

Editorial

Educating Bhutan – Nurturing a Society That Learns to Learn

The theme for the Spring, 2019, issue of The Druk Journal reflects the long-term vision provided for Bhutan’s growth by His Majesty the King. On education, His Majesty said:

“...as I serve my country, I have a number of priorities. Number one on my list is education. Education is empowering - it’s a social equaliser and it facilitates self-discovery, which leads to realising ones full potential. Good education gives you confidence, good judgment, virtuous disposition, and the tools to achieve happiness successfully... That’s why I believe in education.”

When 2015 was declared “National Reading Year” in Bhutan, His Majesty advised students:

“Look for knowledge beyond your textbooks... You must look beyond the education you receive in school – a degree alone is not enough. To be a knowledgeable person, the pursuit of knowledge must be life-long.”

This issue of The Druk Journal looks at education beyond the formal education system, beyond qualification – at the broader concept of knowledge and learning. We are looking at education, not just as preparation for jobs or even for life but, perhaps, as the purpose of life itself.

There are many questions to be asked and many are being asked in different sections of our society about the education system and about educating Bhutanese for personal and professional development and growth as well as for the future of the country. There are also many experiments like the central school system, free education up to Class XII, new colleges being announced, Bhutanese going overseas to study/work. These ideas and initiatives are also raising more questions than answers.

This is a critical time to think about the education of Bhutanese society. A new government has taken the helm and appears to be in a “questioning” and “thinking” and “searching” mode. Thus the focus of this issue is

on education. We want to ask Bhutanese society, as a whole, to think honestly and openly and deeply about learning, within and beyond the education system.

Is the current thinking on education too narrow in its concept and the objectives too short term? Are we devoting our attention to just preparing to be competitive economically in the world market? Has this been “incarnated” in the emphasis on Mathematics and English in the education curriculum? That is to say, is the education curriculum derived from a primary premise that the purpose of education is to prepare the students for the market?

Such a premise has validity, but not long-term or profound validity. It is a necessary but not sufficient expression of what education is about. It assumes, in actual fact, that GNP takes primacy over GNH in education although we are yet to understand “GNH education”. GNH has become secondary to Economics and Math, on the one hand and, on the other hand, we have thought of it as sets of courses rather than as a holistic vision from which we can derive courses.

Bhutan needs, not just the skills necessary for individual survival or for attempting to improve our GDP numbers (Math and English, competitive skills). We need to start from the knowledge that is necessary to establish that Bhutanese identity which will prepare the nation for its long-term survival and to impart the knowledge and wisdom that are necessary for the survival of all sentient beings in an era when that is coming into question and this includes, of course, the survival of the nation in an era and a place where environmental change threatens the nation’s existence. This encompasses history, environmental studies defined in a uniquely Bhutanese way, the social and humanistic sciences.

This argument does not, in any way, preclude or diminish the importance of English and Math. But it argues that we need to think of the educational programme holistically, not in terms of courses, but with a vision which will then find its immediate expression in courses. What we are now doing is piling up courses and thinking that somehow there is a national vision to be found from the list. And that is where we have failed because that is not possible.

The content of this issue will, broadly, be in two parts. The first part aims to encourage policy formulation for the future. Here the articles should be more theoretical and visionary. It will be “education for a GNH society” in a real sense, not the adhoc experiments that we have conducted so far. We will argue that Bhutanese education needs to be envisaged not just in terms of immediate economic competition and GNP. It needs to be envisaged in a long-term perspective - what kind of nation do we want to be in 50 years or in 100 years and how do we need to fashion our educational programme today to reach the vision that we have?

We will discuss the need for History, the Social Sciences, Humanities, as a programme constitutive of our national and social future. We will discuss Buddhist education for the 21st century... what the purpose of Buddhist education in Bhutan should be, how should that be accomplished and why. And we will discuss “social education”, ranging from non-formal education to adult education to education outside of the formal school and university system, and how that will contribute to the vision of the future of the nation.

The second part of the issue is a critical analysis of where we are today... “Bhutanese education today”. The articles here will look at the absence of a research culture in Bhutan, tertiary education and the role of RUB, politics and education, skills versus academics, education through media and ICT, a case of world’s best learning traditions (Finland).

We are inviting thinkers and writers to share their ideas... What is the purpose of learning? What should we learn? What are methods of learning? What does Bhutanese society need? Parenting and upbringing. Traditional and conventional schools. Vocational training and institutions. Skills versus academics. Aptitudes and attitudes of young Bhutanese.