





Review

The Double Whammy of Pandemic and War: A Systematic Review of India's Education Diplomacy to Address Educational Inequities in Afghanistan

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Abstract: Higher education is considered an important tool for the overall development of any country, and it holds true in the context of Afghanistan as well. At the same time, a good eco-environment in terms of political will, leaders' farsighted vision, a fair budget, good infrastructure, and a good teaching community are some of the basic requirements for higher education to move in the direction of new and higher horizons. However, due to the ongoing war during the last couple of decades, the country's education system has become out of reach for a substantial part of the population due to poverty, lack of infrastructure, refugees and internally displaced, digital division, etc., critically affecting the education equity. This systematic review examines India's education diplomacy in addressing the inequities in Afghanistan's education system and making them more equitable. Education was further dilapidated with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Afghanistan is caught between a war and a pandemic and suffers from a double whammy in losses. Subsequently, given their chilling effects, higher education becomes devoid of multiples equities, including education. However, because of their historical and geo-civilizational ties, India has focused on development diplomacy in general and education diplomacy (E.D) in particular to improve educational infrastructures.

Keywords: Afghanistan; Education Diplomacy; India; pandemic; COVID-19; higher education; foreign policy

1. Introduction

Protecting human rights is essential for promoting and protecting education generally, as well as ensuring educational equity. However, it is naïve to accept that rights would remain safe in war and pandemics [1]. Equity of education becomes questionable when the eco-environment used to be metamorphosed from favorable to hostile given the man-made or natural crisis in terms of war and pandemic. Currently, Afghanistan is being sandwiched and haunted by the double whammies given the war and pandemic. In this scenario, two important questions emerged: Would a war or a pandemic impact education in general, particularly education equity? Secondly, are there any effective strategies for reducing the devastating effects of the same and promoting educational equity? These questions need detailed and critical analysis, which is the prime focus of this paper.

Before delving into the specifics, it is necessary to first define education equity. The Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development [2] has defined the two dimensions of education equity. The first one is fairness, which means ensuring suitable personal and social circumstances that do not inhibit the students from achieving their academic excellence and potential. Secondly, it refers to the inclusivity that stands for means setting basic minimum standards for education, shared with all students irrespective of diverse distinctions of socio-economic backgrounds, geographical barriers, personal characteristics, etc. Achieving education equity requires some basic needs such as monetary resources for educational institutional equitable funding. Do the educational institutions have access to the resources which they need to serve the students effectively? Secondly, it is required to maintain academic standards. Would all the students perform and achieve the higher standards? How can these standards be modified to accommodate students with special needs? Thirdly, for education equity, the students require good quality and higher standard content. Achieving these, would students be provided with access to high-quality content that fit their educational needs? Can the country provide highly qualified teachers who can meet the needs of students? Overall, financial resources, economic fairness, inclusivity, maintenance of academic standards, good-quality and high-standard content, etc., are important considerations. The major question is, can a country devastated by war and pandemics ensure these basic requirements to achieve education equity? If not so, then up to what extent other countries can help the country in question. Would India's education diplomacy toward Afghanistan contribute to achieving education equity in the prevailing scenario?

The education system had become dilapidated when the Taliban took over the political regime of the country. However, when the fall took place in 2001, and a partly secular political regime was put in place, some reconstruction efforts took place in Afghanistan along with some external aids, whereby it is said that considerable progress was achieved in education. The most soothing point was that the girls were also given an adequate place in higher education but were not allowed to attend the educational institutions during the Taliban regime. However, despite these good signs, education in Afghanistan has been mired in despair [3]. It was further dilapidated when the outbreak of COVID-19 took place.

The ongoing war has compromised Afghanistan's education in general and particularly higher education during the last thirty years. The COVID-19 pandemic has also left black swan effects on Afghanistan's economy, directly or indirectly affecting education. In this way, education in Afghanistan has been facing a daunting task to maintain education equity, further aggravated given the geographical, racial, and socio-economic differences. These challenges, such as ongoing war and conflicts, including the latest critical challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic, have put Afghanistan's education system in limbo and made it, possibly, more fragile. India and Afghanistan have been enjoying cordial relations except for a few vicissitudes. However, in the current changing scenario, Afghanistan has become a geopolitical Chessboard of the New Great Game, and for a long time, it has remained the "Graveyard of the Empires". Given the geopolitical dynamics, India and Afghanistan relations have been improved significantly. Under the same, India has been pursuing development diplomacy in general, and education equity in particular, wherein the educational exchange programs have been going on between both countries. Considering this context, the purpose of this paper is to determine whether Indian education diplomacy could aid in the expansion of higher education equity in Afghanistan.

