

Original Article

UNIVERSALISATION AND QUALITY OF ELEMENTARY EDUCATION OF BIMSTEC COUNTRIES: A COMPARATIVE INVESTIGATION

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ABSTRACT

The enhancement and universalisation of elementary education are vital for global discussions on Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4). BIMSTEC countries (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand) are facing challenges like enrolment, retention, and infrastructure. Objectives of the study include examining the policy frameworks, constitutional provisions, and governmental initiatives undertaken by BIMSTEC countries to enhance elementary education, as well as comparing the elementary education systems of these countries with respect to universal focus, quality improvement, and inclusivity strategies. This study employed a qualitative approach using document-based analysis along with comparative investigation strategy to explore the policy frameworks, constitutional provisions, and governmental initiatives undertaken by BIMSTEC countries to strengthen elementary education. The result found that BIMSTEC countries have taken strategies to enhance elementary education across three main areas like universal access, quality improvement, and inclusivity. Countries in the BIMSTEC region, including Bangladesh, Myanmar, India, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand focus on compulsory primary education, quality enhancement, and inclusivity in their educational systems. While Bangladesh and Myanmar advocate for access, India mandates education for ages 6-14, and Bhutan offers free education. Quality efforts vary with initiatives such as improving learning outcomes in Bangladesh and fostering holistic education in Bhutan. Inclusivity is emphasized through various strategies, including stipends for disadvantaged groups in Bangladesh and reservation policies in India, highlighting a commitment to equitable education across the region.

Keywords: BIMSTEC Countries, Elementary Education, Universalisation of Education, Quality of Education

INTRODUCTION

The universalisation and quality enhancement of elementary education are the major issues of global discourse on education, especially related to Sustainable Development Goals (SDG-4). BIMSTEC, countries namely Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand have historical, cultural, and socio-economic linkages which have shaped their paths of progress and development, especially in relation to elementary education. Though there is some improvement in making elementary education more accessible, there are challenges remaining, especially in relation to enrolment, retention, equity, and quality of learning and teachers' preparedness and infrastructural facilities. Universalisation of elementary education is not only making it free and compulsory for all school-going children but also ensuring their meaningful participation and completion of education. Reforms and policies of BIMSTEC countries have been influenced by constitutional and national policies. However, merely increasing the number

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of educational institutions is not sufficient for quality enhancement of learning. Poverty, rural-urban disparities, gender disparities, socio-economic disparities, and digital disparities are some of the challenges faced in achieving quality elementary education. The dimensions of quality in elementary education in this context include a relevant curriculum, qualified and motivated teachers, child-centred pedagogical approaches, inclusive educational setting, adequate infrastructure, systems of formative assessment, and governance structures that sustain accountability. In this context, there is a shift in the policy agenda of the BIMSTEC countries to move beyond quantitative expansion to qualitative development in education, with a greater emphasis on competency-based learning, technology-based learning, teacher development, and inclusive education systems. In this context, a comparative analysis of the agenda on universalization and quality in the context of the BIMSTEC countries reveals interesting similarities and differences in their approaches to education governance, financing, decentralization, and evaluation. By analysing the approaches to elementary education in these countries, more holistic and contextually relevant strategies can be formulated to promote sustainable development in the context of their shared development agenda.

