

Literacy For All: One of the Means to Achieve Gross National Happiness

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This paper focuses on how quality education plays a vital role in national development. It also argues that education can be dangerous if we are not careful about excluding pedagogy, enhancing curriculum and including vocational training and teaching other societal values. Incorporating cultural and moral values to help literate people become meaningful contributors to the nation is crucial for development.

The paper suggests ways to bring together our older and younger generations to formulate ways to improve the nation. We must talk about the importance of cultural values and must bring a basic understanding of Gross National Happiness to the local people and to our younger generation. This paper describes the possibilities of GNH in terms of development, modernization, and education, including balanced cultural and spiritual values, and it concludes by proposing that we help our younger generation develop a deeper interest in culture and spirituality.

What is Gross National Happiness?

His Majesty the King has promoted the concept of GNH, and said that the “Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product”. The guiding philosophy of our national development, GNH, is to maintain a balance between material progress and spiritual well-being (Ninth plan, 2002-2007).

Gross National Happiness is built upon the four pillars:

Sustainable and Equitable Socio-economic Development;
Good Governance;
Preservation and Promotion of Cultural Heritage; and
Environment (Love and Respect for Nature).

Bhutan is called the “Last Shangrila” because we have already achieved a certain level of GNH in the country through the pursuit of the above four goals. Gross National Happiness refers to the happiness and peace of the Bhutanese people, even though it is not a term that ordinary people often use. His Majesty recognized that economic development without spiritual well-being would not bring happiness to the people. Therefore, His Majesty constantly encourages us to preserve our traditions and cultural values, while facing the challenges of modern development. No matter how much material wealth one may have, without moral and spiritual values, a person can never be truly happy. Cultural values must permeate school systems, curriculum, and pedagogy, in both the formal and

non-formal sectors. Otherwise, nothing will be fully meaningful. For example, in the Buddhist teachings, the pure motivation of one's action is considered highly important, because no matter what we do and how small the deeds might seem, a pure motivation is what one must have behind every action. It is not what we do, but how we do things in our daily lives that matter the most. No matter how rich and beautiful, if we do not live our values and have the right motivations, traditions will have little impact on our daily lives.

In reality, wherever there is material progress, the spiritual well-being of the people of any nation often tends to diminish slowly. However, it is encouraging that Bhutan is attempting to balance and maintain both. To be successful, we must all work together as a team. We need to build a strategy gearing basic literacy toward quality education. Literacy has advantages and disadvantages in the pursuit of GNH.

Literacy And Its Advantages

Without literacy, it would be hard to even understand the concepts of GNH, much less to bring those concepts into practice. However, it is essential to educate the person as a whole and not stop at basic literacy as the goals of GNH can only be achieved through deeper education and not just basic literacy. Bhutan already sees literacy as an important component of development. The numbers of schools has increased and there is so much interest in improving education. Furthermore, Bhutan introduced Basic Learning Centers for adults during the past several years as an alternative for those unable to take advantage of formal education.

Paulo Freire, has recognized the down side of illiteracy and how it affects the whole process of development. Illiterate people cannot participate fully in decision-making: Illiteracy not only threatens the economic order of a society, it also constitutes a profound injustice. This injustice has serious consequences, such as the inability of illiterates to make decisions for themselves or to participate in the political process. (Freire & Macedo, 1987, preface VII).

Thus, it is very encouraging that Bhutan has introduced various alternative literacy programs to bring the underprivileged some form of awareness through literacy, so they can participate and make their contributions visibly and meaningfully.

Mahatma Gandhi also realized that education is the means to human liberation. By liberation, he not only meant liberation from social oppression and colonial oppression, but liberation from one's own ignorant mind. It is important that every citizen should have access to primary education or basic literacy. However, Gandhi also recognized that literacy alone is not adequate. To be fully educated, a person must be able to understand and practice his/her cultural traditions. Students must be motivated not only to

learn how to read and write, but to also make use of what they have learned.

To provide literacy for all within a short period, basic literacy through non-formal education is the only option, but perhaps we can eventually provide more holistic and advanced education for all. It is through education that our people will have the opportunity to compete in the outside world.

On an individual level, since we are a Buddhist nation, the first thing people want to be able to read is religious texts. Beyond that, literacy will allow them to become aware of a larger world outside their own. Literacy allows them to have access to all kinds of information. For example, today the Basic Learning Centers focus on producing learners who are at least able to read the country's weekly newspaper, the "Kuensel", to understand what is going on in the country. By being literate, they will learn to read and use information on health, nutrition, environmental preservation and economic activity and be able to run their own small business. Most importantly, they will be aware of the daily changes that are taking place around their world and will be able to deal with them accordingly.

