

ESSAY:

TOPIC CATEGORY: 2 -

**EDUCATIONAL REFORM AND EMPLOYMENT
OPPORTUNITIES - IN BHUTAN**

SUBMITTED BY:

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Abstract

The net enrolment of 79.4% and gross enrolment of 100% in primary education, excluding enrolment in monastic education and enrolment to schools outside the country reveals that most of the youth are in the schools. Nevertheless, due to high and increasing dropout rate from classes below class X, a large and increasing cohort of students coming out from classes X (not getting admission to higher secondary education due to limited seats in class XI) and another large and expanding group of students coming out from class XII (who are not admitted to tertiary level programmes) comprise the largest mass of job seekers. This cohort forms the most vulnerable populace, whose unemployment problems, which is on the rise is a major concern to the nation. It is this concern that is the subject of my essay.

Background of the country

Bhutan is a landlocked country bordered by the Tibetan Province of China in the North and Indian states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim in the South, East and West respectively. Stretching along the Himalayan range Bhutan has an area of about 38,394 sq. km. It has a population of 672,425 (in 2005). With about 70 percent of the total population living in the rural areas, agriculture is the main source of livelihood with farmers practising subsistence farming. The total per capita GDP as of 2004 was USD 929.6.

Bhutan joined the rest of the world by shedding its isolation policy only in the early 1960s, with the initiation of the Five Year Plan for socio economic development. Since then, the country has witnessed a rapid transition in the living standards of people and overall economic scenario. The literacy rate has risen to 60%. Value of education has been realized by everyone, and thus, the pressure for education at all levels has increased tremendously. Currently, the country has a total of 512 schools at all levels including tertiary level institutions and colleges with about 150,000 students enrolled.

Trends of Educational output

Our people reminisce the time of 1970s when the government was rigorously pursuing the provision of modern education to its people and when the people were not so convinced of the policy. That was the time when the Government had to pick up children from each household to put into schools. Parents weren't so keen in sending their children to school. Some begged and bribed local authorities to excuse their children from schools in order to keep them in the farm. It was then that the country had only about 1000 students. There were no tertiary level programmes offered in the country and the number of degree level graduates was negligible. Nevertheless, in a decade or so, people have realized the importance of modern education and have started seeking the

government's support to construct schools in their villages. This scenario has given a sharp rise in the enrolment rates in schools.

Today, with an annual growth rate in enrolment of 4.2%, there is a need to expand our schools to accommodate 2300 additional students each year. This increase in the enrolment rate leads to a continuous increase in the number of students passing out of class ten, i.e. after about eleven years of schooling. The predicament is that, many students will not be able to get the opportunity to go to class eleven. Currently, with only 21 Higher Secondary Schools in the country, only about 4200 students can be admitted to class XI out of the 6800 students passing out of class ten. The remaining 2500 or so either repeat or resort to look for jobs. Also, from about 4000 students passing out from class twelve, the small and only University in the country can accommodate only up to 1300 students to various programmes including diploma level programmes. About one thousand students pursue higher education outside the country at their own expense. But the remaining two thousand students have to either look for jobs or repeat in the same class. Therefore, for this year alone, about 8000 students who have a minimum of secondary level educational qualification have come out of the education system looking for jobs. If we include 6300 dropouts from the lower classes, then we have about 14,300 youth looking for jobs for this year alone.

Unemployment scenario

As mentioned earlier, there are about 14,300 youth looking for jobs this year. However, given their skills and knowledge, the job assignments that they can work on are basically secretarial jobs or other administrative support jobs. Therefore, government, corporate and private sectors are not able to accommodate more than 20% of them. Such a scenario leads to a very high rate of unemployment.

The following highlights some of the factors causing unemployment in the country:

1. Quality of education

Quality of education in Bhutan has become a buzz word in our society at the moment. The government and people realize that the quality of our graduates from all levels of education do not meet the expectations of our society today. The teaching and learning approaches used do not help them develop basic competencies in the field of critical thinking, creativity, innovation, communication and leadership qualities. Therefore, when jobs in call centres were offered to our students, only about 2-3 percent of the students qualify.

