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### A STUDY ON THE TYPE OF SCHOOL DURING THE DAWN OF MODERN EDUCATION IN BHUTAN

#### Introduction

This study aims to clarify the state of school education in the Bhutan during the 1940-50s, a period of dawn of the modern education in Bhutan, by classifying schools and identifying their contrasting characteristics.

The origins of modern education in Bhutan can be traced back approximately 100 years. Bhutan's modern period began in 1907 when Ugyen Wangchuck (reign: 1907-1926) became the first hereditary King and uniting the country. Then, 1914 saw the inception of modern education when 46 boys travelled overseas to study at mission school in Kalimpong, India (Tandin Wangmo & Kinga Choden,<sup>1</sup> 2011, p. 445). In the same year, Ugyen Dorji established Bhutan's first modern school in Haa District where teachers from the Church of Scotland Mission taught alongside a Bhutanese teacher by the name of Karp (*Ibid*). Then in the following year, another school was established in Bumthang District for educating the Crown Prince and children of the people serving in the King's court. Reportedly, by 1919-1920, 28 students were attending the school in Haa and 21 students were attending the school in Bumthang (*Ibid*). The two schools described above can be regarded as elite education institutions for the select few rather than regular schools for the general public.

Although many years passed before any further schools were established in Bhutan, several schools were constructed toward the end of the reign of the Second King, Jigme Wangchuck (reign: 1926-1952) (C. T. Dorji, 1995, p. 50). According to the Jesuit priest William Joseph Mackey, the language of instruction at these schools was Hindi and a total of between 7 and 10 primary schools were established throughout Bhutan (Mackey, 2002, p. 6). Although schools opened throughout the country during the reign of the third King, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck (reign: 1952-1972), to my knowledge, no research to date has closely examined the state of school education in the period addressed in this study. Then, an education system was established under the First Five Year Plan from 1961 as the government began to plan the expansion of school education in Bhutan. Subsequent educational developments materialised as a result of successive educational policy submissions and introductions under the Five Year Plans.

So what kind of schools existed in Bhutan during the 1940-50s prior to the introduction of the First Five Year Plan as schools for the general public began to emerge? Arguably, the answer to this question is crucial for understanding Bhutan's educational policy since the 1960s as well as its socio-economic development. This study focuses on classifying schools established in the 1940-50s into 'schools for Nepali immigrants' and 'schools for Bhutanese' and clarifying the characteristics of

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's: Due to the fact that there is no sharp distinction between first name and surname in Bhutanese names, they are given in their full form in both citations and references.

the state of each kind of schools at the time of its establishment and its language of instruction.

### **Schools for Nepali immigrants**

Following the establishment of schools in Haa and Bumthang, the next districts to show signs of modern education were located in Bhutan's Southern area. In 1947, Nar Bahadur Pradhan, a prominent figure in Chargharey, Samtse District, opened up one room of his house as a classroom and, as requested by local residents, invited a teacher from India by the name of C. M. Rai to teach there (CERD, 2007, pp. 357-358). Furthermore, in 1951, a school was constructed by local residents in Nainital, Samtse District. 'Thrimpon' (chief district court official) B. K. Thapa was selected as the school's teacher in response to the requests of local residents. When it opened, the school had 12 students and the teacher was paid 24 Indian rupees per month (*Ibid*, p. 363). Schools were also constructed by residents in various villages in Samtse District in 1954, 1955 and 1958. The first head teacher of the school constructed in 1955 was an Indian man from Kalimpong by the name of Tsho Tshering Lepcha. The primary language of instruction at the school was Nepali and time was also devoted to the study of Hindi (*Ibid*, p. 342). The school constructed in Chengmari in 1958, which had 25 students and one teacher, later underwent government-funded improvements, and the school opened its doors in 1964 to 300 students as Chengmari Primary School (*Ibid*, p. 351). Furthermore, in 1955, a school was constructed in Tsirang District at which students received instruction under a Nepali teacher by the name of Barma Chari (*Ibid*, p. 609).

By 1948 at the latest, a thatched-hut school had been built in Sarpang District and there is a record which shows that a single one hour evening lesson was conducted at the school in Nepali by an Indian teacher (*Ibid*, pp. 374-375). Furthermore, records show that a school which later became Jigmeling Lower Secondary School was also operating in Sarpang District in 1957. The school was located within the grounds of a Hindu temple and the manager and owner of the temple, M. B. Pradhan, and his son managed the school and taught students by collecting an annual fee of ten Indian rupees per student (*Ibid*, p. 368). In 1961, the school was converted into a public school by the Bhutanese government. Furthermore, J. B. Pradhan established Neoli Primary School in Samdrup Jongkhar District in 1957. For many years, the school employed Indian teachers and it was not until 1984 that the first Bhutanese teacher began working there (*Ibid*, p. 311).