On a national level, having a literate population makes it easy to communicate. There will be reciprocity between Government and the people at the grassroots level. People will be able to make wholesome contributions through understanding any plans and actions taken by the government for the common good. Whether it is problem solving or enjoying the end result, it will become a team effort rather than a handful of educated people figuring out how to make everything work. Finally, a literate person can learn more easily about our value system and cultural traditions.

Dangers Of Literacy For All

As I have mentioned, people do not become educated by simply learning to read and write. One danger of overvalued literacy is that young people come to think everything that comes from the western world is "cool". The west offers many good things, but there are risks involved in accepting everything from the west because there are things, values, and cultural practices that are not suitable for Bhutan. When I was growing up in a small village, seeing a person smoking a cigarette used to be such a shocking thing. Those days, people did not know anything about how it impacted one's health, but were aware of the cultural taboos, that it pollutes the local deities who are living around human environments. Day by day belief systems are fading away and nothing shocks people any more, not even drugs. Although this is a simple example, many western practices are adopted without regard for their impact on resources. Mind you, this does not often happen among the illiterate village youngsters. Indeed, in the corners of remote villages, belief systems of old are still alive, and

individuals still care about their own environment and other people around them.

Having said this, the question is, 'is there something wrong within our education system in how we pass messages to our younger generation in general?' If that is the case then maybe it is better to leave the people where they are, otherwise, we might be opening them to corruption they might otherwise avoid. Like the saying, "A little knowledge is dangerous", we need to be strategic about how we educate tomorrow's leaders, as we plan to promote literacy throughout the nation. We must avoid losing what we have, while we adopt all the new things that are creeping into the country from the outside world. We must consider who should be involved in education. Do we need our older generations to step in? Do we need our spiritual teachers and scholars to step in? It is time to recognize the abundant human resources in our country. Everybody should be part of this conversation about balancing the old traditions and modern development. Without that balance, it will be difficult to be a peaceful nation of satisfied people.

Westernization causes two sets of problems: (1) An increasing gap between generations, and (2) A widening gap between the privileged and rural Bhutanese. Sound educational policy will not make those worse. Planners and reformers must try to avoid intensifying conflicts that could emerge from those differences.

We will want to emphasize teacher training, especially in pedagogy. If we wish a unique form of development in the country, we will need a unique form of pedagogy and curriculum, in order to support our vision of increasing GNH.

Pedagogy and curriculum within the school systems and teacher training centers means the need to incorporate spiritual, cultural, and traditional values. Our older generation of spiritual teachers must have conversations with the younger generation who are curious about our religious traditions. There may be a need for some changes in how we teach those traditions as the current secrecy of spiritual teaching prevents many from learning and understanding. Some traditional restrictions are not practical today as we do not have time to wait and watch a student's faith and devotion before revealing some of those precious teachings from teacher to a student, such as Marpa Lotsawa practiced with Milarepa. It is no longer adequate for our spiritual teachers to only provide initiations and prayer ceremonies, with the abstract forms of text written in an old script that most young people cannot read or understand. New methods of religious teachings are urgently needed to compliment the old methods.

True communication does not happen unless there is a conversation. I was happy to read an interview with Dzongsar Khyentse Rimpoche, posted on the Internet:

“I want to teach the young Bhutanese people. I have been told by many Bhutanese that there is an emergence of other religions in the country and I can understand why. Because these missionaries don't sit on a throne. The missionaries are available to talk to, whereas with Lamas like myself, apart from the usual habitual blessings (putting my hands over their heads) and audiences, there is little communication and practically no philosophical exchange. I would like to sit next to the Bhutanese young people and let them talk about anything – drugs, sex money- whatever they want to talk about”.

(www.travellersandmagicians.com/travellers.html).

Often we overlook our interested youth who genuinely seek to learn, and neglect them by focusing on confused youth. Buddhism is moving to the west because communication through spiritual teaching is happening between teacher and student there. This is not happening in our society because both teachers and students continue to stick to the old tradition of students listening quietly, without asking questions about applications to contemporary life. A shift in attitudes should take place among both teachers and students, so that it becomes appropriate to ask questions, and contradict. Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students (Freire, 2000, p. 73).