2. Limited diversity in educational provision

Our education system has not been able to produce sufficient students with the technical and scientific knowledge and skills. Many of our students do not do well in science and math which is a prerequisite to many programmes of higher education in the country. For instance, the selection interview of the University programmes for 2007 saw about 4000

applicants against the 1300 slots available. Yet, the diploma level programme like the mechanical engineering, electrical engineering and nursing could not get enough candidates because the number of applicants with science and math background was very less. Most of the students had taken up studies in the areas of arts and commerce that has comparatively less scope for the admission to the programmes in the Royal University of Bhutan as well as for the opportunity in the job market.

3. Mismatch between demand and supply in the job market

Among all people entering the job market, it is seen that most of the skill-based graduates like teachers, engineers, doctors, nurses and other technical based graduates get employed without any problem. This is due to the fact that the country at the moment lacks people in such areas. For instance, in the health services, with existing facilities and infrastructure the country will need approximately about 900 nurses, few hundred doctors and many other technicians in the hospitals. However, annually, the country is able to obtain only about 50 nurses, 10 doctors and about 30 to 40 technicians. The booming construction industry has also given rise to the demand for the skills based labourers.

The overall supplies of skill-based graduates are very less in number, and the job market is being filled up mostly with students bearing qualifications up to class XII, which comprise about 70% of the total job seekers. These job seekers fail to meet the requirements of various employers be it in government, corporate or private sectors.

Thus, on the one hand, we have a number of job seekers loitering and not being able to get a job, while on the other hand, employers do not get enough manpower as per their need, in terms of skills and knowledge.

4. Less opportunity in the Civil service and corporate sectors

One of the main causes of unemployment in our country is due to the choice of the people. The majority of people do not look for jobs in the private sector. They prefer to wait for the opportunity to get into public service and corporate sectors. Currently the civil service comprises of about 15,000 employees. But with the government's mission of maintaining a small, compact and efficient civil service, the possibility of expansion of the civil service can hardly be envisaged. Further in the corporate sectors, much of the demand is on a skill based workforce, which most of the current job seekers lack. Therefore, majority of job seekers will not be able to make it to the civil service and corporate sectors. Albeit, quite a number of people could afford to remain idle and wait for opportunities in such sectors, the low and never increasing demand for employment in these sectors leads to the ever rising unemployment scenario.

5. Reluctance to join private sector

The government has started to rely heavily on the private sector as the driver of the socio-economic engine of the country. However, the private sector is currently not in a position to respond to the expectations of the government since it is in the nascent stage of

development. The private sector is not in a position to provide opportunities and incentives to employees as offered to the civil servants and corporate employees. Therefore, the employees and people generally view the private sector as an indiscrete pond in which employees would never have opportunities to develop, both in terms of career and academic enhancement. The other reason is the position and job security of employees, which lie at the whims and fancies of the proprietor and managers. They feel that the private employers can hire and fire their employees at any time. Thus, people are reluctant to join the private sector. Beside, even the attrition rate in the private sector is seen to be very high as compared to the government and corporate sectors. This is due to the fact that, though the private sector employers promise their employees attractive pay packages, they do not pay their employees as promised and also in time since the employers' income depend on the work they get and also on the bills they are able to clear for the work done.

6. Attitude towards blue collar jobs.

Generally students at all levels look for white collar jobs. Youth in Bhutan are of the view that blue collar jobs are meant for those who are not educated or for those who are illiterate. Taking up a blue collar job would set an image of backwardness both socially and economically. They feel that they deserve much higher opportunities since they have acquired some educational qualification. Though the unemployment scenario among youth presents a grave situation, reluctance of youths to join take up manual work has forced the country to take in expatriates. In 2006, There were 37,063 foreign workers with work permits and about 80,000 employed as day workers in the border towns. (*Kuensel May 19, 2006*).

