been targeted at improvement in human resource and Saudization plan that has been analysed above. The Saudization and human resource development plans have failed to generate much results even after huge budgetary allocations for various areas of education. This failure in Saudization plan is due to lack of proper implementation of educational programmes and due to various limitations in the programme itself.

Another aspect is the diversification of economy that helps in absorbing the educated human resource and in turn drives the economic growth. Not much success has been achieved in this regard and the country continues to suffer from low level of economic diversification. This has resulted in lack of proper opportunities for students coming out of specialised education, which in turn has led to a lack of interest among the population to go for highly specialised areas of study. The economic growth generated through oil industry has helped improve the investment in the field of education but has not resulted in the diversification of economy and improvement in quality education.

The above assessment of the qualitative aspect of educational development as a result of rise in investment may not be very encouraging, but the quantitative aspect of educational development with huge budget allocations has certainly improved. The Kingdom now has a large network of schools and higher educational institutions, including universities, vocational and technical colleges and specialised centres of studies. This could be made

possible only through the consistent public expenditure in the field of education. The number of schools catering to primary and secondary education has increased during the last two-three decades. In 1974-75, there were approximately 2,000 schools in the country, while in 2005-06, the number had reached to approximately 30,000 (MEP, 2010).

Likewise, the number of universities increased. Till 1981, there were only seven universities in the entire country; however in 2010, Saudi Arabia had more than 50 government and private universities and institutions of higher education (MEH, 2010d). It has been able to develop a vast network of more than 150 vocational and technical institutions including teacher's training institutions that cater to the need for skilled human resource. This huge growth in infrastructure owing to the high investments in the field of education is remarkable and should go a long way in improving the educational standards of the country.

The Kingdom has done well as far as budgetary allocation in education is concerned. It has improved the quantitative aspect of education in the country but the qualitative aspect of education has not improved much. The expected socio-economic development with the monetary input in education has lagged behind. This dichotomy in the quantitative and qualitative aspect of education can be attributed to the fact that the policy makers are concerned more with trying to provide more and more educational opportunities to the people rather than focussing on improvement in the quality of education. The other aspect of this emphasis is the need to make educational opportunities available for more and more people rather than trying to provide quality education to chosen few.

The philosophy of the Saudi education policy seems to be focussing on the horizontal growth of education rather than striving for vertical growth. But this could be more due to the nature of the society and due to the nature of demands of the state. A country that has embarked upon the path of modern education just six decades back cannot be expected to have a high quality education system particularly if compared to developed countries that have started on the path of modern education much earlier and have been on the driving seat in the march towards modern education. The little strides in improving the quality of

education can be attributed to the determination of the monarchy for channelizing the financial gains of oil based economy in the field of education. However, globalisation and more interaction of the population with the international community, through modern techniques of communication and through interaction with the huge expatriate population, have helped improve the awareness to strive for improvement in qualitative and quantitative aspects of education among the population.

It is important to analyse the limitations of these huge budgetary allocations in improving the quality of education system. One of the basic limitations of budget allocation for education has been the focus on improvement in educational infrastructure. The quality of education gets relegated to the secondary level at the point of policy formation itself. It is very much expected that the investments would help more in improving the infrastructure. As discussed earlier, the authorities have to focus first on providing educational opportunities for as many people as possible.

It cannot be argued that the improvement in quality of education does not feature at all in the scheme of things as far as financing of schools, universities and institutions are concerned. A large part of educational budget is being spent on curriculum development, teacher's training and other qualitative aspects of education. It has been observed that the lack of interest in implementation of programmes, lack of awareness for the need to change and lack of interest among administrative machinery add to the limitations and scope of the plans.

