Politics of Education and Employment in Bhutan

H. SRIKANTH

The Necessity of Modernisation

Bhutan is one of the least developed countries by any conventional yardsticks of development.[1] Its inferior status in the subcontinent compelled the Bhutanese state to submit to a kind of a special relationship with India.[2] Though this relationship has introduced some elements of monetary economy, even now Bhutan continues to be a semi-feudal society based on subsistence economy with agriculture as the primary source of income and extraction of rent as dominant mode of taxation. Politically Bhutan is governed by the traditional hereditary monarchy. At one time the Lamas used to enjoy the highest status in the society. Though they are now relegated to a secondary status, higher ranks of the Buddhist monks still exercise powerful influence over the policies of the state. The landlords and the upper ranks of the clergy together constitute the ruling class of this semi-feudal theocratic dependent state. In the recent period the business community bred by the free trade agreements between India and Bhutan, has been developing as a powerful social force. However, most of the big business men have organic links with Indian capitalists and native landlords. Hence, this class, far from becoming an alternative to the traditional dominant classes, is well absorbed in the ruling coalition. Unfortunately even the exploited and oppressed strata constituted by small peasants, tenants and artisans is indifferent, apolitical and unorganised. In the absence of any alternative force, one may say, the state and the dominant classes in Bhutan are safe and secure.

However, there seems to be a trend towards increasing politicisation in all the traditional land locked states of South Asia surrounded by the countries with more progressive regimes. Though the traditional authorities may intend to keep their countries isolated from the world around, being sandwitched between two Asian giants, namely India and China, it will be difficult for them to prevent cross currents of liberal or socialist ideas influencing their own politics. It is wellknown that the political unrest in Nepal and tribal revolt in Tibet are to a conside-

rable extent influenced by the external factors. External force has the capacity to act as a catalyst in intensifying the internal contradictions. Bhutan may not be an exception to this trend. If this phenomenon repeats itself in Bhutan, then the very foundations of the political system may be threatened. This possibility forces the state not to project itself as a mechanical instrument of certain classes. Even to serve the interests of the dominant classes effectively, the state should first legitimise its own authority, by winning over masses to its side. Since the traditional cultural mechanisms are insufficient, the state has to look for other effective means of legitimisation. To achieve this end, the state is forced to modernise the traditional society and take up certain welfare measures for the benefit of the common masses.

Broadly speaking, in this era of imperialism and proletarian revolutions, there are only two options left for any developing state aspiring to modernise its traditional society. It may either choose the socialist path of development or follow the capitalist line. Generally the path that a particular country chooses does not depend on its impartial judgement of the relative merits and demerits of these opposing paths of development. Ultimately, it is the class character of the state which decides the line it has to follow. In case of Bhutan the class composition of the ruling coalition will not allow the Bhutanese state to opt the socialist path, for, its option would only mean revolutionary transformation of society at the cost of the dominant propertied classes. Since the intention of the rulers is only to bring about certain reforms which helps in further strengthening its base, the state naturally chooses the lesser evil—the capitalist path of development. However, mere intentions are not sufficient ; one should have required capital to finance such ambitious plans. In case of Bhutan financing the developmental plans becomes a problem since the state has decided not to attack the previleges of the propertied classes. Inability of the state to mobilise internal sources pushes the Bhutanese state to look for external assistance. Fortunately, India has come forward to finance the state directed plan. Thus a base has been created for initiating the process of modernisation.

With Indian economic assistance Bhutanese state initiated Five Year Plans from the sixties onwards. It is about to finish the V Plan by the end of 1987. Within this 25 years of planning, the state has attempted to modernise certain spheres of economy i.e. agriculture, industry, trade, forestry, power, transport and communications. The state could indeed make some progress in all these fields. Nevertheless the very class character of the state, its close relationship with India and historic limitations of capitalist development in the era have placed many obstacles

in the path of uninterrupted development. In such conditions legitimisation of its own authority while effectively responding to the different challenges becomes an important concern of the state. It is in this context that the present paper intends to throw some light on certain problems of modernisation which called for state intervention in the spheres of employment and education. In the process of opening avenues of education and employment to the masses, the contradictory role that the state of Bhutan has been palying to legitimise its authority is also analysed.