Over the last couple of decades, the ethnic conflict in Afghanistan and the ongoing pandemic have had seriously impacted the country's educational system. Given these factors, the Afghanistan people have been encountering education inequity. The main ethnic group in Afghanistan, the Pashtuns, have traditionally benefited from foreign assistance in terms of education in general and in the context of India's "education diplomacy." While minorities suffer internally and via their inability to participate in educational possibilities provided by foreign partners, they suffer from the disparity between them and the majority. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and, especially, the prolonged conflict that has lasted

more than three decades, Afghanistan's whole educational system has been decimated and deteriorated. Under its education diplomacy towards Afghanistan, the Government of India (GOI) has been offering scholarships to Afghan students to study undergraduate degrees (in the arts and sciences as well as engineering, commerce, and law), postgraduate degrees (in the arts and sciences as well as commerce, engineering, law, and so on), including Ph.D. degrees. Following an evaluation of various areas of educational fairness and consultation with stakeholders, it was concluded that India's efforts had not trickled down to the bottom of the educational ladder.

2. Materials and Methods

For this systematic review, a literature search was done in all major databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, and Google scholar search engines by using the keywords such as "COVID-19" OR "Pandemic" OR "Educational Diplomacy" OR "Educational Policy" OR "Foreign Policy" OR "Higher Education" OR "Bi-lateral Agreements" OR "Equity" AND "India" AND "Afghanistan." We searched for articles published from 1980 to 17 July 2021. After removing the duplicates and excluding those not relevant to our study objectives, we finally included 33 articles for this review. Most of the articles (28) from the database search were published in peer-reviewed journals, while the remaining few were from other authentic resources. These sources included authentic websites and annual reports of UNDP and governmental ministries of India and Afghanistan. Some critical information was also extracted from the news articles from BBC and Ariana News. Two members of the research team assessed all the articles and sources for their quality and authenticity. We used the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) for conducting this review. All the search, exclusion, and final inclusion stages of the relevant articles and sources are shown below (Figure 1).

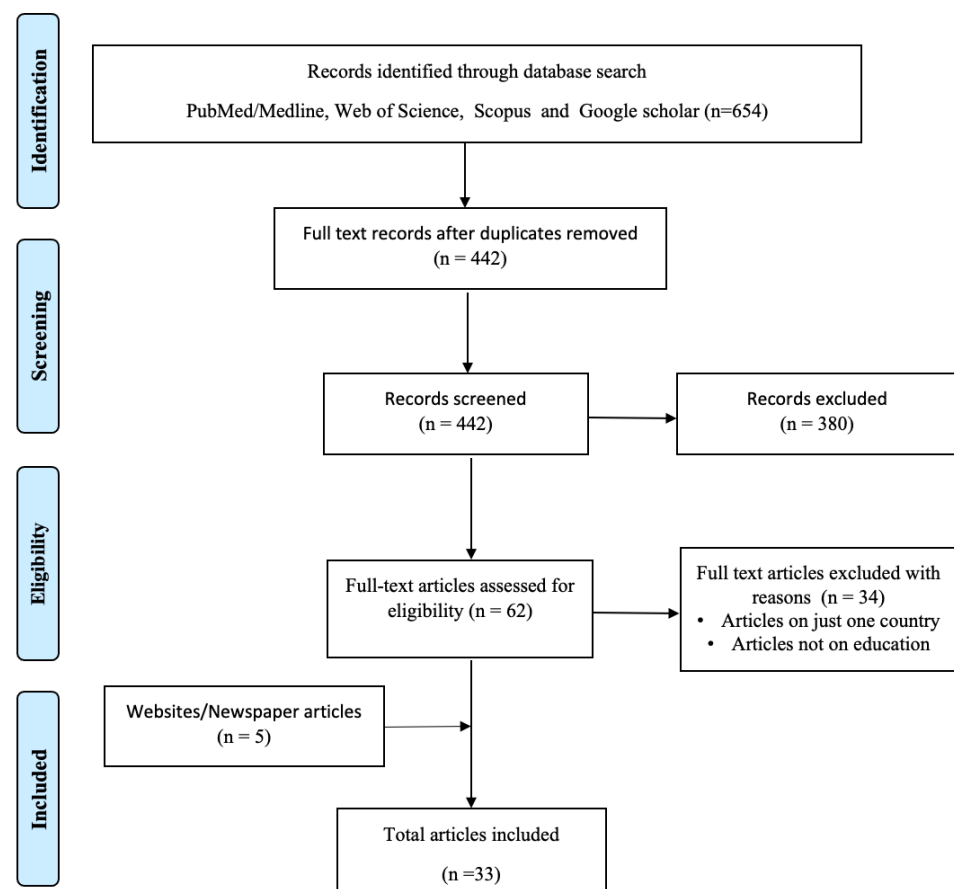


Figure 1. PRISMA diagram showing the searches of databases and other sources.