On the other hand, considerable efforts for improvement in quality through investment go into religious education. Religious educational institutions get higher budgetary allocation. For example, Saudi Arabia has three Islamic universities that specialise in religious education; Umm Al-Qura University in Mecca founded in 1979, Imam Muhammad Bin Saud Islamic University in Riyadh founded in 1974 and Islamic University of Medina established in 1961. However, other universities and colleges also have departments for religious studies as well as students in other areas of study in different universities have to compulsorily study religious subjects.



The lack of proper channelization of funds for different sectors of education is another limiting factor in budgetary allocation. On the one hand, science and religious education gets more funds while social sciences and humanities do not get adequate funds and this impedes the development in these fields. Similarly, higher education gets more and more funds, which is no doubt required, but school education also needs to be equally improved. This aspect for educational improvement has been found lagging in the education budgets. The other aspect is the need to provide better learning and training opportunities for students in vocational and technical colleges. This also has been neglected over the years as far as budget allocation is concerned.

The budget allocation and investment in education has helped improve the educational infrastructure in the country. The school education and vocational colleges are neglected in favour of universities and other higher educational institutions in budget allocation. Likewise the study of social science and humanities subjects are neglected in favour of science and technology education. Even though the data of budgetary distribution to different universities are not available, it can be argued, based on the assessment of the education system, that science and technology education and religious education get a preferential treatment at the cost of other areas of study. It would be interesting to analyse the success of the authorities in improving science education.

### **Programme for Improvement in Science and Technology Education**

It has come under discussion time and again that the science and technology education in Saudi Arabia has improved over a period of time. It would be interesting to analyse the changes and the limitations of this programme in bringing the desired change. It has been noted that science education in schools has improved and the participation of students in science subjects at intermediate level has increased. The quality of science and technology education at higher education level has improved as well.

What are the main objectives of the programme to improve the science and technology education? At the school level one of the main objectives is to create interest among students towards science subjects, which would create inclination among students for scientific thinking and encourage them to take up science at higher level. The education

system at higher level needs to improve the studies of science and technology subjects for producing more scientists and encourage innovations that can help the nation and society at large. A lot of effort, on part of the policy makers, is going in improving the quality of science education at schools and higher education level and to enhance the interest of students in science and technology subject.

New text-books for science and mathematics have been introduced in 2009-10 (MoE, 2011). These books are made available online for easy access to all students and teachers and to make the science education at school level more interactive. Guidelines for students and teachers, for using the book, activities and exercises have also been made available online to make it more accessible. These books make a conscious effort to create scientific interest and thinking among the students. A lot of emphasis has been given on activities and interactive lessons to create analytical skills among the students (MoE, 2011). But how far this can go in improving the quality of science education and participation of students in science and technology studies has to be seen. As of now the number of students taking up science and technology subjects at intermediate and higher level is lower than in humanities and social sciences. For example in 2003, 60.7 percent students took humanities and education, while 15.1 percent chose social sciences, 13.6 percent went for technology and engineering, while 4.6 percent took medicine at higher level after completing school education (World Bank, 2008).

The modest level of student enrollment in science and technology at the level of higher education in some MENA countries is due in part to government restrictions on access to these faculties, as in Morocco and Egypt, for example. In contrast, not as many restrictions are imposed on enrollment in the social sciences and humanities. In Djibouti, Egypt, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and West Bank and Gaza, more than 70 percent of the students are in the humanities and social sciences. This pattern of enrollment is historically consistent with a policy of absorbing most university graduates into civil service jobs, but is ill suited to a development strategy that draws on private initiatives and dynamic manufacturing and service sectors (World Bank, 2008: 21-22).

The Saudi case is no different from other countries in the region where government and government agencies are the largest job providers and people find it easier to get a job in government through humanities and education subjects. Even though the policy makers are trying to improve the quality of science education at school level to attract more

students towards science and technology, they have failed in enhancing the number of students choosing science subjects. The question again comes back to economy; the oil-based economy absorbs a very limited number of science graduates. One area that the authorities have to work on is diversification of economy so as to absorb science graduates and develop more critical thinking among student towards natural phenomena.

