

Chapter 10

Impact of Modern Education on Bhutan's Society, Administration and Culture

The dominant system of education that prevailed in Bhutan prior to the modern school system was more of a religious and classical nature. The emphasis was on religion, religious practices and related philosophies. This traditional monastic education system helped to preserve the Kingdom's literary traditions, its culture and heritage and most importantly, the eternal religion of Lord Buddha as it had come to be understood and practiced in this part of the world. The life blood of Bhutanese culture and heritage still flows within, and can best be preserved through traditional and classical studies. It is, therefore, Bhutanese traditional studies and values have their rightful place and are given due prominence in the educational system of the country. But modern education system, which is the need of the hour, was introduced in Bhutan quite late. It has been there since the dawn of the last century. Thus the system of education in Bhutan is diversified into modern school and monastic school. Students from both types of schools are treated equally in terms of qualification. Yet most of the children prefer going to modern schools and this has indirectly impacted the number of enrolments in the monastic schools. However, this should not really affect the religion and cultural development of Bhutan, since emphasis is laid on the essential Buddhist texts, which is taught in Dzongkha even in modern schools. The narrative of modern Bhutan is the chronicle of educating a nation.

With the installation of Ugyen Wangchuck, as the first hereditary monarch in December 1907, education became an important priority of the Royal Government. Starting from humble beginnings, country's first school and mobile court school, patronized by the first King there followed seven to ten schools with Hindi-medium instruction set up by the second King Jigme Wangchuck. Following the enthronement of Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, the third King commenced western style English medium schools marshalling a fresh age in the history of the country. English became the medium of learning as he realised that Bhutan being a small country needed to be effectively in touch with the outside world. During his reign, the planned economic development was started and it had accomplished the rapid growth of modern education.

In early 1960s there were just few schools in Bhutan attended by several hundred students. These students comprised of unenthusiastic rural cow herders who went into hiding when government officials came to enlist young boys into school. It was an era when parents bribed the officials into overlooking their children from admission to school and even to the extent of making the children act as if they were either deaf or dumb. The few so-called unfortunate ones who could not avoid enlistment nor had their names recorded in absentia, had to travel long distances from home, stay in makeshift bamboo sheds, took turn in cooking and wait for their parents for the supply of foods. It was from these rudimentary settings they received their education and were later able to hold the positions of top ranking government officials in their later life. The harsh conditions precluded admission of girl children and their chance to education was to come much later.

Despite the late initiation of a formal, organised education system, there existed many enthusiastic minds to bring their children to the pale of education. These countrymen, though they illiterate gave their time, effort, properties, provisions and even set up bamboo huts to be used as classrooms and accommodation for children who were from far flung villages. As a part of this attempt, they would invite learned people to the village, collect children and start the process of learning. Thus, young boys imbibed the knowledge and wisdom from learned elders who were often without formal degrees. Gradually there was an evolution in the education system from some humble community schools and primary schools to colleges and a university in the beginning of the 21st century.

During the reign of Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the fourth King, Bhutan witnessed exceptional progress in enhancing literacy rate, increasing enrolment in schools, number of students etc. In the year 1990 the total population was estimated at 600,000 and the main Plan document of the Seventh Five Year Plan projected a rise to between 713,211 and 768,050 by 1997.¹ These figures need to be seen in the light of the data given by the record of the census which states the population in 2005 stood at 634,982 (male: 333,595 and female: 301,387).² The latter data, if true, then the population instead of increasing decreased by over 100,000 which is overtly impossible. Consequently, taking the population to be anywhere within 600,000 the development in educational was very impressive.

Table 10:1 Education statistics of the country in April 1997

Sl. No.	Schools and Institutions	Number	Students	Staff		
				Teachers	Others	Total
1.	Community Schools	107	10743	250	07	257
2.	Primary Schools	150	51776	1312	240	1552
3.	Junior High Schools	25	17907	473	102	575
4.	High Schools	13	8528	316	142	458
5.	Private Schools	07	1424	071	14	85
6.	Institutions	10	1889	293	157	450
	Total	312	92267	2715	662	3377

(Source-*General Statistics*, Ministry of Health and Education, Education Division, Thimphu, Bhutan, 1997, p.1)

The government made a commitment to provide free education up to class X as well as and also to provide scholarships to meet the needs of higher and professional studies. While formal education amongst children was being encouraged, adult illiteracy rate remained high. Hence the government in 1980s introduced the adult literacy programme to enable an enhanced participation of the people in the national development. This was to promote the basic education amongst the adults. In 1992, the National Women's Association of Bhutan introduced non-formal education (NFE) programme in Bhutan with five centres in different districts. So, besides the above mentioned list in the year 1997 most of the Bhutanese had become literate either through adult education programme or non formal education programme but there has not been any data preserved on this. Now the question is how this educated population was contributing to the development of the country. With the ever expanding demand brought about by the increasing social and economic development activities the civil service became the largest employee of people with formal education. Between 1977 and 1987, the employee in the civil service became doubled.