Based on the information gathered and the available empirical evidence, we divided the main findings from the published literature in our research context into major thematic areas and discussed them in the results section. The three major areas are (1) highlighting the double whammies of the Pandemic and War for Afghanistan, (2) Discussion of COVID-19 pandemic in Afghanistan and the double impacts of a pandemic on the fragile health and education systems, and (3) Addressing the role of Indian Education Diplomacy for addressing the equity gaps in Afghanistan's education system. We have made some arguments exploring the bilateral diplomatic relations, the Indo-Afghan development deals, and the contribution of India's education diplomacy, at the same time highlighting the existing inequities in Afghanistan's education system with some examples. Based on the available evidence from the governments and the profile of Afghan students who have benefited through the bi-lateral relations in advancing their careers, we present a critical analysis and the way forward to improve the equity gaps in Afghanistan's education system.

3. Results

The major findings from the search are divided into four major categories, which are discussed below in detail.

3.1. Double Whammies for Afghanistan—War and Pandemic

Throughout its recorded history, Afghanistan has come across many challenges, including regarding foreign invasions. Nonetheless, no one would have been able to control it. It is possible that the failures may serve to substantiate this assertion about external intruders in general and the current scenario of US/NATO withdrawal in specific. Given these dynamics, it is popularly known as the "Graveyard of the Empires." The ongoing conflict of Afghanistan has been the consequence of the internal ethnic diversities and geopolitical dynamics as the external factors have remained the most controversial factors responsible for the Afghanistan conflict.

The conflict started with the Saur Revolution, which started in 1978 [4]. The conflict started with the intervention when the former USSR intervened (1979–1989) [5]. The Soviet Army had extended political and strategic supports to the ruling People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) against the "Afghan Mujahideen". The US, UK, China, Egypt, Germany, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, etc., had supported these Mujahideen. Under a lot of pressure, the Soviet Army eventually conceded and ultimately withdrew in 1989. During the revolution in the country, the Communist Party was instituted in power under Nur Muhammad Taraki. The government of President Nur Muhammad Taraki (1978–1979) had started many modern multi-dimensional reforms. However, these reforms were taken as too radical and became unpopular and unacceptable to the various tribal groups. The Communist Government (1978–1979) had pursued a stern policy of brutally suppressing all the opposition leaders, including the unarmed civilian people who opposed the government. Subsequently, it has led to numerous anti-government armed groups in the country. Concomitantly, the incumbent communist government was also divided into two opponent groups. Taraki led one group, and the second was led by his rival, Hafizullah Amin, who assassinated the former and became the President of Afghanistan.

The ongoing conflict turned into an international war when the allegations of 9/11 were leveled against the Al-Qaeda based in Afghanistan, as it was considered responsible for the attack. This attack had put the US and Afghanistan into direct belligerent postures, turning the conflict into war. The US was seeking to topple down the Taliban from the power given their direct support to Al-Qaeda. On the other hand, the Taliban had refused to extradite Osama bin Laden (Head of the Al-Qaeda) unless evidence was provided. Ultimately, it led to Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). The Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) was launched to target Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. For eliminating the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) under the leadership of NATO was established by the United Nations Security Council's (UNSC) Resolution 1386

in December 2000. In addition, the ISAF was asked to train the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). The ISAF has remained deployed in the Afghanistan War (2001–2014) [3]. With the death of Osama Bin Laden, the direct war had come to an end. However, the US decided not to leave Afghanistan rather remain engaged under the Trump regime more aggressively. President Biden had decided to withdraw its troops, which would be completed by September 2021 [6].