Another aspect of improvement in science and technology education is encouraging more scientists and researchers to engage in different fields of science and emerging areas of technology that can benefit the society and nation. It can only be realised through consistent and long-term effort to improve the quality of science education at all levels. Attracting students towards science subjects at school level, encouraging them to take up science education at higher level and then providing opportunity and infrastructure to go for scientific research would require a kind of atmosphere where scientific thinking is encouraged at all levels of education. This cannot be achieved through dogmatic and traditional approach of teaching and learning which are practised in the schools and universities.

One more aspect that plays its role in the 'go-slow' attitude towards science and technology education is the religious orientation of policy makers. The religious elements at the policy level, who have large scale influence at all levels of education, would not be very encouraging towards rational thinking among students. The interactions in science subjects at schools and universities have to be in accordance with the religious beliefs and values, which are sanctioned by the religious scholars at the text-book and curriculum level. This is one of the fundamental limitations of science education in the Kingdom. The clash of approach between science and religion towards science subjects becomes a roadblock for its improvement, particularly in an environment where religious value system is inherently more important in the social system as well as the set-up of the state.

The effort to improve science and technology education has to be harmonized vis-à-vis policy and system levels and is a long process. The steps for reforming science education at schools and higher level till now have achieved partial success. New text-books have been introduced, but it would take time to analyse their effectiveness in improving the

quality of science education at school level. At higher level also it would be a long drawn process to improve the quality of science education. The point that can be argued here is that the policy makers are trying hard to bring change in the way science education is carried out at schools and universities and are making efforts to establish state of the art institutions to carry out research at higher level in new and emerging areas of science. However, there are several limitations that prevent the improvement of science and technology education at all levels, including the social, economic and political setup of the country and efforts in these directions are also needed.

### **Steps for Inclusive Education**

One of the focus areas of educational reform in Saudi Arabia is to provide equal educational opportunities to all sections of society. Many sections of society based on gender, sectarian division, ethnicity and tribal affiliations face systematic discrimination as far as educational opportunities are concerned. For example, Shias face discrimination not just in education but also in the justice system and especially religious freedom (HRW, 2009: 1). Women are also subjected to systematic discrimination in the field of education as discussed earlier. A number of reform steps have been taken during the last fifteen years to change the system, bring an end to the discrimination and provide equal educational opportunities to all sections of the society.

The number of schools in the Shia majority areas has grown during these years (MEP, 2009). New universities and colleges have been opened in Shia dominated Eastern province (MHE, 2010e). The newly opened King Saud University of Science and Technology is a co-educational university, bringing an end to the continuing practice of segregation of sexes at the university level. Women now comprise more than 50 percent of graduates passing out of the universities (MHE, 2010a). A number of reform steps have been taken as far as Shia and women education is concerned. These reform measures have brought many changes in the education system to make it more inclusive, but there are several limitations which these reform measures grapple with to make the education system more inclusive and non-discriminatory towards all the citizens.

Women's participation in education, which used to be a taboo some decades back, has become acceptable in the society. Indeed, women outnumber men in university enrolment; in 2009 56.6 percent of university students were women (MHE, 2010a). Women also outperform men in higher education in almost every field but women students in higher education are concentrated mainly in subjects like, education, medicine and humanities. Improvement has been witnessed in participation of women in education and work force during the last fifteen years. The ratio of literate women to men has considerably increased to 83.8 in 1995 to 97.9 in 2008 (MEP, 2009: 31). Similarly, the ratio of girls to boys in primary, secondary and higher education has also increased considerably. In 2009, women comprised 15 percent of total workforce and 20 percent of those going abroad for higher education (MHE, 2010a). The number of women students enrolled in graduate programmes in universities increased to 450,000 in 2009 (MHE, 2010a). King Abdullah appointed Norah al-Fayez as Deputy Minister in charge of girl's education in Ministry of Education in February 2009 and she became the first woman to be included in Council of Ministers in the history of the monarchy.