In 1957, a school opened in Dala, Chhukha District under the command of its first head teacher, Laxmi Prasad Sharma. The school was established in response to requests from the 'Gup' / 'Mandal' (block leader) of Tala, Karma Bahadur Chhetri, and the residents of the village (*Ibid*, p. 45). In 1960, a school opened its doors to 27 students in Sinchula, Chhukha District, under the initiative of Gup Jang Bir Raj (*Ibid*, p. 69).

Two similarities can be found between the schools described above. First, the schools were privately established, primarily in response to the strong demands of local residents. Schools were constructed by residents and a significant number of schools selected teachers according to their requests. Furthermore, to the best of my knowledge, the majority of these schools were small-scale institutions at which dozens of students were taught by one teacher. Second, the language of instruction

and the teacher's nationality were diverse. Some schools adopted Hindi as the language of instruction while some instructed students in Nepali. Moreover, recruitment extended beyond national borders as teachers from India and Nepal were invited to teach at the schools.

So why were many private schools which instructed students in Nepali and Hindi established in Bhutan's southern districts during this period? The relationship between Nepali immigrants and education can shed light on this question.

The Southern districts mentioned above are still home to a significant number of 'Lhotshampa', a term used to refer to the ethnic Nepali Bhutanese. Nepali began to immigrate to southern Bhutan in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At that time, British India imported labour, especially from eastern Nepal, to work on Darjeeling and Assam tea plantations; however, some of these workers crossed the ill-defined India-Bhutan border, eventually settling in the 'no man's land' of southern Bhutan. According to the Bhutanese government, at the beginning of the 1950s, Nepali immigration was confined to Samtse and Tsirang districts; however, in the 1950s, immigrant communities began to disperse throughout a wider area, settling in districts such as Sarpang and Samdrup Jongkhar (MoHA, 1993, p. 3).

The fact that the period in which Nepali immigrants began to settle throughout a wider area approximately coincides with the inception of school education suggests that immigrants began providing school education in areas in which they settled, following examples in their home country. On the basis of the objective fact that, at that time, Nepali communities living in villages in the south of Bhutan governed themselves with little Bhutanese involvement, it is reasonable to assume that the schools described above were not schools for Bhutanese but schools for Nepali immigrants.

These private schools were successively enhanced and transformed into public schools by the government. The first schools were transferred to the government in the early 1960s and now all schools have become public schools.

### **Schools for Bhutanese**

In the 1950s, schools operated by Bhutanese for Bhutanese began to emerge throughout the country. All of these schools were established as public schools. In the Eastern area, a school opened in Trashigang District in 1952. According to records, the school was established under the initiative of 'Dzongpon' (district officer) Sey Dophu and Karchung with the permission of the second King (CERD, 2007, pp. 454-455, p. 458). At the time of its establishment, there were 32 students including two girls (*Ibid*, p. 455, 458). The language of instruction was Hindi and teachers by the names of Kharpha and Karma taught at the school. In 1964, Father Mackay was appointed as the head teacher of the school, which became Bhutan's first high school under the name Trashigang Central School (*Ibid*, p. 455).

In 1958, Dzongpon Tashi constructed Yurung Junior Secondary School in Pemagatshel District by order of the third King and the school opened in April of the following year with 138 students and three teachers. The languages of instruction during the school's first five years were Hindi and Chokey (classical Tibetan); however, like many other schools, the school began to instruct students in English from 1964 (*Ibid*, p. 254).

In 1959, another school was also established by Tashi, this time in Mongar District. The school grew in scale from 200 students and five teachers at the time of its establishment to 300 students and ten teachers by 1963. Although the school had only four year groups when it opened, the number of year groups was increased to ten after Father Mackay became head teacher in 1965 (*Ibid*, p. 149). According to Jigme Zangpo, one of the first students who entered the school in 1959, the school originally instructed students in Hindi before switching over to English in 1961 (Jigme Zangpo, 2002, p. 11). Students studied general subjects, Dzongkha (national language of Bhutan) and Chokey and all 200 students gathered in the lecture hall to study as a single class (*Ibid*, p. 10).

In the Central area, in 1958, a primary school with over 100 students was established in Zhemgang District (CERD, 2007, pp. 663-664). Furthermore, a school called Tongsa Junior Secondary School opened in 1959. The school instructed students in Hindi before adopting English in 1964 and courses offered were Hindi, English and Mathematics. Some female students also attended the school (*Ibid*, pp. 574-575).

In the Western area, Punakha School was constructed in the early 1950s. The languages of instruction were Hindi and Dzongkha and lessons centred on the study of the language of prayers (*Ibid*, p. 285). In 1955, Druk Gyalpo Jigme Dorji Wangchuck Higher Secondary School opened in Wangdue Phodrang District. The language of instruction was Hindi and there were 46 students when the school was established (*Ibid*, p. 623).