Furthermore, in pursuit of developing skills populace, various vocational institutions were created by the Royal Government. However, job seekers still refuse to take up training opportunities in the vocational training institutions. This scenario retards the government's effort of developing a good skilled workforce in the country.

7. Lack of entrepreneurship among the youth

The Private sector is still in its developmental stage. Our government continues to encourage the development of diverse private business firms. A new scheme has been initiated under the Small Business Resource Center (SBRC) guaranteed by the Royal Government and the Banks in the ratio of 60:40. the aim of the SBRC id to encourage and create self-employment opportunities, particularly among those who have acquired skills through the vocational programmes of the government and who have no assets to offer as collateral and also to promote lending to small and micro enterprises. However, due to lack of idea and enterprising nature among our youth, the response has not been so good. Many job seekers at the moment do not posses the capability to set up their own business firms, rather they choose to work for other firms and live on their salary.

Challenges

Bhutan has seen an unprecedented growth in the unemployment rate especially among the youth, which has in fact surpassed the rate of the population growth. The current trend of youth coming out of education system shows that within the next five years from now the country will witness about 70,000 youth looking for jobs. The paragraph below expounds the grave scenario of youth unemployment and challenges that lie ahead for the education system in our country.

“The recent growth of the construction industry and the revival of tourism in Bhutan have increased its GDP by 8.7%. But data is ‘infected’ by the virus of rising unemployment, especially among youth, who drop out of school between the ages of 15 and 19. Such a bleak scenario is due to the fact that the construction industry invests mostly in engaging skilled laborers... ‘There is a great dearth of skilled labourers in Bhutan and we meet their requirement from India and Nepal’ ... The Bhutanese education system was incapable of creating a skilled workforce and the government needed to introduce education reforms, otherwise we will depend on foreign nations not only for funds but also for qualified personnel... this situation, together with the increasing foreign debt, could create serious social tension”. (www.Asianet.it)

The country at its developmental stage is constrained with challenges in almost every field. At the national level the Government needs to encourage and enhance privatization for which particular attention needs to be provided in the development of, and building up of infrastructure and in increasing access to finance. It would also involve establishing a number of training institutions. This includes new Job Training Centres to build capacity of youth to make them the key workforce for the country- so that our youth acquire right skills for the right jobs.

Bhutan being a developing country relies heavily on external grants and loan. Since the majority of Bhutanese are farmers depending on subsistence farming, the country is challenged with the constraint of resources. There is much to be done to bring reform in the education system to address unemployment problems. However, the lack of resources provides a major setback.

Recommendations

1. Educational system reform

The seminal document of our country, Bhutan 2020 a vision for peace, prosperity and happiness states “Education must prepare young people for the world of work and instill an acceptance on the dignity of labour”.

It is clear that the opportunities to get work increases with the increased quality of education. There is indeed, a call for increased student achievement through providing enhanced and rigorous learning opportunities for students to meet the demands of the job market. It has become critical, unlike a decade or two ago when our society demanded

just reading and writing skills. Now demands are being posed on the students to acquire skills like creativity, innovativeness, group dynamism and enterprising capabilities, that will help them fit in the knowledge based society.

There is also a dire need to change students' attitudes towards manual and skills based work. It is critical for students to realize that the skills based education is more valuable while seeking jobs. Presently, students fail to appreciate technical and vocational skills as the education system does not have room to develop such skills in students. Therefore, some kind of technical and vocational education must be experienced by students in the schools. This implies that steps must be taken to inculcate elements of applied and practical based education to the students during their early days.