During the ongoing war, an individual life has been characterized by human rights violations, atrocities, lack of health and human security, lack of employment, etc. Almost all sectors have been seriously affected, but education has become one of the critical sectors. How can transnational justice in health, healthcare, security, and especially education be ensured in such situations? Singh has argued that to end the ongoing civil war and terrorism, several international agencies and major powers like the US, Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan, and India have made several peace-making efforts in Afghanistan [7]. It was the long list of peace-making and peacebuilding measures in Afghanistan. The list included the Geneva Accord (1988) and the Bonn Agreement (2001), the National Consultative Peace Jirga (NCPJ); the National Reconciliation, General Amnesty and National Stability Law, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (2002); the Amnesty Law (2007); The United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA); International Centre for Transitional Justice (ICTJ); The ‘Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process’ (HoA-IP); the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG), The Doha Peace Talk, etc. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has been playing its role in peacekeeping, peace-making, and peacebuilding through its various diplomatic roles such as resolutions 1267 (1999), 1333 (2000), 1363 (2001), and 1378 (14 November 2001). The UNSC resolutions had acknowledged the urgency to end the ongoing war and terrorism and establish peace, justice, and establishment of a new fully representative government that can take care of human rights and its international obligations and facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance [8]. Notwithstanding the above-cited measures, President Ashraf Ghani acknowledged that about 45,000 Afghan security personnel had been killed during the last couple of years [9]. On the other hand, the South Asia Terrorism Portal (2021) has reported that between 2018 to 2021, about 40,800 total killings (Terrorists—32,803; Security forces—4220; Civilian—3491; Not specified—286) had taken place in the country [10].

The most nerve-racking issue is that about 6.3 million people, one-sixth of the population, have been seriously affected by the war with no access to basic services like clean water, electricity, food, healthcare, shelter, education, etc., and require humanitarian assistance [11]. About 3.5 million internally displaced people have been seriously suffering due to a lack of basic needs. One-fourth of the population is unemployed [12]. If the basic amenities were not within reach, how could these people think about education, and would education equity remain a distant dream? Since one-sixth of the population was seriously affected by war, therefore, they needed essential amenities first.

The long war had seriously affected the education system. Most educational institutions have faced violence and threats against the students, teachers, professors, and education personnel. As per the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA) report, it has been reported that the military is also using the schools and universities to fight against the Taliban. Furthermore, Afghanistan is one of the countries that were heavily affected by attacks on schools. During the period 2015–2019, about 500 to 999 total incidents of attacks had taken place. Afghanistan is the country where the direct attacks have harmed the highest recorded numbers of teaching fraternity and students. Child recruitment and sexual violence from and in schools/universities take heavy tolls [13].

3.2. COVID-19 Pandemic in Afghanistan

The World Health Organization (WHO) has identified and confirmed that the COVID-19 outbreak originated in Wuhan City (China) and reported it on 31 December 2019. Afghanistan has been no exception to the pandemic, and the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed to have spread in Afghanistan on 24 February 2020 in Herat [14,15].

As of 28 September 2021, about 150,485 confirmed cases, 102,827 recovered cases, and 6908 deaths have been reported. In Kabul Province, the highest number of COVID-19 cases were reported, amounting to 18,896, followed by Herat with 9343 and Balkh with 3431 [16]. However, an official survey from the Ministry of Public Health (5 August 2020) had reported that approximately one-third of the country's population of roughly 10 million people had been affected by COVID-19 [17]. The overall COVID-19 scenario of Afghanistan is shown below (Figure 2)

