

Bhutan Kuen-Nyam Party

Education – Transcending Your Own Domains

The primary benefit of education, amongst a myriad of things, must be freedom. Freedom from poverty, freedom from ignorance, freedom from not having less, freedom from drudgery, emotional and psychological freedom, Freedom from the imagined order (social, economic and political constructs), and political and ideological freedom. Further, education, if equipped with the right pedagogy, should unarguably result to socio-economic, intellectual, and political prosperity inviting true happiness for all Bhutanese and not just a few.¹ Taking the context of socio-economic development, one could say Bhutan is a transformed nation, but only in comparison to a timeline of 100 years traceable to our foraging forefathers. Within this context, education has indeed lifted us out of impoverishment, from the ages of walking for days to Tibet, to the era of YouTube, smart phones, Netflix, K-pop and Google. Education has also helped produce our own doctors, engineers, pilots, managers, entrepreneurs and political leaders.

That said, education has also left us trailing with poor civic sense, indifference towards public goods, caring little for the future, while dwelling in pride for having circumvented the system on numerous accounts. To cite simple examples, we may have immaculate homes but think nothing of littering or spitting *doma* juice in public space and smearing walls, polluting the river, dumping garbage in the open and urinating and defecating where convenient. Again, our educated society (public and private) increasingly reflects the qualities required to acquire power rather than the skills to exert it for the common good. Education has also made us materially rich but poor on values of community vitality, family time, brotherhood and sisterhood, and lesser regard for the environment as long as bounties are harvested, excavating mountains of its minerals and valuable natural resources as if there are “no tomorrow.”²

¹Although happiness can be argued from many perspectives of both objective and subjective well-being while using the former to measure the latter, this is what studies around the world (Bhutan included) claim to measure with questionnaire ratings by respondents. While some view happiness as accumulation of wealth, fortune and social status, others think happiness can be stimulated by injecting chemicals to the body allowing the neurons to do its job.

²The legendary John Lennon wrote, “Imagine All the People, Sharing All the World, I Hope Some Day, You’ll Join us as One.”

It strikes me to ask, how can one reign supreme while risking becoming ecological serial assassins and yet claim the conservation of the environment as one of the pillars of Gross National Happiness? This continued, man made natural calamities will become inevitable at the rate urban centres are growing with little preparedness or planning on the “what ifs”. The copy paste urban growth centers have left residents lamenting for scarcities even in lifeline services like drinking water, cooking gas, sewerage, garbage disposal, and parking space.

To continue, has education led us to view the world as faltered in our actions, behaviour, and consumption patterns, wanting more each day with little in our backyard? For instance, national debt³ rises each year, unemployment has become a plague and many are resigned to the fact that nothing can be done while governance continue as usual, and red tape gets longer by the mile. This should not continue to happen if adults assimilate deeper values of a concerned citizen and set examples by leading our youth and school children to become more responsible in making Bhutan self-reliant through actions of sorts and cease the long standing intellectual acrobatics churning mundanely-convincing national reports, heavily window-dressed satisfying the world order of conformity.

Just like elsewhere, today’s education in Bhutan has given us individual rights, robotic schedules and alienation in the name of concepts like privacy and personal space. This space commands maximum self-rule where even parents are prevented to enter without requesting permission while appointments have to be made to meet relatives and friends. Is this the type of education that can bring happiness? Coincidentally, while we attempt to measure GNH with everyone an expert in the field, happiness has been pursued for millennia by our forefathers. As said by Harari in his Sapiens, “...community spirit with chieftains looking after the entire village shared greater contentment as compared with present 21st century affluent societies suffering immensely from alienation and meaninglessness despite their prosperity.” Shouldn’t a GNH country largely dominated by the Buddhist faith encourage meaningful consumption of austerity and not contradict by embracing consumerism in excess, telling the untruth (especially during political campaigns), breeding a culture of pretense in national sync and walking away from responsibilities when it concerns larger public interest. Sadly, this is what education has made us all.