Figure 1

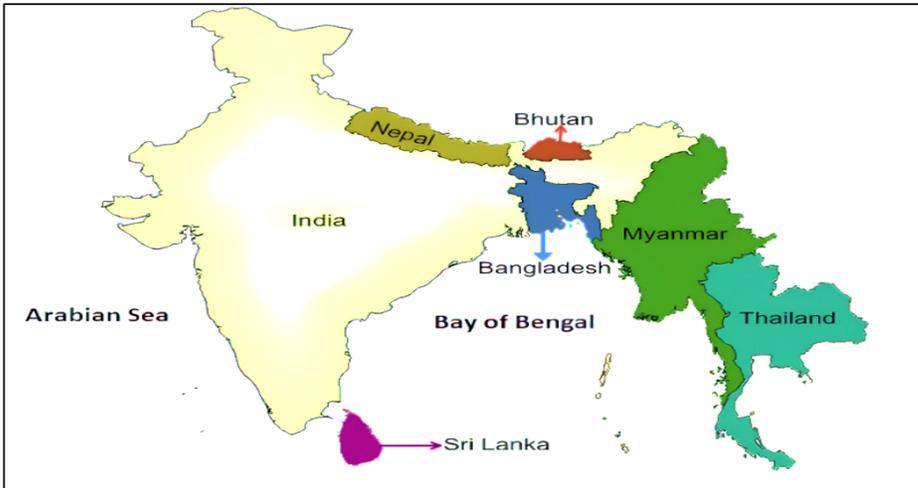


Figure 1 Map of BIMSTEC countries

Source: <https://politicsforindia.com/3-1-saarc-and-bimstec-psir/>

This study critically examines the policies, progress, and gaps in universal elementary education in BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) countries, viz., Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.

This study has tried to bring out regional as well as national-level features. The focus of this study has been on the policy initiatives, constitutional provisions, and governmental efforts adopted by the concerned nations to raise the standards of elementary education.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- 1) To study the policy frameworks, constitutional provisions and governmental initiatives prevailing in BIMSTEC countries to strengthen elementary education.
- 2) To compare the contemporary elementary education system prevailing in BIMSTEC countries in reference to universal focus, quality improvement and inclusivity strategy.

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

RESEARCH METHOD USED

The study has employed a qualitative approach, focusing on document-based investigation to explore the policy frameworks, constitutional provisions, and governmental initiatives prevailing in BIMSTEC countries to strengthen elementary education. A comparative investigation strategy has also been utilised to derive findings from the gathered data.

Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material. Like other analytical methods in qualitative research, documentary analysis requires that data be examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Bowen (2009), Corbin and Strauss (2008)). Comparative study is a kind of method that analyses phenomena and then put them together to find the

points of differentiation and similarity [Miri and Dehdashti \(2019\)](#), [Mokhtarianpour \(2016\)](#). This approach has aimed to comprehensively understand the strategies and commitments made by these nations to improve their educational systems at the elementary level.

DATA SOURCE

The present study has utilised a diverse range of primary data sources, including official reports from UNESCO, UNICEF, UNDP, and the World Bank, along with National education policy documents and the annual reports from the Ministries of Education of BIMSTEC countries.

Evidentiary research articles, books, and comparative education literature related to policy frameworks, constitutional provisions, and governmental initiatives prevailing in BIMSTEC countries have also been utilised as data sources in the present study.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

The data collection procedure was a thorough investigation of documents and literature pertinent to the study. The researchers collected all relevant data and followed record keeping method to preserve all the documents.

DATA VALIDATION

Data validation has been conducted, confirming the integrity of the collected data through both external and internal validity measures. Primarily, the data has undergone refinement via external validation to confirm the authenticity of the sources, which helps to ascertain that it is neither a forgery nor invalid. To evaluate internal validity, the data has been thoroughly scrutinized to assess the accuracy and credibility of the content within the source, placing an emphasis on reliability, potential biases, and factual consistency.

DATA ANALYSIS TECHNIQUE

After collecting data, the researcher conducted data analysis techniques utilised various steps which included data reduction, formation of narratives and diagrammatic representations of the data, as well as juxtaposition and comparative analysis methods to derive insights from the findings [Koul \(2018\)](#).

Figure 2

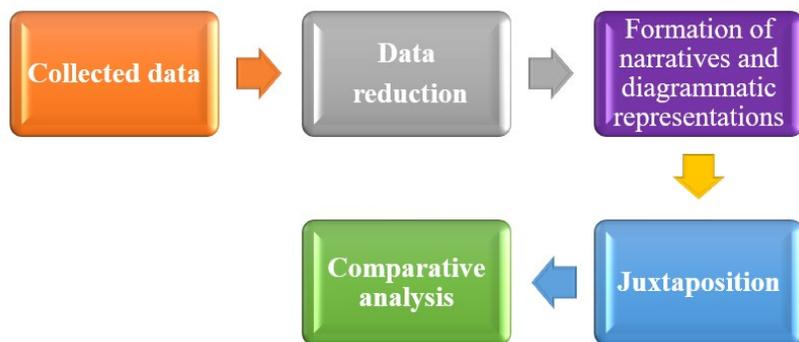


Figure 2 Steps of Data Analysis Procedure

DATA ANALYSIS, RESULT AND DISCUSSION

POLICY FRAMEWORKS, CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS AND GOVERNMENTAL INITIATIVES PREVAILING IN BIMSTEC COUNTRIES TO STRENGTHENING ELEMENTARY EDUCATION POLICY FRAMEWORKS