Total Coronavirus Cases in Afghanistan

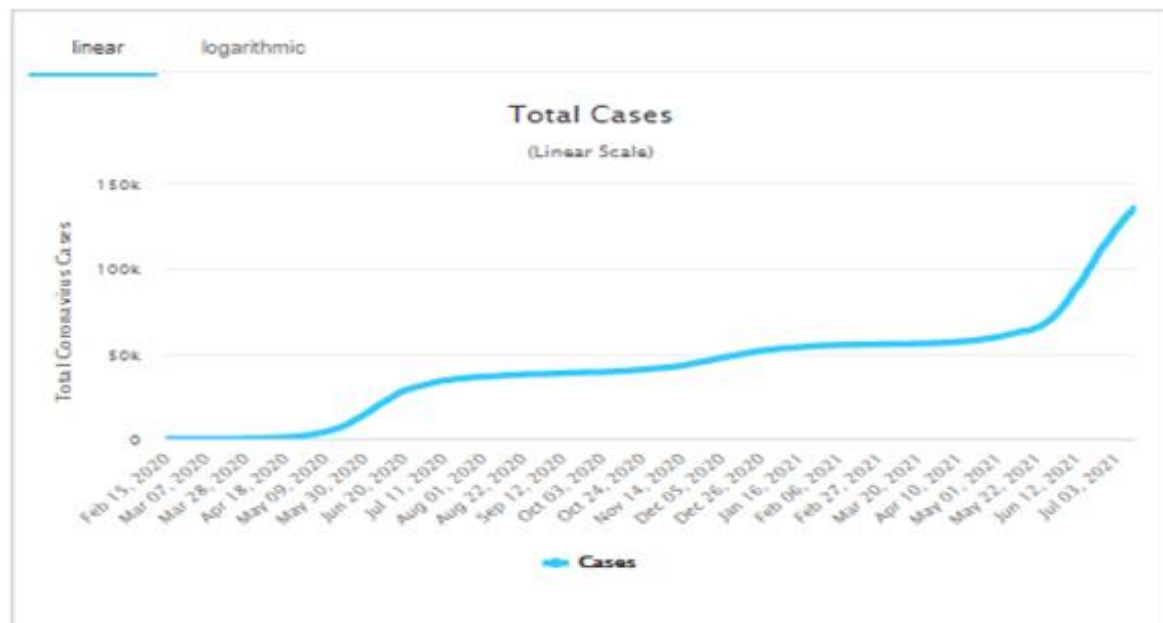


Figure 2. The cumulative number of COVID-19 Cases in Afghanistan. Source: Worldometer-Afghanistan [18] (accessed on 28 September 2021).

The pandemic has also become critical for education in Afghanistan. Many pupils tested positive, forcing the country's government to close educational institutions. The rising health concerns cautioned the parents against sending their children to pursue their studies. Researchers have argued [19] that the pandemic may have long-term negative impacts on education. Besides this, all education institutions, schools, and universities would remain closed for an extended period due to the high infection rates.

3.3. Paralysis of Afghanistan Education System

After more than three decades of war, the education system in Afghanistan is shattered and decrepit, especially in terms of gender equality. To understand this assertion, first, we have to examine: what constitutes quality education? Secondly, how has war affected the quality of education? The factors determining the quality of higher education in any country includes the teaching/learning environments; the prevailing of farsighted leadership with clear rules and directions of governance; good, efficient, and supportive administrative system; having access to quality infrastructure in terms of teaching, learning materials; good quality teachers, etc. However, with the ongoing war and pandemic, the national economy of Afghanistan has been seriously impacted. These assertions are substantiated by some facts, for example, Afghanistan's Human Development Index (HDI) value in 2019 stood at 0.511, which placed Afghanistan at 169 out of 189 countries. Gross National Income (GNI) per capita has decreased by 10 percent between 1990 and 2019. Only 13.2 percent of adult women had reached the secondary level of education compared to 36.9 percent of their male counterparts. About 56 percent of the total population were

reported to be multi-dimensionally poor, while an additional 18.1 percent were classified to be vulnerable to multidimensional poverty (6742 thousand people) [20]. Based on the facts mentioned above, it can be argued that education and war have an inversely proportional relationship.

The COVID-19 pandemic had also seriously affected education leaving disproportionate impacts on the vulnerable students given the nationwide school closures. It further aggravated the eco-environment because the country's education was already struggling to enthuse the people toward education during this ongoing crisis. Education became an area of contention and disputes occurred regarding the long-criticized curriculum and textbooks. Availability of the internet is important for the accessibility of education in rural and remote areas, and it has become more crucial during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, it is reported that accessibility of internet usage is very low in the country. However, it was more available in cities than rural areas, reaching 200,000 in 2006 to 5 million in 2014 [21].

It has been reported that an estimated 3.7 million children are still out of school in Afghanistan [22]. What is the rationale for such, or who/what is responsible for it? There are many answers to these questions; however, in this context, the underlining reasons include insecurity given the war situation, further aggravated by the traditional norms and practices related to gender norms and the role of girls and women in society. Some parts of the country have been experiencing a shortage of schools, insufficient transportation, lack of qualified teachers and quality education, etc. Ultimately, war has affected the national economy and subsequently impacted the various aspects of higher education directly or indirectly.

Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic can be characterized as a black swan event, which has left critical impacts on all facets of life such as politics, democracy, society, economy, employment, tourism, bilateral and multilateral relations, regional integration, etc. One of the biggest threats at the national and international level in achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in general and specifically SDG-4 emphasizing quality education. Afghanistan is already devastated by the ongoing war and is not an exception to the ongoing pandemic's critical impacts.