In Haa District, Jigme Palden Dorji, who was appointed Chief Minister in 1952 and became the first Prime Minister of Bhutan later, transformed the long-established Haa School into a modern mixed-sex institution which provided primary education under a five or six-year system (Stewart et al., 2008, p. 3). The first batch of approximately 50 students enrolled in the school in 1951. These graduates are recognized as the first students to complete primary education at a school that is open to the public in Bhutan (*Ibid*). Furthermore, the school was designated as a model school for the switch over to English instruction by the third King (CERD, 2007, p. 113) and records show that, from the 1950s, English was used as a language of instruction alongside Hindi. According to Gagay Lhamu, a student at the school, there were three teachers including the head teacher, lessons were conducted between 9:00 am and 3:30 pm every day and time was devoted to activities such as archery, dance, and athletics in addition to general subjects (Gagay Lhamu, 2002, p. 23).

In addition, from the 1950s, public schools also began to spring up in southern Bhutan where Nepali immigrants had begun to construct private schools. In 1954, Jigme Palden Dorji Secondary School was established in Tsirang District and began conducting lessons under the direction of its first head teacher, Lingden Lepcha (CERD, 2007, p. 596). Records suggest that the modern education system with English as the language of instruction was introduced at the school in 1964 (*Ibid*). Furthermore, in 1957, a school with 109 students was established in Samtse District by order of the third King (*Ibid*, p. 340).

Two major similarities between the schools described above can be found: First, schools were established under the initiative of local government officials. As far as can be ascertained, unlike schools for Nepali immigrants, none of the schools

described above were established in response to the strong wishes of local residents. Moreover, most of the public schools were comparatively large with more than 100 students in attendance when they opened. If schools for Nepali immigrants embody 'modern education which grew from the bottom up', then schools for Bhutanese can be said to represent 'modern education which spread from the top down'.

Second, with the exception of the school in Mongar District, schools generally adopted Hindi as the language of instruction until 1964. However, in addition to Hindi, some schools instructed students in Dzongkha, Choekey and English. Although it is difficult to grasp the educational content adopted by the schools at that time in detail, it is reasonable to assume that there were no common curricula and no detailed regulations except for those regarding use of Hindi as the language of instruction.

It is difficult to identify a clear reason why schools adopted Hindi as their language of instruction; however, it is possible to speculate several negative reasons for this. First, Hindi was necessary for students to continue their education. Although some of schools described above were called 'lower secondary' or 'secondary' schools, these schools generally only provided primary education throughout the 1950s and outstanding students were sent to Kalimpong to continue their studies (Singh, 1985, p. 186). Since there were no modern secondary or higher education institutions in Bhutan at that time, knowledge of Hindi was essential in order for students to continue their studies. Therefore, schools may have sought to familiarise students with Hindi by adopting it as the language of instruction from the primary school level.

Second, adopting other languages as the language of instruction was problematic. Bhutan is a multilingual country with a dispersion of many different languages. No one language holds the absolute majority and native speakers of Dzongkha account for only 30% of the population. Although, Dzongkha had a writing system—unlike the numerous other languages scattered throughout Bhutan—arguably, it lacked the vocabulary needed for teaching general subjects under a system of modern education, thus ruling it out as a language of instruction. Moreover, additional factors, such as the fact that teachers were well versed in Hindi owing to their experiences studying abroad and the fact that Indian textbooks written in Hindi were also in use at the time inevitably led to the adoption of Hindi as the language of instruction.

## **Conclusion**

This study has analysed schools which were established in Bhutan in the 1940-50s. These schools can be summarized as follows on the basis of circumstances surrounding their establishment and language of instruction:

In terms of circumstances that led to their establishment, the results of the analysis reveal that the small-scale private schools for Nepali immigrants which emerged in Bhutan's Southern area from the late 1940s in response to the requests of local residents embody the 'bottom up growth of modern education'. Conversely, the comparatively large public schools which were established throughout Bhutan from the 1950s by local government officials under the instructions of the King can be said to represent the 'top down spread of modern education'.

In terms of the language of instruction, schools for Nepali immigrants adopted Hindi and Nepali and the majority of teachers were invited from India and Nepal to teach at the schools. On the other hand, schools for Bhutanese generally adopted Hindi as the language of instruction, but employed Bhutanese teachers with experience studying abroad rather than inviting teachers from other countries.

In this way, schools for Nepali immigrants and schools for Bhutanese have contrasting characteristics and it can be argued that such differences define the dawn of the modern education in Bhutan. Before the full-scale expansion of modern education began with the introduction of the First Five Year Plan in 1961, the foundations of school education in Bhutan had already been established to the extent described in this paper. In the 1960s, a unified school education system and curriculum were established and English was adopted as the language of instruction; however, the study shows that such changes were not achieved overnight but developed from the foundations of general school education established from the late 1940s.

### First Appearance

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