The Bangladesh Observer

তারিখ ... 15 AUG 1994
পৃষ্ঠা ৫ কলাম ৬

10

New Learning Approach Draws Kids To School

Patricia Roberts

THIMPHU — "There are too many students and not enough teachers," laments the headmistress of Changgangkha Primary School as she surveys the crowded room.

Some 48 children, average age six years old, are busily and happily drawing pictures on Child-sized tables in a classroom in this capital city of the Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan.

But it would be difficult not to hear the undertone of pride in the headmistress voice. Not so many years ago, primary schools were not very popular in Bhutan. Though the government provided free education, most people didn't see why they should send their children. After all, the classes were taught entirely in English, a language very few young children understood. Nor did the textbooks, published in India, seem relevant to life in Bhutan.

How to make public education relevant was indeed, a challenge to educators since the introduction of Bhutan's first primary school system in the early 1960s. Most residents of this sparsely populated country are illiterate subsistence farmers who speak DZONGKHA. The indigenous literature and history is written in the CHHOKI script, a Tibetan-based script derived from Sanskrit and unfamiliar even to scholars.

The Changgangkha Primary School is part of Bhutan's new education programme which aims to provide a different kind of school, customized to fit Bhutan's unique needs.

It began as an experimental pilot project in the mid-1980s called New Approach to Primary Education (NAPE) and has been adopted nationwide in Bhutan's school system. It is an application of advanced educational techniques in one of South Asia's least developed countries, where the adult illiteracy rate averages 80 per cent and adult female illiteracy is as high as 95 per cent.

Bhutan, a country the size of Switzerland, is wedged between two very different cultures that of the Tibet Autonomous Region of China to the north and of India to the south.

From the eighth century, Buddhist monasteries reigned, like the feudal lords of Europe, over the craggy landscape of Bhutan. Young monks (male only) learned ancient Buddhist culture and rituals, written in Chooki. Monasteries also taught a wide range of subjects designed to perpetuate Buddhism, among them Tibetan Buddhist healing, agriculture, art, astronomy, numerology and practical accounting.

Bhutan's first primary education system came from India, but it was outdated and inflexible. Its stilted curriculum was taught in English from textbooks designed for use in India and patterned on the archaic British system of the early 1900s.

By the mid-1980s, educators began to search for a Bhutanese-based curriculum.

Textbooks were written with help from the British Overseas Development Agency, the World University Service of Canada and the British Voluntary Service Overseas, with support from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). The Department of Education formulated a new National Education plan in 1984 and two years later, a NAPE pilot programme was introduced into 12 schools.

Most pre-primary students enter NAPE schools speaking no English. In the early grades, most instruction is oral, using both Dzongkha and English. The first 100 English words are taught through pictures.

That children study in English — with Dzongkha as a required subject of study — might seem an anomaly in the country with a policy of preserving the national identity. The country restricts tourism, architecture and satellite television.

But teaching English, says Peter Chen, former UNICEF Project Officer for Edcuation, is not a contradiction, it's a wise move for Bhutan to step into the 20th century."

English is now a reality of life in Bhutan, from shop signs to government documents, rental videos and textbooks for higher education. Most students still go outside Bhutan for University-level education, usually to Indian universities, which teach in English. Besides, the national Dzongkha Development Commission is still developing written Dzongkha, and very few Dzongkha language books exist.

In every way possible, the curriculum incorporates and reflects the Bhutanese perspective. Students learn to count Bhutanese money and measure with Bhutanese instruments. They study local tools, animals, food and geography.

Assuming that primary schooling is all most Bhutanese children will get, the NAPE approach teaches basic skills and problem-solving capabilities. The goal is to enrich the lives of all, no matter what level of education they complete.

A 1988 evaluation of NAPE methods was so positive that NAPE was rapidly implemented system-wide. By 1990, NAPE schools were nationwide, and today the method is used in the lower grades of all of Bhutan's 235 primary schools and some junior high schools.

One measure of NAPE's success is continually increasing primary school enrolment. Now, 56,773 students attend school — 56 per cent of Bhutan's school-aged children. The proportion of girls, now 43 per cent of enrolment, is rising.

Bhutan's most formidable obstacle to primary education, and to other social programmes, is its topography. The country is 45,000 square kilometres of rugged terrain, where 600,000 residents live in remote villages wedged into narrow valleys. Roads and trails are often blocked by snow in winter or landslides in summer.

But even in the remotest areas, communities have begun to band together to build their own schools, a development largely attributed to enthusiasm for the NAPE system. In areas with 30 or more students within one hour's walking distance, the Department of Education provides educational materials and trained teachers for community-constructed schools. UNICEF provides building assistance, as well as a programme to train teachers how to teach in multigrade classrooms.

Today, more than 8,000 students are studying in 92 such community schools in Bhutan. All things considered, Bhutan is well on the way to the goal of universal education by the year 2000. — *Depthnews Asia*