3.4. Indian Education Diplomacy as a Tool for Afghanistan's Education Equity

India's education diplomacy was started as early as the 1950s. Students from Asia and Africa seek admissions in Indian universities for various higher education degrees and diplomas. It becomes more concrete and substantiated when international institutions such as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), and the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) sought the Indian expertise. South Korea's economists used to be trained by the Indian Planning Commission until the early 1960s. India has been providing its services to place satellites of several countries into space at globally competitive rates in the current scenario. Similarly, India has been known as the "Pharmacy of the World", given its expertise in producing medicines/vaccines and supplying the same at affordable prices to developing countries [23].

Given the geopolitical considerations, Afghanistan has been figuring very prominently in the Indian foreign policy. For the overall development of Afghanistan and as a stable country, India has been using its development diplomacy as a tool of soft power [24] in Afghanistan by providing development aid and assistance for reconstruction and rebuilding Afghanistan in terms of education, finance, technology, machinery assistance, and training of Afghan technician, diplomats, police officials, armed forces personnel, etc. [25]. Afghanistan has much admired India's same efforts and initiatives and several other stakeholders [26]. Since 2001, India's development diplomacy towards Afghanistan can be divided into four main types: (1) humanitarian assistance, (2) major infrastructure projects, (3) community development projects, and (4) Capacity building, including education on how India helped Afghanistan's education.

4. Discussion

Over the previous three decades, the ethnic struggle, including the ongoing pandemic, has significantly impacted education in Afghanistan. The dominant ethnic group, the Pashtuns, has always benefited from external aid in education or, say, Indian education diplomacy. In comparison, minority ethnic groups suffer internally and through their inability to participate in educational opportunities given by foreign partners, hence exacerbating inequality. Afghanistan's entire education system has been devastated and deteriorated because of the COVID-19 pandemic and, more specifically, given the extended war for more than three decades. The GOI has pursued education diplomacy towards Afghanistan. Afghan students received these scholarships to pursue undergraduate degrees (arts, sciences, engineering, commerce, and law), postgraduate degrees (arts, sciences, commerce, engineering, law, and so on), and doctoral degrees in Indian universities. After evaluating many areas of educational equity and receiving input from stakeholders, it was pointed that India's efforts have not trickled down to the bottom.

In the field of International Relations (IR), the scholars make distinctions between foreign policy and diplomacy. Diplomacy is perceived as art or practice for conducting the I.R. through negotiating alliances, treaties, agreements, etc. Scholars [27] (Evans & Newnham, 1992) have argued that diplomacy is something like a dialogue concerned with "designed to identify common interests and areas of conflict between the parties." Whereas on the other hand, Reynolds (1980: 36) defined the same as it is being conducted and guided by a country's foreign policy, in which the state actors act, react, and interact at the boundary between the internal (domestic) and external (foreign) environments [28]. However, it is very strange to know that education diplomacy was unknown during the last 20 years. The term Education Diplomacy (E.D) was coined in 2009 by the Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI) recommendations. The ACEI defined the E.D. as the "cross-disciplinary, intercultural sharing of theories, ideas, and concepts that advance the landscape of education and, thereby, enhance human development" [29]. Kjellén (2007) has argued that Putting this in the context of the theory and practice of diplomacy, I think education diplomacy is best described as what is often called "new diplomacy" [30]. As far as the scope of education diplomacy is concerned, it covers the exchange programs in education by giving grants or developing international educational cooperation and international educational volunteering practices. Education diplomacy ensures the mutual exchanges of educational, technical, and scientific materials and equipment and the organization of scientific and educational activities with the representatives of other countries to support and facilitate the study.

The Indian education diplomacy starts with fellowships, grants, and scholarships. Under the Ministry of External Affairs, the Govt of India (GOI) has provided 1000 scholarships to Afghan students annually. Under these scholarships, the Afghan students pursued undergraduate (arts, sciences, engineering, commerce, and law), postgraduate (arts, sciences, commerce, engineering, law, etc.), and Ph.D. courses at Indian universities. Under the "Propagation of Hindi Abroad" scheme, scholarships are offered to Afghan nationals at Kendriya Hindi Sansthan, Agra. Under the ICCR Special Scholarship Scheme in Dance, Music, and Fine Arts, a few slots are being offered to deserving candidates for learning them [31]. (Embassy of India in Kabul, 2021). Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) is a very important program of the GOI. The main objective of this scheme is to provide training to the Afghan Government officials along with limited seats for private/business organizations. The GOI has increased the slots for Afghanistan from 500 to 625, covering more than 300 training courses in various fields, including the education sector. The GOI provides tuition fees, accommodation, limited living allowance, and a two-way airfare in economy class. From 2006 to 2018, about 5602 Afghan nationals benefited from this program.