Researchers compared the policy frameworks prevailing in BIMSTEC countries towards strengthening elementary education. The existing policy frameworks in India for strengthening primary education include the National Policy on Education (1986 and 1992) which focuses on achieving universalisation of elementary education and reduction in drop outs, the Right to Education Act (2009) which ensures provision of free and compulsory education, and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which focuses on developing foundational learning in literacy and numeracy, pre-schooling and structural transformations. Similarly, the Compulsory Primary Education Act (1990) enforced universalisation of primary education in Bangladesh; while the National Education Policy (2010) has focused towards quality enhancement of education keeping in mind expansion of primary education up to Grade VIII,

achieving gender equity, child centred education, among other issues. Hence there is a clear shift from focus on access towards quality. The Education Blueprint for Bhutan 2014-2024 and the revised National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 too has a balanced approach focusing on universalisation of primary education, while at the same time focussing on competency-based learning, information and communication technology (ICT), and governance reforms. Thus, the primary education policy framework of Nepal has a strong focus towards achieving compulsory and free basic education, enhancing early grade learning, multilingual education and inclusive access by keeping in mind cultural and linguistic diversity. Meanwhile the primary education policy framework of Sri Lanka has a strong focus towards curriculum reform, teacher education, ensuring quality in education and promoting the principles of equity in education through the National Education Commission Act and Policy Framework, by adopting a reformist approach towards quality. Similarly, the policy framework of primary education in Myanmar too has focused towards achieving universalisation of primary education through attaining universal completion of primary education and improvement of teachers' quality, which indicates the strengthening of foundational aspects of the education system. The policy framework of Thailand on the other hand, has adopted a long-term approach towards reforms through the National Education Act and National Education Plan (2017-2036) and hence has promoted competency-based curriculum, awareness about lifelong learning, equity, and the global competitiveness of higher education. Overall, policy frameworks at the regional level brings out the shared goals and achievements of countries towards strengthening primary education within a decade by focusing on moving away from access towards quality, equity, competency-based learning and structural transformations at national levels, while moving at different speeds, and adopting different approaches based on the legal provisions as well as depth and breadth of the policy frameworks.

Table 1

Table 1 Shows the Policy Frameworks of BIMSTEC Countries, Undertaken to Strengthen Elementary Education		
BIMSTEC Countries	Representative Sources	Analytical Findings
India	NEP 1986, 1992	Focused on universalizing elementary education, reducing dropout rates, and improving teacher education and school infrastructure.
	NEP, 2020	Emphasizes foundational literacy and numeracy, integrating early childhood care with primary education, and aims to enhance access and learning outcomes by 2030 through structural reforms.
	RTE Act, 2009	Mandates free education for children aged 6-14.
Bangladesh	Act, 1990	Mandates compulsory primary education for children aged 6–10, promoting universal access and increasing enrolment in both rural and urban areas.
	National Education Policy of 2010	Emphasises universal quality primary education, expansion from Grade V to VIII, child-centred teaching, recruitment of qualified teachers, and gender equality.
Bhutan	NEP, 2022	Focusing on universal access, Early Childhood Care and Development integration, and a competency-based, learner-cantered pedagogy.
	Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014-2024	Improving quality and efficiency in basic education, key focus areas include enhancing student learning outcomes, strengthening teacher quality and leadership, expanding ICT integration, improving governance and accountability, and ensuring equitable access for rural and remote communities.
Nepal	National Education Policy, 2076 (2019)	Ensuring compulsory and free basic education, strengthening early grade learning, promoting mother tongue-based multilingual education, improving teacher management and capacity building, and integrating technical and vocational elements, while also fostering inclusive and equitable access to education.
Sri Lanka	National Education Commission Act (1991)	Recommendations on curriculum reform, teacher education, school management, and quality assurance, including at the primary level (Government of Sri Lanka, 1991).
	National Education Policy Framework (NEPF)	Universal access and participation, quality and relevance of curriculum, child-cantered and activity-based learning, Equity in education.
Myanmar	National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) 2016–2021	Focused on universal access and completion of primary schooling and improvement of teaching quality and teacher education.

