

The direction of Bhutan's education

As the week long conference on education and GNH is nearing its end, a private citizen like myself waits to hear what kind of future is being planned for our education system. Education undoubtedly is the central pillar of happiness and democracy and it is a matter of immense delight that this convention is taking place and education is given its rightful place in the GNH paradigm. However, as a strong believer in the right kind of education for societal eudaemonia and as a conscious citizen, I cannot also help feeling excited and apprehensive about the future that is being designed for Bhutan's education, for even simple ideas conceived today can have far reaching implications for many generations to come.

I am not here questioning the collective wisdom of the national and international experts who are engaged in intensive discussions. In fact, I share with many of the participants the same concern about the staling school system today and the desire for a dynamic and holistic educational programme for our country. The crucial question then is what kind of programme is right for Bhutan? What kind of ideas and cultural ethos should inform the GNH curricula that this conference is bent to build?

For one, we may have to do away with the assumption that a sound education must be essentially sought from outside, particularly from the West. Many of our educational projects started with this wrong premise. We must abandon our inclination for Westernisation, which some of us may be promoting wittingly or unwittingly. The dual tendencies of Westernization and Orientalism represent the two extremes which Bhutan's development programmes in general and educational initiatives in particular may have to avoid if we are to tread the Middle Way and stop spiralling down the current course of change.

Despite the fourth King's judicious warning that Westernisation should not be mistaken for modernisation, our formal education system so far has been almost entirely Western in content and method. One cannot deny the many benefits brought by this Western system but it has also left an indelible scar on Bhutan's cultural and linguistic landscape. The fact that I am writing this in English to capture a wider audience is a proof of the dominance of English over Bhutanese ones. The cultural wound runs even deeper. Bhutanese worldview, outlooks and perceptions of themselves, their life, relations, society and nature are being increasingly informed by a largely Western cultural ethos in which our school text books and reading materials are embedded. The rise of individualism and materialism are also two by-products of such exogenous educational programme, which is inept or at least not properly modified for local needs and sensibilities.

These problems arise primarily due to a serious disparity between the underlying philosophical traditions of the two cultures. The Western culture is mainly an extrovert, anthropocentric, individualistic and materialistic one. Even in deeply spiritual pursuits, the focus is on a God or divinity out there. In contrast, the Bhutanese Buddhist culture focuses on the mind inside, is based on an utter abnegation of the self and of the essence in materiality. Given this gap, it is not surprising that the educational programme, which was designed for the West, does not work well for Bhutan.

We must by now realize that educational policies and practices are *emic* values and not cross-cultural *etic* categories, which can be transferred easily. Our educational policies must be primarily based on a deep understanding of our own worldview, values, needs and cultural sensitivities. We must be vigilant while importing alien ideas, as some of them may turn out to be useless or harmful in the long run. While being fully receptive to wholesome ideas from outside, it is about time that we determine our own education system. How long can we seek guidance from a culture that is drastically different from ours? Do we really need to turn to North America to improve the educational programme we initially received from the British via India? The conference, I hope, is at least an attempt by the Bhutanese to craft our own system that draws from and feeds into our own cultural wealth. Our own Buddhist tradition is an excellent educational and edification programme rich in educational principles, theories, practices, methods and techniques. These values need to be seriously studied and reformulated in contemporary pedagogic idiom and structures and incorporated into our formal education system. A few Buddhist terms strewn around as mere tokens are not sufficient.

As much as we may value and believe in our own heritage, we should also not be fooled by the Orientalist picture of Bhutan as a land of happiness. There are many serious challenges we have to face than this romantic portrayal would permit. Even today, at least 10 out of every 100 children do not go to school or monastery and some of those who do walk for hours to school each day. Our situation asks for a serious reappraisal of our current system and sustained and thoughtful endeavour to change it for the better. I hope this conference will provide us with just that and is not another project to reinforce Western import in the guise of GNH values, or a passing hype of the GNH in vogue.