Changes have also been witnessed towards the approach of Saudi policy makers regarding Shias that also reflects on the education system, albeit this change of approach has not satisfied the Shias who demand more freedom and equal status. "Steps have been taken to promote respect for Shias, particularly after the increased unrest among Shias due to regional circumstances since 2006" (HRW, 2009: 7). In 2003, Abdullah began a series of National Dialogue, which for the first time brought together leading Shia and Sunni religious figures. Furthermore, since 2005 the authorities eased the prohibition on festivities surrounding *Ashura* (commemoration of martyrdom of Hussain bin Ali on 10<sup>th</sup> day of first month of Islamic calendar), allowing more public processions in Qatif. Between February and April 2005 the authorities conducted elections to half the seats of municipal councils, the first elections in most parts of the Kingdom and did not interfere when Shias won all six contested seats in Qatif and five out of six in al-Hasa province (HRW, 2009: 7-8).

Steps have been taken to remove derogatory and hateful references to Shias in school text-books. The *Tatweer Project* also has plans to open new schools and colleges in areas

which did not have enough number of educational facilities. This means that the authorities are also trying to do away with the official discrimination against Shias. These steps are not enough and may not be able to completely bridge the gap between Sunnis and Shias. The authorities, especially the King, have shown character in facing the long held complaint of the Shias that the government is discriminatory towards them, which resulted in their socio-political marginalisation in the official machinery. King Abdullah has tried to address the Shia's claim that the government denies them religious and cultural space and that it discriminates against them in education, administration of justice and employment. In 2003, when a Shia delegation was allowed to meet him and submit their petition, it was a major political statement from the incumbent ruler. But all these steps and efforts have not done much to end discriminations against Shias.

These changes are encouraging but the reform measures to make the education system more inclusive also have certain limitations that have prevented it from becoming equally accessible and inclusive. In case of women and Shias, the major limitation of these reform measures is the religious influence on the education policy makers. As discussed in the second chapter, religious scholars have huge influence on the educational machinery both upon the policy and its operation. When it comes to education of women and opportunities for Shias, the official Wahhabi school of thought comes in way of bringing change. At times, *ulemas* who have huge influence on the ruling elite as well as sections of society are found on the wrong side in the issue of freedom of women and minorities.

Further, the political setup of the Kingdom makes it almost impossible for the authorities to give equal status to the Shias. The ruling family suffers from insecurities regarding Shias of Eastern province siding with Iraqi Shias or Iran in case of any problem. It is also supposed that complete freedom to the Shias may encourage the secessionist elements among them which could lead to the loss of oil rich areas, populated mostly by Shias. In case of women, the social setup impedes their forward movement in the field of education. Despite outnumbering men in universities, women find it difficult to go for non-traditional areas of study, which are deemed as non-suitable for their gender. In other words, women are allowed to take up higher education mostly in those areas that are

supposed to be the extension of their house hold chores, like teaching and medicine etc. Another limiting factor of the reform measures for inclusive education is the lack of proper implementation of programmes and plans for making the education non-discriminatory and equally accessible to all. The administrative machinery that overlooks the implementation of the policies and programmes is found lacking when it comes to proper implementation and the will to see the required change. These factors make it difficult to bring the desired change in the education system.

### **Abdullah: Challenges and Limitations**

There are several challenges facing King Abdullah as far as educational reforms in Saudi Arabia are concerned, which limit the ruler's ability to pursue these reform measures. He faces strong challenges from the Wahhabi clergy, who want the curriculum of religious education to be left intact and the religious dose in modern education at all levels to continue (Prokop, 2003). Challenges also come from factors such as creating opportunities for the educated youth graduating from universities and vocational institutions, providing equal opportunities for all sections of society including the women and minorities and political repercussions of speeding up the educational reforms due to external pressure. Another major challenge is to maintain the supremacy of Al Saud over education policy formation which has traditionally remained under Al Shaikh family. The challenges for King Abdullah come from social, economic, political as well as external factors.