Even during the Buddha's time, Buddha and one of his disciples, Rabjor, had wonderful conversations, exchanging questions and answers, clarifying many doubts and curiosities of Rabjor. The whole Buddhist text Prajnaparamita Sutra (rdorje jcod-pa and Shrub Nyingpo) records the dialogues of Buddha and his disciple Rabjor. We must encourage dialogue between teachers and students, because that is the only way to transform any knowledge. Our traditional way of teaching and learning is what Freire would call the banking concept of education, where teachers deposit the knowledge to students as a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing (Freire, 2000, p. 72). Our school systems in the past have adopted these traditions. Of course, some schools in the urban areas are already taking steps so there is trust built between teacher and student, younger and older generations, rather than fear which drives them further apart.

If we don't do this, our cultural values will be eroded by the kinds of modernization that are not suitable for our country, that will not help our people, but will harm our younger generation and eventually the nation. The generation gap will grow wider day-by-day. We are talking about the well-being of each citizen, which eventually will grow into national well-being and increased GNH. In order for this to happen, we must do a good job in educating the youth so they too will become deeply committed to increasing GNH.

What Are The Solutions?

It might be easy to articulate literacy for all but difficult to put into practice. There is no quick fix to any social problem if we wait until the last minute. As I have suggested, the schools and institutions are the best places to begin. We are already taking a proactive approach by increasing the number of schools and by improving the teacher training programs by offering M. Ed programs both outside and within the country. We have started Non-formal education (BLC) programs for the illiterate population and vocational training programs teaching sewing, carpentry, farming, and much else. However, we have to make sure that vocational training does not create more inequality. Vocational programs must not be only for people who cannot send their children to higher education. We do not want privileged Bhutanese to look down on manual labor. As Gandhi stated, all book learning should include manual labor. An agricultural specialist should be able to work in the field with the soil, as well as read books about how to plant crops. All work must be respected. We should value every kind of labor, without dividing it by gender or social group. As a Buddhist nation, people should especially value and understand equality.

We must gear every literacy program to deeper understanding to produce truly educated people so that our small nation remains peaceful and strong with everlasting richness in our tradition and cultural values.

Language

Students, all Bhutanese citizens, must be able to read and write their native language so they have access to their own culture in a first hand, original way. We must work to make it easy to become literate in Dzongkha, and we must prevent English from replacing Dzongkha in every day life. There are numerous dangers, including social conflicts, which could result from an overvaluation of English. Literacy in Dzongkha alone should suffice for a person to work well in his own businesses or fill out government forms. For example, small construction workers and contractors, who are only literate in basic Dzongkha, are not able to use their knowledge because forms are available mostly in English. We should encourage the use of one's own language skills, at least for people who already have those skills. This is one area where we could work on translating the necessary official forms that are used daily by the ordinary people without having them go through the hassle of running after someone who can translate or fill out the forms for them.

Instead of going to the extreme of disqualifying school children if they fail in one subject (Dzongkha), we could generate, through attractive and subtle ways, the promotion of language by having simple story books made available in English and Dzongkha.

Gross National Happiness, Education, And Development, are the three main components of our national task at this moment. All three must be well balanced. Without quality education for all, the country may not be able to move forward towards full participation in economic development; without the spiritual well-being of the people, economic development alone may only bring many problems.

What I Propose

Incorporate moral values within the curriculum and pedagogy of every school in both formal and non-formal school systems.

Organize in every school at least twice a year, spiritual values workshops, inviting local spiritual teachers. Let there be dialogue between spiritual teachers and young students.

Incorporate moral values within the teacher training curriculum and pedagogy.

Encourage the use of local material and human resources. For example, we have experts and scholars who are capable of consulting about many areas of work, such as spirituality, agriculture, health, environment, and so on. Let us use our own experts, as well as those from abroad.

Promote entrepreneurship in the remote villages. This will provide economic opportunity for newly literate people produced through Basic Literacy Centers. Encourage villagers to be better farmers, carpenters and blacksmiths, weavers and whatever they are already good at or used to. Thus they will know how to look for better designs and follow the instructions to improve their field of work. We have to pass the message that education is not to give up our roots but to understand how to maintain values and preserve our roots.

Every educated person should try to look back from where they have come and try to give back something to their community.

Remind our younger generations who come from all types of family background that every person and every occupation is worthy of respect. Therefore, teachers and parents have the huge responsibility of educating our children not just in bookish knowledge, but also deeply humane knowledge. If this is in place, I think we need not have to worry about the achievement of Gross National Happiness. There is no other better way than this, to serve the nation.

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