Thailand	National Education Plan (2017–2036)	Quality education, equity, efficiency, and global relevance
	National Education Act B.E. 2542	Focus on education reform and lifelong learning
	Basic Education Core Curriculum B.E. 2551 (2008)	Competency-based learning and lifelong education

CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS

Comparison of constitutional provisions among BIMSTEC countries was done. India has articles 21A and 45 in its Constitution. These articles guarantee free and compulsory education for children aged 6 to 14 years. They also recognize the importance of early childhood care and education. Bangladesh is similar to India. Article 17 of its Constitution states that education should be free and compulsory. Nepal has article 31(2) in its Constitution. These articles guarantee free and compulsory basic education and also free education up to the secondary level. So, Nepal covers more years of free education than India and Bangladesh. Sri Lanka's approach is different. They focus on universal and equal access at all levels, but it's under directive principles. That means it's more like a policy goal, not a strict legal right. Myanmar guarantees free and compulsory primary education and says education is a citizen's right. But how it's actually done depends on laws passed later. Thailand requires at least 12 years of free and quality education. That's one of the longest guarantees in the region. Bhutan offers free education up to Class X. Overall, it shows that all countries in the region are committed to providing universal and free basic education.

Table 2

Table 2 Shows the Constitutional Provisions of BIMSTEC Countries, Undertaken to Strengthen Elementary Education		
BIMSTEC Countries	Representative Sources	Analytical Findings
India	Article 21A	Education a fundamental right for all children aged 6–14.
	Fundamental Duties	To provide opportunities for education between the age of six to fourteen years.
	Article 45	Mandates early childhood care and education for children below six years.
Bangladesh	Article 17	Mandates free and compulsory education for all children.
Nepal	Article 31(1)	Every citizen can access basic education.
	Article 31(2)	Every citizen shall have the right to compulsory and free basic education, and free education up to the secondary level (Constituent Assembly Secretariat, 2015).
Sri Lanka	Article 27(2-h)	Universal and equal access to education at all levels.
Myanmar	Article 28(c)	Free and compulsory primary education.
	Section 366(a)	Every citizen has right to education.
	Section 366 (b)	Basic education which the Union prescribes by law as compulsory.
Thailand	Section 54	Mandates the provision of free and quality education for at least 12 years.
Bhutan	Article 9(16)	Free education for all school-going children up to Class X.

GOVERNMENTAL INITIATIVES

Comparative view of governmental initiatives among BIMSTEC countries is discussed. India, through Sarva Shiksha [Abhiyan \(2001\)](#), expanded infrastructure and teacher recruitment to universalize access, while the Mid-Day Meal Scheme addressed attendance and child nutrition; more recently, the NIPUN Bharat [Mission \(2021\)](#) has shifted focus toward achieving Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) by Grade 3, reflecting a move from access to measurable learning outcomes. Bangladesh, under Primary Education Development Program IV (PEDP IV), emphasizes quality improvement, teacher training, and inclusive education, complemented by school feeding and stipend programs that reduce socio-economic barriers and promote equitable participation. Bhutan combines equity and modernization through its School Feeding Programme, Central Schools Programme for remote learners, and ICT integration initiatives, indicating a balanced approach between inclusion and technological advancement. Nepal, via the School Sector Development Plan (2016-2023) and the School Education Sector Plan (2022-2032), prioritizes universal completion, equity, and improved learning outcomes, supported by school meal programs in remote regions to strengthen retention. Sri Lanka focuses on institutional strengthening and literacy enhancement through sector-wide development programmes, alongside school meal initiatives targeting disadvantaged areas. Myanmar concentrates on school grants and stipend programs to directly support

infrastructure and vulnerable students, reflecting a foundational capacity-building model. Meanwhile, Thailand adopts a comprehensive welfare-oriented approach through its 15-Year Free Education Policy, covering tuition and learning materials, and reinforces quality through OBEC reforms and ICT-driven digital learning initiatives. Overall, it shows a regional trend where earlier programs focused mainly on increasing access to education.