II

Inadequacy of Indigenous Workers : Role of Non nationals

This process of modernisation has created new avenues of employment and education. Bhutan needs a large number of workers to work in administrative bodies vested with the responsibility of implementing the developmental policies. But, unlike many other developing countries faced with severe unemployment problem, Bhutan is faced with a unique problem of underpopulation. Bhutan spread over an area of 47,000 Sq. Km. comprises a tiny population of 1.2 million (density of population being 25 per sq.k.m.). Approximately 94% of the workforce is still engaged in the traditional sector of agriculture. The modern sector accounts for only remaining 6% of the workforce.[3] In a sparcely populated country like Bhutan where the people are mostly unskilled and illiterate, ambitious goal of modernisation can not be achieved, unless the state utilises the scarce manpower resources properly. Having understood the necessity, Bhutanese state created a separate Department of Manpower under the Ministry of Development. Royal Civil Service Commission which has come into being in 1982, is given the responsibilities of looking after the manpower planning, training and recruitment of able candidates in all governmental departments.

However, the inadequacy of the indigenous labour to meet all the requirments of the process of modernisation has forced the state to import a large number of foreign workers. During the 60's and 70's, thousands of non nationals got employed in Bhutan. According to 1981 estimates, 49.1% of the governmental staff (from I Class to IV Class employee) are non nationals. Whereas the total number of non national governmental employees was 15,685, number of private labourers was 10,740.[4] Another governmental source says that Bhutan imports a large workforce numbering approximately 36,000 non nationals. This total which includes even temporary and floating labourers constitute 77% of the total labour force in the modern sector.[5]

Though a small number of volunteers of the UNO and other foreign organisations do exist, most of the non-national come from India and Nepal. Along with temporary manual labourers the non nationals include regular workers, contract employee and the deputationists. Whereas the manual labourers come from both India and Nepal, most of the white collar employees, professionals and other technical experts are imported from India. These two distinct grades of employee play two different roles in Bhutan.

There being very few indigenous workers ready to work as manual labourers, Bhutan has to employ a large number of non nationals in construction and other fields. Acute unemployment problem in India and Nepal has pushed many poor families to try their luck in the alien land Bhutan. Forced by the circumstances most of the migrants readily show their willingness to work even as manual labourers. It is these sections of the non nationals who have laid roads in the most rugged mountainous terrains and constructed almost all the modern buildings both public and private. Despite their positive contribution to the building up of the modern Bhutan, they are forced to live a wretched life in Bhutan. The government which does not hesitate to exploit their cheap labour, has done little to improve their life conditions. The native officers behave in a high handed manner with these poor and unorganised sections of the non nationals. There are no written rules to regulate their work and mobility. The government collects about Rs. 500/- as deposit amount and seize the identity cards so that the workers can not go back without the permission of the authorities. The workers will not have the right to choose their own jobs and place of working. The state executive authorities can impose harsh penalties including imprisonment on those who do not comply with their orders. The author had the opportunity to see Dasho Thrampan (City Corporation Commissioner, Thimpu) ordering imprisonment of a Nepali girl without framing any charges against her. It is observed that most of the prisoners in Thimpu jail are either poor Nepalese or Indians. Very few of them are taken to the magistrate before imprisonment. Since they entered Bhutan voluntarily, even the governments of India and Nepal take little interest in their well being.

The masses in Bhutan do not in any way get affected by the presence of this section of the non nationals however large their number may be. But other sections of the non nationals-white collar employee, professionals and technical experts-play a different role in Bhutan. These sections of the non nationals enjoy a better salary, status and authority. Some of them hold key positions in administration and policy

making. Incapability of local officials to handle all administrative probelms and ever growing intensity of corruption and favouritism in Bhutanese Civil Services allow some aspiring Indians make career out of the situation. They maintain personal contacts with the Dashos (heads of the departments), design policies which generally benefit Dashos and other influential forces in the society and guide the corrupt native officials as to how they can take advantage of the existing loopholes in the administrative structure. Very few deputationists attempt to impart their skills to the native people. It is not to say that there are no honest and hard working non nationals. Though there are good number of such people, their numerical strength and power are overshadowed by the other category of non nationals breeded by the corrupt native officers.

However, this section of the non nationals is gradually losing their credibility. Though Indian experts and the Dashos are happily married to each other, there is growing dissatisfaction among the lower ranks of the civil servants against this unholy clique. Some of them do not hesitate to say that what the Indian state gives as economic assistance is mostly taken away by these Indians in the form of high salaries and other benefits. There is a strong opinion that native people should take up all important posts and the non nationals are to be expatriated.