In 1991, there were 11,228 people were with the civil service among whom there were 671 graduates and post graduates and 506 diploma holders.³ This meant that the higher educated personnel only constituted 10.48% of the civil servants, a clear indicator of the lack of qualified nationals. This shortage was mainly felt in education, in scientific and technical sectors where considerably very large number of expatriates filled the vacancy while the nationals filled the posts in administrative and judicial sectors.

If anything has persistently and reliably served the advancement of the country over past one hundred years, it has been the gift of modern education that has empowered the country to harvest benefits in diverse fields and even helping the countrymen in value their own rich legacy. The schools and institutions across the country were instrumental in bringing together the youths from varying backgrounds and transforming these youngsters into potent resources in the development of the country. Education led the youths to achieve success in miscellaneous fields, enrich their understanding of themselves and sharpening of their world view. Gradually they started participating in the international community as confident, energetic and forward looking people. Since the inception, modern education has continued to be a priority among other things in Bhutan. It started designing its own system and work on building a foundation that supports the country's development philosophy. Bhutan has developed in to a forward looking nation largely shaped and supported by its education system.

The education was moulded as a means to follow the unique concept of Gross National Happiness which includes spiritual and cultural needs in the way of progress.⁴ Earlier value education was simply a concept included in text book stories; later it was introduced as a formal subject. Traditional values sculpted Buddhist teaching of universal values like empathy, reciprocity, responsibility, selflessness etc. Though initially the main endeavour of education in Bhutan was to fight unawareness and gain spiritual knowledge, the recent trend in education is based on ensuring the inherent capacity of every child, instilling a consciousness of contemplative learning, ecological awareness and genuine care for nature, a holistic understanding of the modern world and the competence to deal with it, preparation for productive livelihood, while not ignoring the country's unique cultural heritage. According to the former Prime Minister Lyonpo Jigmi Y. Thinley the vision of the education system is

to generate “an educated and enlightened society-----, at peace with itself, at peace with the world, built and sustained by the idealism and the creative enterprise of our citizens.”⁵ In the words of the fifth King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, “If our vision of the nation is not contained in the pages of the books that our young children hold, in the words of the teachers as they lead their classrooms, and in the education policies of our governments, then let it be said – we have no vision.”⁶

So, education is the key to the development of Bhutan. Today, modern education has become indispensable in achieving socio-economic development and progress in Bhutan. Followings are the effects of modern education witnessed in Bhutanese society, administration and culture-

- A) As per the Constitution of Bhutan, education has become a basic right since education is a precondition in fulfilling the wider social, cultural and economic goals.
- B) Here education system is highly scientific and based according to the needs of the time. Head Teachers are trained in school administration that helps them run their schools efficiently.
- C) Bhutan embarked various programmes to provide mass education, including adult education and specialized vocational training for their people which entertains an all round development in the society.
- D) Since Bhutan first ventured in formal education, it has embarked upon the process of mobilizing its human, physical and financial resources for a rapid growth. The process of development has brought many changes and played leading role in the society.
- E) Government formulated positive educational policies to enable the creation of knowledge based society providing equitable and quality education leading to learning opportunities to all children so as to become creative equipped to confront the challenges of the society.
- F) As a result of the educational policies the educated youth have become an asset and contributors to the harmony of the society.
- G) English education has facilitated the Bhutanese students to study in any country: graduating in fields as diverse as from accounting to medicine and visual arts. After returning home they can apply their knowledge and skills and thus contributing to the welfare of the society, administration and culture.