The second major program in this direction is a 'Study in India' Program. It was launched in 2018 with the objectives to improve India's soft power with a focus on the neighboring countries, increase the number of inbound international students, and multiply

India's market share of global education. Under this program, foreign students obtain admissions in India from 164 different countries across the globe. About 63.7 percent of the total foreign students came from the top 10 countries, wherein Afghanistan shares about 10 percent [32]. Under this program, most admissions are given with tuition fee waivers of 100%, 50%, or 25% covering courses undergraduate, postgraduate, Ph.D., etc., in the 100+ premier institutions of India [31].

Human resource development and capacity building constitute an important part of India's education diplomacy. As per the available records on the official website of the Indian Embassy in Kabul, more than 3500 Afghan nationals undertake education and training annually, along with more than 15,000 Afghan students who pursue education on a self-financing basis in India. Thus, India has played a very constructive role in creating a large pool of trained workforce which ultimately contributes to the development of public and private sectors in Afghanistan. The Afghanistan National Agricultural Sciences and Technology University (ANASTU) was established with the help of India to promote capacity building in agricultural sciences. The Indian Agriculture Research Institute (IARI) has been engaged with training, equipping, and establishing the university.

Moreover, India–Afghanistan Agricultural Fellowship Programs were launched for Afghan students and scholars to pursue graduation and research courses at various Indian agricultural universities and institutes in India. About 50 Afghan students have been studying in the Indian School of Mines Dhanbad. This initiative aims to strengthen and promote the technical workforce in Afghanistan's mining sector. Humanitarian assistance has an important place in Indian education diplomacy. During the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, India provided about 75,000 MT of wheat in 2020. About 500,000 tablets of Hydroxychloroquine, 100,000 tablets of Paracetamol, 50,000 pairs of surgical gloves were given to the Government of Afghanistan in 2020. A Medical Diagnostic Centre was established in Kabul in 2015. A total of 11 lakh tons of wheat in the form of grains and biscuits and 2000 tons of pulses have been provided to nearly 1.5 million school pupils as food assistance. The major initiatives of India were included the reconstruction and renovation of Habibia School in Kabul, along with assistance with training and maintenance of the school. The Centre provides the latest diagnostic facilities to children of Afghanistan, thereby generating goodwill for India.

Since 2005, India and Afghanistan have collaborated in community development under the High Impact Community Development Projects (HICDP). Under this scheme, about USD 120 million (mn) has been committed for various small to medium scale projects in general, education, and health in particular. Overall, about 433 HICDP projects have been completed across Afghanistan. On 5 July 2020, India signed five (05) agreements to construct schools and roads worth USD 2.6 mn. 20. During FY 2019–2020, 37 projects were completed in various provinces of Afghanistan under the High Impact Community Development Project (HICDP) scheme of the Government of India [31].

The next question is, what are the impacts of the Indian education diplomacy towards Afghanistan? Would it have a negligible or minimal impact on educational equity? To answer this issue, we must look at various variables and come to a logical conclusion to meet the paper's main objective. The list of variables includes the multi-dimensional black swan effects of war and pandemic, the ongoing crisis against the backdrop of US withdrawal, and its implications for Indo-Afghan relations. If the Taliban takes over the political regime, what possibilities are likely to emerge for education, and in which direction? The bilateral relations will move, given that the GOI and the Taliban have not been on the same page. Currently, the HDI of Afghanistan for 2019 stood at 0.511, standing at 169th position out of 189 countries, and GNI has been decreasing continuously throughout 1990–2019.

In terms of education, only 13.2 percent of women reached the secondary level compared to the men with 36.9 percent; about 56 percent of the total population were multi-dimensionally poor; and about 18.1 percent were vulnerable to multidimensional poverty [20] (Human Development Report, 2020). Due to the pandemic, education insti-

tutions were closed, which needed more internet facilities. However, accessibility of the internet is very low in the country, reaching from 200,000 in 2006 to 5 million to date [33]. (Digital Divide in World, 2021). An estimated 3.7 million children are still out of school in Afghanistan. Shortage of schools, insufficient transportation, and lack of good-quality teachers are other challenges for Afghanistan's education system. The Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4), achieving the target of quality education by 2030, seems very difficult against several odds: poverty, unemployment, lack of infrastructures and teachers, lack of adequate funds, political corruption, cultural hindrances, etc. About one-sixth of the population was seriously affected by war, and thus, are in dire need of necessities. About 3.5 million people were internally displaced, and one-fourth of the population has been unemployed. About 2.5 lakh Afghans have been facing a lack of medical treatment [12]. From the past and present experiences, it is evident that GOI and the Taliban have not remained on one page. Most of the contributions on the part of India were made when other friendly governments were in power.