The first and foremost challenge for Abdullah's administration is to dilute the religious character of education. The educational reform measures taken in this direction have not yielded much result. Religious schools and universities for the study of theological subjects have continued without being touched by the government as far as their curriculum is concerned. The liberal dose of religious instructions in modern schools and institutions of higher learning have seen some dilution, however, it is yet to be made completely free from religious influences. For example, thirty to fifty percent of classes every week are dedicated for religious subjects in elementary, intermediate and secondary schools (Al-Sunbul, 1998: 152). Likewise, religious subjects are mandatory in technical

institutions, colleges and universities. A major limiting factor in Abdullah's educational reform endeavours is the religious legitimacy provided by the Wahhabi clergy to the Al Saud rule. This limits the monarchy's ability to bring religious education under the ambit of reforms and thereby limiting the scope of reforming religious character of modern education.

Another challenge is the problem of youth unemployment and in 2009 an estimated 30.2 percent of the youth were unemployed (ILO, 2010). An improved education system has created an atmosphere, where the number of educated youth is increasing every year. But the failure of Saudization plan and lack of economic diversification together with the issue of quality of graduates pose a major challenge to educational reform measure undertaken during Abdullah's rule. Such a situation not only gives ammunition to the detractors of educational reforms but also reflects poorly on the efficiency of these measures as well as the ability of these reforms to solve the problem of unemployment. It becomes more important because these reform measures were executed with the promise that they would ease the problems of unemployment among youth by enhancing their skills. Failure of Saudization plan, in tangent with lack of economic diversification, is a major limiting factor for educational reform measures in the oil-rich Kingdom.

The social challenge for the reform initiative during the last fifteen years is to provide equal opportunities to the marginalised sections of population. Some improvement in this regard has been witnessed during this period particularly in women's education and educational opportunities for Shias. However, in a society that specifies particular role for its women, not wanting them to foray into the supposedly 'manly' works and a clerical establishment that does not tolerate diversity of opinion, providing equal opportunities to all sections is more than a challenge. This again limits the ability of King Abdullah in articulating his educational reform measures.

As far as external factors are concerned, the challenge for Abdullah is to balance between using religious education as a tool for extending its foreign policy objectives in Muslim-dominated countries, while maintaining the position among Western countries that it is curbing the extremist trend in its education system. When it comes to extremist



tendencies, it not only poses a threat to the outside world but also to the Al Saud family's political supremacy in the Kingdom. The limiting factor here is that the monarchy wants to curb the extremist tendencies on the one hand, while at the same time it wants to use religious education for extending its influence among the Muslim population all over the world. Its allies like the US have exerted pressure to curb the extremist trend in its education system. But the opposition at home, both secular and religious, accuses the ruler to be succumbing to external pressure. This web of dynamics in the domestic and international politics is also a limiting factor for King Abdullah.

It has been noted in the second chapter that the education policy and education system has remained under the influence of Al Shaikh family since the establishment of the Kingdom in 1932. However, off late King Abdullah has tried to bring education under reformist leaders by himself taking charge of the education portfolio. There are two kind of tendencies among education policy formulators; the reformists represented by King Abdullah, his son-in-law Education Minister and the technocrats on the one side of the debate while the status-quoists led by the Al Shaikh family and conservative religious leaders holding the forte on the other. The tussle to maintain the supremacy over education between the reformist and the status-quoist is again a limiting factor for the monarchy.

### ***Conclusion***

The education system of Saudi Arabia is under a reform process that has effected many changes in the system during the last one and a half decades but they also face certain limitations in bringing the desired changes. The educational trend is changing and almost all areas of education have witnessed numerous changes, which should go a long way in making the education system cater to the socio-economic need of the country in a better way. The desire to develop its education system by bringing reforms stems from the need to provide good education to its citizens and to achieve success in limiting the number of expatriate workers in the country. It also realises that education can play an important role through providing job opportunities to its youthful population and maintain a stable

political system. Political legitimacy through education is another goal that drives the Saudi authorities to bring educational reform.

