

Educational Pathways of Bhutan: Transition to Transformation

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Abstract - Bhutan, also known as the last Shangrila has evolved dramatically in the field of education from monastic to modern and is currently moving toward the realization of 21st-century requirements. The history of schooling in Bhutan started with Buddhist monastic education that was self-contained and inward-looking where learning happened at the spiritual and moral levels. It attempted to offer an appreciation of life and simple moments of being with a sense of self. The introduction of modern education in the 1960s altered the focus and ended in reductionism because the content of modern education differed vastly from monastic education; there were new disciplines of learning classified into humanities and sciences, with sub-categories branching into a wide range of subjects. The deviation from internal to external aspects was not without tension. In this context, the paper aims to analyse the effects of transition and the efforts taken in the form of a nationwide initiative called 'Educating for Gross National Happiness with the aim to reform the country's education system and the birth of the Green School concept for holistic development in the learners. However, the impacts of modern education are not different, the Bhutanese education system too mistook the ability to reproduce information as knowledge. As a result of which, Bhutan's current shift in focus toward technological-oriented and skill-based STEM-centered education will be examined to comprehend the nature and purpose of educational reforms in Bhutan from the past to the present. In the direction of life-long learning and for better future careers, the initiative is toward STEM topics.

Keywords: *education system, initiatives, Green School, University College, pedagogical approach, futuristic vision.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Education facilitates self-discovery which leads to realizing one's full potential. Good education also gives confidence, good judgment, and a virtuous disposition. Bhutan's unique development path under the leadership of its past and present kings is no different from Bhutan's approach to educational development. Buddhist monastic education used to be the main form of schooling in Bhutan and it existed for over a thousand years. Modern secular education began in the second half of the twentieth century and it is not based on Buddhism or monastic education but is viewed more as a means to an end that is for a better job and a better salary. This is mainly due to the need to enter the job market. This is in contrast to the traditional notion of education where education was more or less seen as an end in itself in the individual's quest to remove ignorance and attain greater knowledge for its own sake. However, the outlook and approach of modern education have created a lacuna, with a sense of moral vacuity, behavioral changes, different self-perceptions, and expectations often not matched by the opportunities that presently exist in the country like the lack of

enough jobs for the graduates. But the divergent attribute of monastic and modern education is brought together to a meeting point in the Green School model as both values and skills define a Green School. But considering the model too idealistic and due to the lack of an in-depth understanding of the concept, the tertiary education system became market-driven and valued grades and paper degrees more than the productive value of education. With qualification inflation, there is an ever-increasing gulf between exam-centric pedagogical approaches and skill-centered learning practices. Therefore, the paper attempts to examine the past transitions and the present transformations in the Bhutanese education sector in order to unravel the nature and purpose of change.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Conceptual research allows one to conduct a study by observing and analyzing the existing information on the ground that it is a qualitative study. The topic did not involve a field survey to assess the practices or factors. Relevant books on education like *Educating for GNH: Nurturing Green School for Green Bhutan: A Guide to School Management*, *Sherubtse College: An epitome of Higher Education in Bhutan*, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire, and articles from the newspaper *Kuensel*, *The Druk Journal* and *Centre for Bhutan Studies* were also consulted. I have followed the search procedure from the articles included in the reference section.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The paper aims to critically analyze the varied dimensions of the Bhutanese education system to discover the inherent meaning and purpose of education and to emphasize the factors essential to empower the learners. *Holistic education* as a system takes into account the affective dimension of learning as much as the cognitive dimension. While cognitive learning takes care of knowledge and skills for workforce development, affective learning promotes socio-emotional skills, spirituality, and social-cultural values. In this direction, the end goal of both Green School and GNH is toward producing wholesome individuals in whom the affective and cognitive dimensions are fully developed. For instance, the petal arrangement in plants and flowers would be the means to study mathematical patterns and sequences popularly known as the Fibonacci sequence. By observing the arrangement pattern of leaves in a plant where the new leaves do not cover the older ones, children can learn about survival skills with the implied message that there is enough for everyone in the world. Philosophically, it shows one cannot obstruct another person's growth wherein, life skills are

not alienated from learning. But the 3Rs known as arithmetic reading and writing skills taught in the classroom focus only on the cognitive aspect of education and not on the whole person.

Modern education devotes its attention to preparing students to be competitively driven by personal success and ambition. The purpose of education is not only to prepare students to fit in the job market but also to nurture them as complete human beings with moral uprightness. According to educators, Dey and Sunar (2020), a 'Green School' is an alternative to teaching children wholesome values, it teaches children to be a true human being [1] and in this regard, Powdyel (2014) stresses that education has the privilege of being called the 'noble' sector due to its mission in cultivating the nobility of mind, heart, and hands thereby leading to the cultivation of the nobility of action [2]. Gyatsho (2019) who is a Buddhist teacher claims that today's education system requires reformation because "today's education system prepares learners only to use education as a tool to climb the social ladder and as a result, the growth of the other dimensions of human experience is totally ignored" (p. 6) [3]. However, the Bhutanese education system is geared toward teaching young boys and girls the ability to reproduce information as knowledge to compete in the examination resulting in mass production of graduates from tertiary educational institutions such as Sherubtse College, popularly known as the *peak of learning*.

The field of education is a noble sector, it is a powerful instrument for human development. But with the inflation in education there is reductionism as over time education has been reduced to the mere acquisition of knowledge and certificates. Paulo Freire refers to modern education as the 'banking concept of education that allows students only to receive and store information and be passive like money deposited in the bank. This misguided system prevents learners from discovering their talents and aesthetic sensibilities [4]. Today, education systems across the world are deficient in many respects. It prepares people for careers, factories, corporations, and the job market making education a means of accumulating information and reproducing the sense without developing an insightful understanding which will be irrelevant. With the introduction of several new programs with combinations such as English-Dzongkha, English-Media, and Eco-Evs, the vertical growth was affected and teaching-learning became mundane without purpose, leaving the graduates in a liminal state of interstice. As a result, in order to equip Bhutanese youth with twenty-first-

century skills, the current reforms in the sector focus on the key subjects termed STEM by integrating the disciplines as a combination of major and allied modules to involve problem-solving and creative thinking to handle real-life situations. In the words of Dasho Zangley Dukpa, "All universities are now engaged in the creation of knowledge that is directly relevant to their societies." (p.151). [4].

IV. CONCLUSION

With more and more Bhutanese nationals leaving the country in search of greener pastures in countries like Australia, the government is initiating a reformatory process in every sector wherein the field of education not being an exception in an attempt to enable the citizens in general and youth, in particular, to cope with the scientific and technological advancements through upskilling and reskilling measures. Thus, by applying the new style of learning, Bhutan is developing a 'growth mindset' in its adults through STEM-centered education.

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