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## **The Effects of Political and Socioeconomic Change on an Educational System (Tibet)**

### **Abstract**

*Changes in the political and socioeconomic conditions of a society have an inevitable impact on the system of education. The modification of two systems of education are followed as the result of abrupt political and socioeconomic events in Tibet – the one in the home country under Chinese occupation and the other established by Tibetan refugees in India, Bhutan, and Nepal. The main objective of both systems remains the same: The retention of the Tibetan language and culture. Each system attempts to reach this objective separately while accepting substantial financial assistance from foreign governments.*

*These political and socioeconomic changes in Tibet and their consequent effects on the educational system provide a metaphor of what can happen in any society that experiences radical change.*

Massive and rapid changes involving both the structure and content of educational systems seldom occur as the result of research evidence pointing at new directions, or philosophical postulates aspiring to higher levels of pedagogical adventures. Major economic changes, in addition to the political and social ones such as the transfer of private ownership of a country's resources to the people, inevitably influence the content as well. It would appear that modification of all these three factors (political, social, and economic) are needed for a radical transformation of both structure and content of an educational system.

Abrupt changes in the political and social structure alone, such as attaining independence from colonial rule, as in the case of several nations in Africa, may have had a greater impact on the structure than on the content of this inherited system of education. In Zimbabwe, for instance, the new government, after independence in 1980, eradicated educational inequalities by transforming the former racially discriminating system to a racially integrated one. This has caused an immediate explosion in enrolment but did little to alter the content (Kadhani & Riddell, 1981).

During the twentieth century the following major forces: revolutions (Soviet Union, China, Cuba, Vietnam, Iran), independence from colonial rule (India, Nigeria, Tanzania), liberation or takeover by another political system (Tibet, Afghanistan), displacement of a large proportion of the population (Palestine), and to a lesser degree civil rights legislation (U.S.A.) and language legislation (Quebec) have played significant roles in the reshaping of systems of education.

An interesting and dual transformation has occurred in Tibetan education during the last quarter of this century. Not only did the system of education change in Tibet, but also Tibetans who have left their country have created a different system in their exile. Regardless of the point of view, whether the country was liberated from the oppression of serfdom and slavery or invaded as a free nation in 1950, the new political-socio-economic order has created a system of education better suited to serve its purpose. At the same time, the refugee settlers in neighbouring countries have found themselves in a modified political-socio-economic structure which influenced the transplanted system of education and created the need for reorganization in order to better serve the changing life in exile.

The purpose of this paper is to review the effects of political, social, and economic changes in the Tibetan system of education, on both the developments in education in the autonomous region of Tibet and those under the government in exile in India, Nepal, and Bhutan.

### *Traditional education*

Religion dominated Tibetan life almost completely under a theocratic feudal rule before 1950. Formal education was the monopoly of the monasteries and offered to the elite (Karan, 1976). Secular education was virtually non-existent even at the primary level (Ward, 1980; Epstein, 1983), and the education that was available to a small percentage of children and youth largely served the interests of the feudal ruling class (Epstein, 1983). A small minority of monastic novices learned religious reading in the lamaseries and sons from noble families were prepared for administrative posts in schools or were taught by tutors at home. Only the richest were

sent to the British school at Gyangze, or to India or Britain. There were no schools for the populace (Karan, 1976), and the influence of the system of education on the masses was quite negligible.

Students attended school for five to six years without the payment of academic fees or promotion to higher grades. Usually only the ambitious and those given the option to prepare for administrative posts continued their studies. The traditional curriculum, highly specialized and mostly religion oriented (Tibetan Information Office, 1981), contained both temporal and religious knowledge. Even reading was ritualized. Lamas and laity read mostly prescribed texts, many in Sanskrit. Lamaist dogma and ritual predominated, and religious postulates made scientific inquiry impossible.

Educated commoners and women were rare (Epstein, 1983). About 25% of the male population entered the monastic orders and some gained access to education.

### *Educational transformation in Tibet 1950-1986*

A large scale secular education with a socialist orientated curriculum began, first slowly, but accelerated after the Dalai Lama and his supporters fled in 1959. The process of developing secular education continued. The Tibetan cultural revolution of 1966-68 against the four "olds" – old culture, old customs, old habits, and old thoughts – was part of the pushing of Tibet into the modern world.