- H) Bhutan's administration became equipped with educationally qualified and skilled people because of modern education system. The modernization of the administrative system owes much to modern education.
- I) Till the 80s of the last century Bhutan was dependent on India's financial assistance in the educational sector. But in the late 80's and beginning of 90s there nationalization of educational took place with a gradual transfer of School Boards and education administration to the hands of the Bhutanese leading to self sufficiency and wide changes in the society.
- J) Bhutan's spectacular economic growth owes much to its effective use of its educated manpower. The establishment of schools all over the country and the educated joining the administrative machinery has led to country's overall development. A learned farmer is able to a change and move into totally new production process and this adaptability has become an indispensable bridge over which a poor Bhutanese can cross the gulf from misery to hope.
- K) The Royal Government has introduced various educational programmes to foster cultural understanding, friendship among the citizens and also with the rest of the world.
- L) The education system in Bhutan differs from the others in that Bhutan stresses promoting a sense of belonging among the students and value the culture and heritage of the country.
- M) Educated Bhutanese have adapted with the modern way of living. In Bhutan there has emerged a vibrant middle class and highly educated elite class. Since their medium of learning was English, they had good exposure to several countries in the world, maintaining their national identity at the same time. Even in the monastic system they are adapting English language for communication and also the modern techniques that have a positive impact in the teaching - learning system.
- N) The farsighted fourth King got convinced that people were ready to run democracy and there was a smooth transition of Bhutan into a constitutional democratic monarchy in 2008. It has given an opportunity to the education ministry to help in making a better foundation for democracy to sustain there. There came then a new demand in the education system to be able to support all citizens through the formal, non-formal and even informal arrangements to

acquire basic skills. This has enabled them to meaningfully participate in the administrative process and build a vibrant democracy.

- O) The march of modern education swept away the so called primitive knots of gender discrimination as it provided equal opportunity for everyone on terms of the need of the society which enshrines the females to a greater extent, enabling women to work in Bhutan administration and contribute in the task of nation building.
- P) The introduction of modern education led to the global upliftment of the Bhutanese people as their culture became much more refined and helped them doing away with the hallmark of savagery. It constitutes to be an essential part of their nation building through modernization although keeping them keen to their tradition.
- Q) The fore-fathers of this generation of Bhutan is no more doomed to the ill-fate of being uneducated rather some of them had succeeded to be the torch bearers through modern education which later contributed for the advancement of the nation.
- R) The education ministry pursues the target to make Bhutan a knowledge hub, and create an Information Technology and knowledge based society. This is the initiative to broad-base Bhutan's education system, and the introduction of Tertiary Education Policy (TEP) has opened fresh avenues for students to pursue higher education in GNH studies, environment, Buddhist studies, and traditional medicine.⁷ After fulfilling this young generation will positively acquire skills, knowledge, and values to support of a fast globalising 21st century Bhutan.

On the contrary, according to former Education Director Thinley Gyamtsho, every Bhutanese possesses traditional qualities of self perseverance, self-reliance and self resourcefulness but these qualities are generally being eroded due to modernization and media-education. According to Gyamtsho, "He is increasingly being specialized only in a few limited skills having to rely on others for his perseverance. Working with their own hands is being viewed as being something below their dignity and the dignity of labour which was held in high esteem is being downgraded. Students immediately after their graduation from schools and colleges look for white collar jobs and on being absorbed in the government services

immediately look forward of hiring servants to carry out their various domestic chores. Such dramatic changes in the values and outlooks amongst our population are tantamount to rising expectations amongst the populace increasing the nation's dependency on others at great economic, social and political costs..... There is, therefore, the need to revitalize these traditional qualities----. They are capable of being nurtured with these essential virtues.”⁸ In order to cultivate dignity of labour among students, various activities like social work, school farming, social forestry, and greening of school compounds were implemented in school curricula. The kind of future Bhutanese generation, Gyamtsho dreamed to see was that, “as a result of the education a person receives he is capable of, without fear or shyness, mixing or adopting himself at the highest levels with comfort while at the same time he can do the same thing with the most ignorant person.”⁹

Notes and References:

1. *Seventh Five Year Plan*, Main Document, Vol-1, 1992/93-1996/1997, Planning Commission, Royal Government of Bhutan, Thimphu, Bhutan p.7.
2. *Population & Housing Census of Bhutan 2005*, Office of the Census Commissioner, Royal Government of Bhutan, Thimphu, 2006, p.17.
3. *Seventh Five Year Plan*, op.cit, p.84.
4. Wangyal, Tashi, Ensuring Social Sustainability : Can Bhutan's Education system ensure intergenerational Transmission of Values?, *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, Centre for Bhutan Studies, Thimphu, Summer 2001, Vol. 3, No. 1, p.115.
5. *Educating the Nation: A journey through time*, Ministry of Education, Royal Government of Bhutan, Thimphu, 2011, p.46.
6. *Ibid*.
7. *Ibid*, p.47.
8. Gyamtsho, Thinley, "Education should emphasise traditions", *Kuensel*, Vol. XII, No.9, June 14, 1994, p.2.
9. *Ibid*, p.3.