Table 3
Table 3 Shows the Governmental Initiatives of BIMSTEC Countries, Undertaken to Strengthen Elementary Education

BIMSTEC Countries	Representative Sources	Analytical Findings
India	Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), 2001	To achieve Universal Elementary Education (UEE), improving school infrastructure and recruitment and training of teachers.
	Mid-Day Meal Scheme,	Improved enrolment, attendance, nutrition.
	NIPUN Bharat Mission, 2021	To ensure that every child achieves Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) by Grade 3.
Bangladesh	Primary Education Development Program IV (PEDP IV)	Focus on improving learning outcomes, expanding pre-primary education, enhancing teacher training, developing infrastructure, and promoting inclusive education.
	School Feeding Program, 2002	Aims to increase student attendance, nutrition, and concentration in classrooms
	Stipend programmes	Focus on underprivileged families to reduce socioeconomic barriers and promote attendance, while free textbook distribution ensures equal access to learning materials, alleviating financial burdens on families.
Bhutan	School Feeding Programme	Improve student attendance, nutrition, and concentration in classrooms (Ministry of Education, 2019).
	Central Schools Programme	This initiative introduced to improve the quality and equity of education, particularly for students from remote and disadvantaged areas.
	ICT Integration in Schools	ICT-based initiatives such as digital classrooms, computer labs, and online learning platforms to modernize teaching and learning in primary education (Ministry of Education, 2020).
Nepal	School Sector Development Plan 2016–2023	Improving access, equity, and learning outcomes in basic education.
	School Education Sector Plan (SESP) 2022–2032	Aims to ensure universal completion of quality basic education.
	School meal program	Improve attendance, retention, and student nutrition in remote regions.
Sri Lanka	Education Sector Development Framework and Programme (ESDFP)	This programme strengthened institutional capacity and improved learning outcomes.
	General Education Sector Development Programme (GESDP)	Focus on improving literacy and numeracy at primary level, strengthening school leadership, enhancing monitoring and evaluation systems.
	School meal programs	To improve attendance and student health, particularly in disadvantaged regions.
Myanmar	School Grants	To provide financial support directly to schools for infrastructure, teaching materials cost.
	Stipend programs	To support children from poor and disadvantaged families, encouraging school attendance and retention.

Thailand	15-Year Free Education Policy	To provide free education from pre-primary to upper secondary level. This initiative covers tuition fees, textbooks, learning materials, uniforms, and other educational expenses, reducing financial barriers for families
	Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC) Reforms	focusing on school quality assurance, teacher development and performance evaluation, infrastructure improvement and educational supervision and monitoring.
	ICT and Digital Learning Initiatives	Enhance teaching and learning in elementary schools, particularly in remote areas

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CONTEMPORARY ELEMENTARY EDUCATION SYSTEM PREVAILING IN BIMSTEC COUNTRIES IN REFERENCE TO UNIVERSAL FOCUS, QUALITY IMPROVEMENT AND INCLUSIVITY STRATEGY

UNIVERSAL FOCUS

Comparative view of universal focus among BIMSTEC countries to strengthening elementary education. Bangladesh and Myanmar prioritise free and mandatory primary education, demonstrating a strong commitment to ensuring that every child receives a minimal level of education. India is enforcing free and compulsory education for children aged 6–14. Bhutan guarantees free education. In contrast to the majority of BIMSTEC members, Nepal offers free education up to Grade 12. Goals for universal literacy are given top priority in Sri Lanka. With an intentional focus on minimising regional disparities, Thailand requires free and high-quality education, emphasising both equity and quality aspects. Overall, it demonstrates a shared regional goal of universal access to education, although there are variations in the length of free education, legal enforceability, and emphasis on literacy, quality, and regional equity.

QUALITY IMPROVEMENT APPROACH

Comparative analysis finds that Bangladesh has successfully increased enrolment, but it still needs to close quality gaps by concentrating on raising learning outcomes and closing the gap between urban and rural schools. Bhutan integrates values, competencies, and general child development into its reform framework, adopting a comprehensive and learner-centred approach to education. To improve educational quality across the country, India places a strong emphasis on structural and systemic reforms, such as curriculum restructuring, foundational literacy initiatives, and institutional accountability mechanisms. In order to improve classroom procedures and give local education authorities more authority, Myanmar places a high priority on teacher development and decentralisation. Nepal supports inclusive pedagogy, early grade support, and kid-friendly learning environments. To maintain high literacy rates and raise primary standards, Sri Lanka concentrates on curriculum reforms and strengthening governance. In the meantime, competency-based curricula, learner-centred education, and school quality assurance systems are being advanced in Thailand. While each nation prioritises different reform levers, such as governance, pedagogy, teacher capacity, or systemic restructuring, overall shows a regional shift from access-driven expansion to quality-focused transformation.