III

Response of the State : Challenges of Employment and Education

The state can not ignore these kinds of pressures. At the same time, for certain practical considerations it can not knock all the non nationals out of Bhutan. Then the only alternative left to the state is to check the influx of the non nationals gradually. In the 50's and 60's a large number of Nepalese and Tibetans were given Bhutanese citizenship. Many Indians were given regular employment. However in the 80's the Bhutanese state has taken necessary steps to stop these parctices. A new rule, 'Non-National Appointment rules and regulation act 1982' has been enacted which forbids recruitment of non-national as regular employee. The arbitrary expatriation of Indian nationals will have to face the wrath of Indian state. Hence as an alternative, Bhutanese state initiated the practice of converting the status of employee from regular to that of contractee. According to new rules the non nationals would be recruited only on contract basis for a period of five years, renewable by a maximum of another two years.[6]

By enacting acts such as these, the state itself desires to overcome gradually its dependence on Indian experts. Nevertheless the government's

intention to replace non nationals by nationals in all administrative and professional fields, can not be realised so long Bhutan faces the problem of inadequacy of qualified persons at all levels. Awareness of the fact that this requirement can be met only by educating and training the nationals, compels the Bhutanese state to involve itself in the sphere of education also. Although there has been a long tradition of monastic and ecclesiastical studies, education on modern lines has been initiated by the state only after the sixties. Now Bhutan has 145 primary schools, 22 Junior High Schools, 8 High Schools, 1 Junior College and 1 Degree College.[7] Along with these institutions there are two technical schools and two teacher training centres. In all the plans considetrable percentage of the budget is allocated to education. In the V Plan the government has allocated 7.8% (Nu.340 millions) towards education. As a result of these policies, the adult literacy rate has risen to about 12% and that of primary school enlrolment to 21%.

The total enrolment in Junior Secondary schools rose from 1,856 in 1981 to 3,184 in 1985, and that of high schools from 368 in 1981 to 686 in 1985. Total student population in the secondary education rose from 2,224 in 1981 to 3,870 in 1985.[8] The state provides free though not compulsory education to all the people. It has sent some of the nationals to India and other countries for higher education. Manpower Depatrment and Royal Civil Service Commisison attempt to import technical skills through different training programmes. Thus the state has achieved some kind of progress in education which is intended to meet the manpower requirements of Bhutans. By opening avenues of education and employment to the common masses the state has succeeded in projecting itself as the benefactor of the common people.

Though these aspects help the state in legitimising its authority to an extent, the state has not ignored the challenges that this progress may pose to the system. The rulers are well aware of the fact that modern education while imparting scientific and technical knowledge to the students may even inject modern liberal democratic ideas which may strike at the root of the authority of the ruling circle. Incresae in number of educated especially highly educated ones, may turn dangerous to the present system in future. Though the economy now has the capcity to absorb the educated, if there is unchecked growth of educational institutions, even Bhutan will have to face the problem of educated unemployment in course of time.

The unemployment problem can be avoided if there is scope for uninterrupted industrialisation, whose scope, at present, is not bright.

The whole of Bhutanese market is now flooded with foreign goods. Even if rising business men attempt to start certain industries their products will never be able to compare with the foreign goods. Moreover, the people being very poor, the home market is limited. Further, its own geographical location will not allow Bhutan to trade with other countries without Indian permission. In such conditions the much trumpeted wish of diversification of trade remains an unfulfilled dream. Bhutan's inability to overcome these problems drives the state to think in realistic terms.

The state elite does not hesitate to admit the limitations openly. For a better understanding one may look at certain excerpts from one of the documents of the Department of Manpower, entitled, '*A Review of Policies, Plans and Programmes* '1973-79'.

The planners know that "once a huge number of schools is established its enormous output will be constant. The rate at which these students will be employed in the near future will have to be sustained permanently".[9] But they themselves are aware of the fact that "it is most likely that there will come a stage when the vigorous pace of our development process will experience a lull, or a saturation point in respect to the capacity of our economy". In such conditions "the constant and massive outflow of educated students will create inevitable situation of unemployment and its resultant ill effects". The state can not then go for closing the educational institutions, for, "what is once given as a privilege by the government is almost always considered as a right by the people. And that which is recognised as a right of the people can not be taken away by the government without opposition and with unpredictable consequences". Though they may talk loudly about the fruits of development and modernisation, at least the planners are aware of the fact that "the manpower intake capacity of an industrialised country must never be compared with Bhutan, especially in respect to manpower planning. Bhutan is essentially a rural economy and it is to be presumed that it will always remain so". Further, they are very much worried about the pollution of nationals sent to India for higher studies, because "Indian higher education system is a bed of politics, a breeding ground for discontentment and anti-establishment sentiments...(they are) suspended between traditional values and uncouth and vulgar modern habits".[10]