Ironically, people in the village are beginning to experience the shortage of manpower to work in the agricultural field. While in the towns many young jobless people are loitering around. It is therefore, important that education should impart a sense of pride and dignity to the students to work in the farm. Greater efforts will need to be made to bring reforms in the field of agricultural work, where farmer could work in a more advanced manner employing higher scientific methods and sophisticated technological aid. This approach will bring in sense of pride, joy and motivation among the young farmer. Under such circumstances, agriculture will regain its importance among the youth for which, they will aspire to work. Agriculture could then become a continuous source of employment for the youth.

To make our youth a strong workforce equipped with required skills and knowledge to succeed in the job market and address the shortage of manpower, I would like to suggest reforms in education in the following ways:

- There is a need to identify areas of training in various fields that employers will demand of them and provide appropriate counseling to students in the schools. This can be done by providing information to students, other young people and parents, through which students will be helped to discover various career opportunities and develop skills required to move ahead;
- It would also mean incorporating some activities as part of wholesome education. Such experiences would provide them the chance and flexibility in their mindset to comprehend their own potential for pursuing advanced training/lessons at a later time;
- Improved infrastructure and facilities in the schools with the provision of IT facilities to the students to enhance learning activities. Facilities and technologies must also be developed that are required to provide learning experiences for improving communication skills, creativity, innovation and leadership qualities;
- Sufficient opportunities must be provided to facilitate lifelong learning for in-service personnel to help them define their career path in their professional and academic arena.

Curriculum reform

“Problems are compounded by schools curricula and perceptions of job prospects. Despite the enormous efforts made to ‘Bhutanize’ imported curricula, much still needs to be done to adapt teaching programmes to the longer-term needs of the nation, especially through the strengthening of components that inculcate a work ethic and respect for the dignity of labour. More of our young people must be encouraged to pursue technical and vocational occupations that can only be found in the private sector ... These negative perceptions find concrete expression in the under-utilization of capacity in technical and vocational training institutions that the nation can ill-afford. They also constitute a major obstacle to the growth of the private sector”. (Bhutan 2020, A Vision for Peace, Prosperity and Happiness, Bhutan).

To produce talented students, there is a need to include elements of reform in the curriculum to make students survive in the competitive world. This process can be improved in our country by bringing reforms in curriculum with the incorporation of following two main elements:

- Enhanced teaching-learning style of our students to adapt them to change. For that there is a need to bring forth a paradigm shift where student centered approach has to be adopted to make students capable of taking responsibility for their own learning, for which support through the provision of state-of-the-art facilities is required in all schools;
- Basically focus on those areas of studies where the market poses demand. In our context, more emphasis must be made in the areas of science, math, and technical level programmes;
- The curricula should facilitate the education institution to build relationships with the industries to attach students and help them acquire skills. Such a system is absent currently, and therefore, the students do not get the opportunity to test their potential and develop interest in skills and technical based education.

2. Diversification of educational institutions

Currently in our country the choices of programmes and technical institutions is very less. Looking at the current trend, of 150,000 students only about one thousand students are in the vocational institutions (basically in the field of driver, mechanical, electrical and some construction work). There is a huge demand in the areas of programmes like graphic design, movie editing, hardware (electronics) technician, and camera personnel, film making and desk stop publishing works. Similarly lots of opportunities can be explored to bring in diverse and varied learning opportunities for students, which will later help them find jobs much easily. With tourism being the second largest industry, programmes that fall under tourism and hospitality management can be one niche area. Programmes reflected should not necessarily be advanced degree level programmes, they could focus on skills and be technical based at certificate and diploma levels, both at the vocational training institutes and university in the country.

The Ministry of Labour and Human Resources and the University must explore all possible areas of programmes to offer with analysis for the present as well as the demand in the future. They must then initiate the development of curricula so as to offer such programmes in a varied manner. The programmes offered must not only be focused on the demand side, it should also be focused on the supply-driven side, so that when employers realize the availability of such human resources, they will begin to employ.

It is therefore, very vital if the government rigorously strategizes on the diversification of educational provision in the country, so that firstly the demand for varying range of skills and technical manpower is met, and more importantly the unemployment problems in the country especially for our youth is addressed.

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