INCLUSIVITY STRATEGY

Comparative estimation explores that disadvantaged groups are given priority in Bangladesh through stipends, gender-focused programs, and focused assistance for low-income and rural areas. Bhutan fosters inclusive learning environments by incorporating students from a variety of backgrounds and remote locations into a nurturing, morally grounded educational system. Through reservation policies and special programs to lessen educational inequality, India targets marginalised populations, including minority groups, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and economically weaker sections. In order to provide context-specific solutions that address regional, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity, Myanmar has adopted flexible and localised education models. Nepal's constitution and policies, which include provisions for children with disabilities and multilingual education based on mother tongue, exhibit a strong emphasis on equity and inclusivity. In order to maintain high literacy and lessen inequalities between provinces, Sri Lanka places a strong emphasis on equity in access and participation. In the meantime, Thailand improves accessibility and infrastructure, especially in underserved and rural areas, to strengthen inclusivity. Overall, it shows that all BIMSTEC countries try to achieve inclusive education, but their methods are different. Some focus on improving the education system and building infrastructure, while others provide welfare programs and special support for disadvantaged groups.

OVERALL COMPARISON
Table 4

Table 4 Shows the Comparison of the Elementary Education System of BIMSTEC Countries in Reference to the Universal Focus, Quality Improvement Approach and Inclusivity Strategy

BIMSTEC Country	Universal Focus	Quality Improvement Approach	Inclusivity Strategy
Bangladesh	Free & compulsory education	Enrolment, quality gaps	Focus on disadvantaged groups
Bhutan	Ensures free access	Holistic & learner-centered education	Inclusive learning environments
India	Right to Education Act Free & compulsory education	Structural & systemic reforms	Targeting marginalized populations
Myanmar	Free and compulsory primary education	Teacher development & decentralization	Localized and flexible education models
Nepal	Free education up to Grade 12	Child-friendly learning	Strong focus on inclusivity & equity
Sri Lanka	Universal literacy goals	Governance & curriculum reforms	Focuses Equity
Thailand	Free and quality education, Reducing regional disparities	Learner-centered education	Infrastructure & accessibility improvements

CONCLUSION

The study tried to portray a comprehensive picture of the Universalization and Quality of Elementary Education of BIMSTEC Countries. The researcher has presented the policy frameworks, constitutional provisions, and governmental initiatives undertaken by BIMSTEC countries to enhance elementary education, as well as comparing the elementary education systems of these countries with respect to universal focus, quality improvement, and inclusivity strategies. The researcher has pointed out that many countries have made good progress in increasing access to education, but differences still exist in providing equal quality learning for all. Constitutional provision helped to achieve universal enrollment, student retention and active participation, especially among marginalized and poor communities. Many policies and government initiatives undertaken by BIMSTEC focus on improving the quality of education through better learning outcomes and teacher development. But there are some problems, such as teacher shortages, lack of proper training, lack of infrastructure and socio-economic inequalities make it difficult to implement these policies effectively.

All BIMSTEC countries offer universal and free education at the elementary level. However, their strategies for enhancing quality and inclusiveness difference from each other. In Nepal and Thailand, free education is offered at higher levels, while learnercentred teaching is emphasized. In India and Sri Lanka, structural and governance reforms in the education sector is emphasized for enhancing quality in education. In Myanmar, teacher development and decentralized education systems are emphasized, while in Bhutan, holistic and learner-centred education is emphasized. In Bangladesh, more emphasis is given to enrollment rates, but still, some gaps in quality remain. All BIMSTEC countries are trying their best to enhance the quality of education by focusing on access, quality of learning, and inclusiveness for disadvantaged groups.

Finally, it is important to highlight the need for strong regional cooperation with BIMSTEC nations emphasised to address the challenges faced by elementary education. Future policy must focus on foundational literacy, teacher quality, monitoring systems, and inclusive practices to ensure that universal access is balanced with quality for transformative education development.

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