All the above considerations compell the state to device a cautious educational policy that would protect its interests without at the same-time alienating the educated youth. 'The National Education Policy' that the Bhutan state adopted is in many ways a precurser of the newly

adopted 'New Education Policy' in India. Their policy clearly says that though primary education would be given to all, enrollment of the students will be gradually restricted from there onwards. The number of the students in junior college and degree college should always be limited. Achievement of this limited education is very difficult if private educational institutions are allowed to work. To quote them, "No amount of manpower planning or measures against unemployment can be fully effective unless control of the growth and size of the educational systems lies in the hands of the planners".[11] Accordingly the state has taken over almost all the private educational institutions. The state monopoly over education enables effective planning and implementation. While attempting to achieve 'national goals' through education, the planners are firm that their beliefs and faith in their social and political institutions should not be wavered under any circumstances. The Fifth Plan clearly states that one of the main objectives of the plan is to preserve and promote country's rich cultural and spiritual heritage, preventing the alienation of the educated from the heritage.[12] The cultural wing of the Department of Education is given the responsibility to achieve this end. The government has also established career counselling cells to motivate the students in the direction of the state goals. During the counsellings the students are asked to sacrifice "certain personal interests" in order to "fulfill the expectations of the King and Country". Students are made to accept that the undemocratic practices like checking the higher education, favouritism in selections and arbitrary recruitment in jobs are there in the best interests of the nation. In order to impart religious and outmoded traditional values, moral education is included as compulsory subject in the curriculam. Paradoxically, inclusion of civics and politics as subjects of study in the curriculam is prohibited. Thus the state has taken maximum precautions to face all the future challenges.

Conclusion : Future Possibilities

The traditional semifeudal state of Bhutan is being compelled to modernise the society and take up certain developmental activities to be able to consolidate its own power. The process of modernisation which leads to transformation of traditional society gives birth to new contradictions. In Bhutan, modernisation has given birth to an overdeveloped bureaucracy vested with the powers of implementing the developmental policies. Practice of employing common masses in the lower and middle levels of all the administrative bodies, hitherto dominated by the traditional elites, has made the state machinery an arena of class struggle. The requirements of the state which have brought forth the modern English educated masses, are now aspiring to replace traditional and non national

bosses running the wheels of the government. Their anti-India sentiments may create some kind of nationalist feelings. The educated youth, especially those who fail to get absorbed into the system, may take lead in spreading the discontentment. The future possibility of the unity of national and non national labouring masses under the leadership of the educated youth against the traditional authority depending on Indian, assistance, can not be ruled out, though there are no visible signs as yet. It is true that the state, so far, has succeeded in managing the challeges. But how long the Bhutanese state continues to manage the crisis to its own advantage is not yet clear. Even then one may say that, in future if this state fails to reorganise the status of the dominant classes to suit the changed conditions; to democratise the administrative structure and to restrain the growing dissatisfaction among the educated youth and other oppressed strata, then there would be unrest even in Bhutan-the 'Land of Peaceful Dragon'.

Notes.

1. According to U.N.O. reports percapita income of Bhutan in 1981 is **$ 116;** agriculture constitutes 63.2% of the G.D.P., whereas manufacture accounts for about 5.2%, and adult literacy rate is just 12%. For other details see *Bhutan-United Nations Development Programme : Some Highlights,* March 1984 and other relavant documents on Bhutan.
2. This dependency was actually imposed by the British India through the Treaty of Sinchula (1865) and Treaty of Punakha (1910). Emergence of independent India has not brought any changes in its relationship with Bhutan. The Indo-Bhutanese agreements of 1949 incorporated same provisions of Treaty of Sinchula and Treaty of the Punakha with little modifications.
3. **Royal Civil Service Commission Report 1982-84,** Thimpu, 1984, p. 4
4. **Statistics at glance:Bhutan 1980-81,** Central Statistical Organisation, Planning Commission, Bhutan, p.16
5. **Royal Civil Service Commission Report,** *op.cit.*, p.4
6. *Ibid.*, p. 7
7. **Fifth Plan 1981-87 An Interim Review,** Planning Commission Bhutan, 1986, p. 32
8. **Fifth Plan 1981-87 Main Documents,** Planning Commission Bhutan, p. 119
9. **Fifth Plan 1981-87 : An Interim Review,** *op.cit.*, p.35
10. **All quotations in the para are from** *A Review of the Policies, Plans and Programmes* **1973-79,** Department of Manpower, 1979, p.p.5, 12, 13, 18, 20, 23.
11. *Ibid.*, p.6

x2. **Fifth Plan 1982-87 Main Document,** op.cit., p. 118