³External debt to GDP ratio has increased from 30 percent in 1990 to 113 percent in 2017, World Bank report, Bhutan

The challenge of education in the Bhutanese context like in any other developing country is that our children are simply not learning enough even when they are in school. Or is it, as noted by His Eminence Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche in his article titled, Education - Bhutan's Most Important Choice, Bhutan Observer, February 21, 2018, due to "... a curriculum that is long outdated British one, regurgitated and shoved down the throats by ex-colonial India." Or is it "...archaic even by modern British standards where students no longer just passively copy, paste and memorise as they do in Bhutan with no encouragement to question or think critically." To note, the ability to churn value-based ideas that compel us to think, re-think, re-evaluate, re-learn and criticise for positive contributions has seen lower scores across the board in our schools, in the bureaucracy, and in other communities. Although some positive signs are noticed in the private sector with people embracing innovation, creativity, taking risk and contributing to wealth creation, the elements of 'me-first' rubbed from the '*hum phailey*' attitude adopted from our neighbours continue to triumph.

To worsen things, there is limited understanding (both with the youth and adults) or refusal to understand the benefits education can bring, such as empowerment of the self, leading to empowering the family, society, culture and eventually the nation. For example, to acquire personal freedom and happiness as the indispensable condition for the quest of human completion, the notion of quality education to be pursued constantly and responsibly is yet to be part of our culture. For instance, the argument on education enlarging opportunities both for the individual and the state continues to be hurdled with limitations in innovation and creativity, instead entrenched in indifference, ignorance, complacency and worst, all obsolete methods and curriculum pursuing only a catch up game. Efforts are continuing since time immemorial but shouldn't we ask what smart methods can be accomplished to avoid the catchup game. Is it policy, resources, or simply an attitude malice? Unpopular thoughts but important to unbundle in sincere acceptance while putting an end to blaming the system. We are the system and it must be ourselves to stop the blame and act.

In the past, His Majesty the Great Fourth has cautioned us on the unmistakable importance in the pursuit of educational reforms with irreparable damage it can cause to a generation if gone wrong. I am uncertain if we have lost one generation but sure on missing the boat for at least two generations with little content mastery, inadequacies on

education quality and teaching methods, infrastructure and technology, teacher motivation and student enthusiasm or even overall shortfalls in the pedagogy itself. Further, as should be understood, one of the primary purposes of education, particularly early in life, is the development of character, ethical behaviour, citizenship and dreams of becoming useful to mankind. It has become urgent in our context to integrate such ideas into educational models at all levels of the school system (primary, secondary and even tertiary). Miracles can be achieved in developing curriculum that combines science, technology, and business programmes with the likes of arts, ethics, music, religion, governance, and literature preparing students who are committed to becoming ethical, mindful, smart working, and skillful leaders. Should such a model be adopted, as an example, we need not dwell with the exploitation of resources to the tune of Nu 55 Million (in the year 2015 -16) by our Cabinet Ministers, Prime Minister, and Chief Justice on hospitality and entertainment expenses.

The role, importance, and accountability of teachers and parents alike cannot be limited to developing good citizens, but beyond, because they are the impetus for sustainable change that bonds the society together, especially in the values of *Le Jumdre Tha Damtshi* in the 21st century. They are the backbone of the education system and, therefore, no amount of anything will matter if the two most important constituents are not improved. No amount of policy, curriculum, and resources can achieve anything without capable, motivated and enthusiastic teachers, and responsible parents. For example, most parents in Bhutan are not even aware of the standard at which their children should be performing but remain satisfied with the outcome the school is providing even as their child's learning objectives fall short.

Having said that, there is no silver bullet and this should not dampen our spirits. Let us attempt to educate the heart and the hand, perhaps concerns like youth unemployment, vandalism, substance abuse, suicide, crime and depression will not be an issue as children will explore the world using other faculties at their disposal. Let us investigate alternatives to achieve empowerment and freedom, skills and cognitive development as being far more important than academic excellence. Taking education beyond classrooms, bringing about meaningful impression on children at home and the society at large. And, most important, education that imparts knowledge on collective responsibility nurturing a fair and just society

for a better tomorrow as all equals just like Kuen-Nyam endeavors. Our education system should reflect in our behaviour, habits, and lifestyle consistent to the values of Gross National Happiness. If this is happening, it's a good sign but if otherwise, then we need to rethink deeper at all levels and question whether we are true Bhutanese citizens worthy of living in the land blessed by Guru Rinpoche.

To end, as Nietzsche said, if you have a “why” to live, you can bear almost any “how”. Most important by looking beyond your own domains.