*Primary education.* The period between 1950 and 1959 is enmeshed in contradictions. The time table of Tibet's democratic reform was postponed due to upper class attempts to retain the traditional way of life. Hence the replacement of theocratic feudalism by a socialist government, intent on modernization, was not fully realized until 1959 (Ward, 1980). The first state primary school was established in Lhasa in 1952 with funds from the Central People's Government. The local regime of serf owners attempted to gain control (Epstein, 1983), and as a compromise the school was run by the central and local authorities in consultation. The struggle continued between those desirous to maintain tradition and those who wanted to create a new system. Over 50% of the teachers were from the nobility. Yet by 1955 the social composition of the pupils reflected a change: 1/3 nobles, 2/3 from poor families, and more than half were girls. But the curriculum was slow to change. In spite of China's general principle of separation of state and church, religious instruction remained in Tibet. Science and scientific thought were slow to penetrate. The teaching of history, for example, ran into many problems because it had to cross the

road where on one side its moving forces were gods and kings, and on the other the masses who wrote their own history. The large-scale expansion of secular education caused the rapid decline of the importance of traditional centres of learning (Karan, 1976). By 1956 there were 60 primary schools (Peking Review, 1972, cited by Epstein, 1983, p.42).

After the 1959 revolution the aims of the central government met no further opposition. Study combined with labour became the guiding principle. During three periods of labour each week, first and second graders cleaned their classrooms, and third to sixth graders cut fire wood, carried water, and cooked meals for the disabled poor. Children worked in shifts to build the Lhasa Children's Palace. Tibetan was the general language of instruction, to which Han was added in grade three. Each school was headed by two principals, one Tibetan, and one Han.

After 1959 enrolment in primary schools rose rapidly. The total enrolment figure of 2000 for primary schools in 1955 increased to 33,000 by 1960 (Karan, 1976), and to 58,821 by 1965 (Epstein, 1983). It was estimated that by 1960 nearly all school age children in Lhasa were attending classes (Karan, 1976).

After 1959, neighbourhood committees were active in creating people's primary schools with four years of instruction, with the prospect of additional senior grades being added as the children completed the fourth grade. By 1965, 1,595 peoples' primary schools with 48,755 pupils and 56 state primary schools with 10,066 pupils were operating (Epstein, 1983).

These primary schools were self supporting with some government aid and nominal tuition. The upkeep and repairs were carried out by teachers, students, and parents. The buildings were fully used, and provided adult literacy instruction in the evenings. By 1965 labour for one day a week was part of the curriculum which consisted of Tibetan, Han, language arts, arithmetic, politics, drawing, singing, and sports.

Epstein (1983) described the case of Gyanshon village, at 4300 m. above sea level, where classes were initially held outdoors on the "green carpet" while villagers worked for 26 days to erect the school and clear a "self-support" field where teachers and pupils would grow grain, potatoes, spinach, cabbage, and fruit. Pupils also made their own abacus, ink, and paper from the pulp of local plants. By 1965, 30% of the primary age children from across the country were in school (Epstein, 1983). Migratory schools, with itinerant teachers on horseback, moved with the herds in the high grassland areas; They also helped to reach children in more remote regions.

The rapid expansion of schooling is illustrated by the following table. The data include primary, secondary, and workers' evening class enrolments. They are based on figures of the Peking Review (1972) and Ward (1980).

School Enrolment

Year	Number of students
1955	2,000
1956	5,000
1962	58,000
1965	73,600
1971	83,000
1980	280,000

In thirty years, in a country where no secular education to speak of existed, 280,000 students were in school, representing 16.5% of Ward's population estimates for 1980 of 1.74 million. Since Tibetans are exempted from China's birth control policies, the population on the roof of the world is steadily rising.

The 1980 Educational Reform provided state financing of schools, and the establishment of additional boarding schools, in order to expand and improve Tibetan education.

*Secondary education.* Tibet had no secondary education until Lhasa's No. 1 middle school was created in 1956. The beginning was wrought with a lot of difficulty. Scientific subjects, physics and chemistry, which ran contradictory to religious postulates met with opposition. The combination of education and labour offended traditional relationships between class position and work. The 1959 political changes made way for modernization of the curriculum, where sciences became prominent, as well as collective morality, with the aim of serving the people. Mao's principle that education should be combined with productive labour was implemented by teachers and students working in rotation, one day a week, on a farm providing vegetables for the canteen. Industrial classes produced chalk, made and repaired school furniture, and wired the school for electricity. Teams went to farms to provide help with sowing and harvesting.