The education system has witnessed changes at several aspects of education, including educational curriculum, text-books, teacher's training, infrastructure development, science and technology education, human resource development and women and minority education. The curriculum of various subjects has evolved over a period of time to make it more contemporary and relevant for the modern needs. Curriculum in science subjects has especially been changed at higher education level and the school curriculum has also been developed keeping in mind the need for modernisation of school education. Curriculum in religious subjects has not changed much and schools continue to provide an overdose of theology.

Text-books have been revised and objectionable references have been removed but negative references are still found in primary and secondary school text-books of history and religious subjects. The teacher's training programme has brought changes in the way the teaching and learning process is carried out at the schools, but change in the mind-set of teachers to make teaching and learning process more interactive and based on practical understanding would take more time. Likewise, efforts to improve the teaching environment in schools have yielded some result, but several roadblocks in this regard have led to continuing of the traditional system of rote learning and memorization.

The human resource development and Saudization plans aims to achieve a reduction in the number of expatriate workers and provide more job opportunities for local citizens. These efforts can bring result only when worked out in harmony with socio-economic development where authorities have been found lacking. Investments in the field of education that aim at achieving similar goals cannot succeed until and unless it is supported by a robust economic diversification. The efforts to bring change in the science and technology education have brought some good results, however, certain old practices limit the benefit of the reform measures in realising their full potential in improving the standards in schools and universities as well as at research level.

Efforts in the direction of expanding the education system and to develop the education infrastructure at school as well as higher education level have been one area where Saudi Arabia has realised the optimum result. It has established a vast network of schools spread all over the country. The number of universities and higher education institutions have also grown, which caters to the higher educational needs of the schools graduates. One more area where changes have been witnessed is the accessibility of education to the women and minorities. However, lot more efforts need to be put in to make education more inclusive and non-discriminatory towards all sections of society. Educational trends are changing but face various roadblocks which limit their effectiveness. If it has to realise the dream of having a robust and developed education system capable of aiding the socio-economic and political growth of the country, then it will have to work out plans to overcome these limiting factors.

King Abdullah faces several challenges in his endeavour to improve the education system, which limits his ability to smoothly bring reform measures. These include creating jobs, providing equal opportunities to women and minorities, external pressure and domestic political considerations. But the most important factor comes from the conservative forces that do not want change and are politically and socially at strong positions hampering Abdullah's ability to bring about reform in the education system.

# Chapter Five: Conclusion

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The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has the largest oil reserves in the world and its economy depends entirely on oil wealth. Since the 1970s the country has invested huge amounts of resources to develop its education system. Historically the region had witnessed thinkers and eminent scholars of science like Al-Beruni, Ibn Rushd and Ibn Sina who had a profound influence on the evolving Western science and philosophy. But in the modern period, the Kingdom has suffered from poor education and lack of development in sciences and social sciences; from kindergarten to university, the state education system has remained traditional and barely entered the modern age. Focusing excessively on religious and Arabic studies, Saudi Arabia has long struggled to produce the scientists, engineers, economists and lawyers that the modern state requires.

The education policy and education system of the country is based on *Wahhabi* Islam and the entire system of education is based on *Shari'a* (Islamic law). The heavy emphasis on religion in education policy works as a legitimising tool for the ruling Al Saud family and has worked well for the past eight decades. The religious nature of society and patrimonial nature of state also favour the traditional educational practices. Even though the education system in Saudi Arabia has seen unprecedented growth in recent decades, not much has changed as far as quality of education is concerned. Educational reform is one of the most sensitive issues in the Kingdom that evokes passionate debate and discussion among all sections of the society.