During the personal interactions of the authors with Afghan students studying in India, a few inquiries were made about how they feel about India's educational cooperation, how they think about this cooperation, and if there is any positive role in filling the equity gaps in Afghanistan's education. There was a tremendously positive response of 'Yes' and holding India in high esteem [34]. The best example may be former President Hamid Karzai, who received his master's degree (Political Science) from India. While receiving his 'Doctors of Letters' Honoris Causa degree awarded by the Lovely Professional University (LPU), Jalandhar (India), the former President Hamid Karzai had acknowledged and appreciated India's role in uplifting the standard of education; provision of scholarship, grants, fellowships, etc.; training, HRD capacity building; along with the generous financial aid for educational infrastructure, etc. Concomitantly, there are two versions of the education diplomacy of India. Almost all students who obtained an opportunity to study in India are satisfied with India's role and accepted and acknowledged that it significantly contributes to higher education's equitization [7].

The inputs provided by the former Afghan students (those who studied and are studying in India) to one of the authors telephonically concluded that education equity is likely to remain a big question. It was found that most students come from a particular community, i.e., Pashtun, being in the Afghanistan political system. The minority ethnic groups are marginalized, and their chances of selection remain very remote. The medium of teaching and education in remote areas are other inhibitive concerns for obtaining fair chances and opportunities. In Afghanistan, nepotism in teacher recruitments in higher educational institutions is prevalent, particularly in higher educational institutions and universities. Some of the ethnic groups used to remain hostile to the ideas of gender education. The ambitious candidates are concerned about nepotism throughout the processing of documents from submission to admission.

Furthermore, Mol et al. point out that India has expanded its help to Afghanistan through health diplomacy by giving COVID-19 vaccines during the crisis [35] and raising a voice for equity in global vaccine distribution [36]. With the recent takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban, it is certain that India always stands against terror and supports an inclusive government. The bilateral relations can grow only when such a conducive environment is prevailing in Afghanistan. Definitely, with decades of war and terrorism, the country has suffered enough, and the future for the citizens seems to be gloomy in the current phase. India always believes that terror and talks will not move hand in hand. In this context, bilateral relations between India and Afghanistan are set to undergo a paradigm shift, with significant implications for India's education diplomacy and education disparity in Afghanistan. Besides, D' Souza has highlighted that India has a great chance to deliver long-term peace and stability to the area by moving beyond bilateralism and stressing regional and multilateral strategy [37].

5. Conclusions

Afghanistan's education system has been devastated and dilapidated due to the COVID-19 pandemic and particularly by the ongoing war for more than three decades of sustained conflict. Under the Ministry of External Affairs, the GOI has pursued education diplomacy towards Afghanistan. Under this diplomacy, a considerable number of schools were established along with one university. Substantial numbers of scholarships were provided to Afghan students. Professional training was being provided to a considerable number of bureaucrats and defense officials under the capacity-building programs.

Similarly, school-going children were provided with nutritious food. Under these scholarships, the Afghan students pursued undergraduate (arts, sciences, engineering, commerce, and law), postgraduate (arts, sciences, commerce, engineering, law, etc.), and Ph.D. courses at Indian universities. Crises such as war and pandemics have violated human rights and directly impacted education, leading to inequities. During the last 30 years, the ethnic conflict turned into war had seriously affected education in Afghanistan. The majority ethnic group—the Pashtuns—have been enjoying the privilege of education.

In contrast, the minority ethnic groups are affected domestically and by missing to participate in the educational opportunities provided abroad by the external partners, thereby widening inequities. After analyzing the various aspects of education equity and inputs from the stakeholders, it was found that India's initiatives have not been trickling down to the bottom. Rather, it is being exploited by the elite class of Afghan society. Another notion that has evolved from the analysis and discussion is that India should track and follow the alumni who have graduated from Indian universities to gain political and geopolitical mileage from them. Further, the Government of India should decide to take effective steps to devise the criteria so that the marginalized or unrepresented minority ethnic groups can benefit from the programs under education diplomacy to achieve education equity.

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