During the last fifteen years, the education system in the Kingdom has witnessed a number of small but significant transformations. The key architect of this has been Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz. First as the de facto ruler following a debilitating stroke suffered by King Fahd in 1995 and later on as the King, Abdullah has nurtured an

educational policy for the Kingdom. During 1995-2010, the focus of this research, the Saudi educational system has witnessed a number new initiatives and direction.

Changes in primary and secondary education have been incorporated through the evolution of a national school curriculum designed towards a more inclusive, modern and tolerant educational system. School text-books have been revised and the hateful references about 'others' has been removed. Teachers training programme has been initiated to make the teaching process more effective and to improve the quality of education at primary, middle and secondary school levels. *Tatweer Project*, *Comprehensive Assessment Project* and monitoring of schools have been started to improve the overall quality of education. Steps have also been taken to improve the quality of higher education to enhance the quality of Saudi human resource. A number of measures have been taken to lessen unemployment and to implement the 'Saudization' plan of the government. New universities have been opened, old universities are being expanded and more vocational colleges are being established to cater to the needs of the Saudi population. Budget allocations for education and human resource development have seen consistent and considerable increase during this period. This has allowed the authorities to implement the plans for an overhaul of the education system.

The Kingdom is also trying to improve the quality of science education in the country. It promotes Saudis to go abroad for pursuing higher education, while making efforts to improve the quality of science education and research in the country. It has allowed opening of private universities with considerable autonomy in educational and curriculum matters. Institutions are being founded to cater to the new and emerging areas of science and technology. With respect to girl's education, a number of measures have been taken during the period of Abdullah to provide equal opportunities for female students aimed at providing higher levels of education and career. The General Presidency of Girl's education has been merged with Ministry of Education and has ended the authority of religious leaders on matters concerning girl's education. Educational facilities for women are being improved. Steps have also been taken to make the mainstream education more inclusive towards minorities. This initiative on part of Abdullah to fulfil the demands of Shias to end discrimination against them has not yielded much result.

Steps have also been taken to bring an end to the intervention of religious leaders at education policy level. The Council of Senior Ulema, that had considerable say in the education policy matters, is slowly losing its clout. The Ministry of Education and Ministry of Higher Education have been given more autonomy and persons with reformist tendency have been made in charge of these ministries. King Abdullah has tried to take the education policy and education system away from the first religious family of Al Shaikh and thereby minimize the intervention of *ulema* in education. However, their overall influence of the *ulema* upon the education system emanates from the system being completely based on religion. King Abdullah, who strives for reforms in the education system of Saudi Arabia, faces a major challenge from the conservative forces in the country.

The education system of Saudi Arabia is under a reform process that has effected many changes in the system. The educational trend is changing and almost all areas of education have witnessed numerous changes and these should go a long way in making the education system catering to the socio-economic need of the country. Saudi Arabia's desire to develop its education system by bringing reforms stems from the need to provide good education to its citizens and to achieve success in limiting the number of expatriate workers in the country. It also realises that education can play an important role by providing job opportunities to its youthful population and in the process maintain a stable political system. Curriculum in science subjects have especially been changed at higher education level and the school curriculum have also been developed keeping in mind the need for modernisation of school education. Curriculum in religious subjects has not changed much and schools continue to follow the curriculum with overdose of theology.

Some of the educational reforms have undoubtedly been the result of the 11 September attacks and the negative coverage of Saudi Arabia and its educational system in the west. However, there were also considerable domestic pressures for a more modern education system that is in tune with changing times. Globalization and economic demands for a technically skilled Saudi human resources meant that the Kingdom could not continue its traditional approach towards education and still address modern problems. At the same

time, traditional orientation of the society and conservative nature of the *ulema* resist far reaching changes in the educational system. The Wahhabi Islam also provides legitimacy to the Al Saud rule. Hence, King Abdullah has to carefully balance his drive for educational reforms with the religious conservativeness of the Saudi society.

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