In 1965 secondary education, still in its infancy, offered a full six years education in Lhasa only. The regional secondary schools in Quamdo, Xigaze, Gyanze, Loka, and Lhunze were designed as three year junior secondary schools. The total secondary enrolment was 769, with 408 in senior middle school. In addition 3,000 Tibetan students were enrolled at the secondary level for nationalities in Beijing, Chengdu, and Xian, and at the

Tibet Institute in Xianyang. At the No. 1 middle school in Lhasa, ten years after its opening, there were 340 students, 269 Tibetans, and five other Chinese nationalities (Epstein, 1983). In 1979, Lhasa had five middle schools with 1,400 students, and 49 middle schools with over 90% of the students coming from working class families (Epstein, 1983). Students were instructed in both Tibetan and Han, and the curriculum continued to emphasize labour. Students and teachers made secondary schools self-supporting by working on the school farm, growing grain and vegetables, working at the school factory, making cement, concrete products, and chalk. Much of the subject matter was learned in real life situations.

During the time of the cultural revolution productive labour became more important than classroom work. The length of secondary schooling was reduced to five years, and the curriculum was cut back to politics, Tibetan, Han, mathematics, basic industrial and agricultural knowledge, and athletics.

Once the influence of the "gang of four" ceased, the six years secondary program was reestablished, and the new China-wide secondary curriculum was adopted in addition to Tibetan language and local studies. The amount of labour was reduced, and the importance of science in well equipped laboratories rose considerably.

The educational reform of 1980 emphasized Tibet's unique national characteristics, and strengthened Tibetan language instruction.

*Post-Secondary Education.* In the mid to late seventies, three post-secondary institutions had been established: the Regional Teachers' College in Lhasa and the Tibet Medical College in Nyingchi, both in 1975, and the College of Agriculture and Animal Husbandry in Nyingchi, one year later.

The Regional Teachers' College in Lhasa, a regional institute, incorporated the former secondary level municipal teachers' training school built in the 50s. In 1976 it had 565 students, 50% women, all Tibetan and from smaller national groups in Tibet: Loba, Monba, Sherpa, and Nax. The college trains teachers for regular and vocational secondary schools. Like most schools it tried to be self-supporting by cultivating its own farm, and by building and operating its own factory. Since 1977-78 professional knowledge has received more stress. The need for qualified teachers continues to be great, especially in primary schools (Topgyal, 1983; Csapo, 1986).

The Tibet College of Agriculture and Animal Husbandry, officially inaugurated in 1978, began to function in 1976 while it was being built.

Agriculture, animal husbandry, veterinary medicine, forestry, farm mechanization, rural hydro-electric power, farm and range administration, and accounting are the major areas of study. Science laboratories, test farms, pastures, and a forest base are well used by the 524 students during their four-year course.

The Tibet Medical College, in its five year program, offers courses in traditional Tibetan medicine, diagnosis and treatment of local diseases, and conducts research in high altitude physiology and ailments.

The Tibetan Institute in Xianyang occupied buildings vacated by the University of Shanghai. Tibetan language was used as the medium of instruction, and Tibetan instructors were trained. In addition Tibetan students were accepted at several institutes, colleges, and universities in China, as well as the Institute for Nationalities in Beijing, Chengdu, and Lanzhou.

In 1956-57 over 500 Tibetan students were sent for training, and approximately 400 workers, peasants, and soldiers, most of them sons and daughters of emancipated serfs, were sent to be educated in China. A great number of civil servants have also received schooling in China.

After the cultural revolution China-wide standards and texts were introduced. These required upgrading the Tibetan students' ability to read Han texts, especially in science.

A delegation of Tibetan refugees visited Tibet in 1980 and criticised the schools in their former homeland. They found standards lower than those in the schools in exile; the rural teachers were often unqualified and the amount of Tibetan language taught was not sufficient (Tibetan Review, 1980). The need for more Tibetan teachers was stressed (Tibetan Review, 1978). The Chinese government, in an effort to rectify its treatment of minority groups, now assists with the revival of local languages and literature. It permits religious practices, also. (Mullin, 1981).

### *Tibetan schools for refugees*

Approximately 90,000 Tibetans fled from the mother country in 1959 (Ward, 1980), approximately 2.4 to 6.8% of the population, and settled in the neighbouring countries of India, Sikkim, Nepal, and Bhutan. Thousands of children followed the Dalai Lama into exile. Their upbringing and preparation for gainful employment in a new society was a stressing problem. In India, the Tibetan administration-in-exile, established by the Dalai Lama, set up a special administrative branch, the Council for Tibetan Education, to address itself to the problems. The Indian government, in consultation with the Dalai Lama, set up a special committee consisting of



two Indians and three Tibetans, which group became known as the Tibetan School Society (TSS), an autonomous body under the Indian Ministry of Education. In 1979, renamed the Central Tibetan School Administration (CTSA), this body aimed at preserving Tibetan culture, history and traditions, and language, while attempting to introduce students to a modern system of education. The government of India, through the CTSA, finances and runs all the Tibetan schools in its territory, with the exception of the Tibetan Children's Village.

The Tibetan Refugee Children's Nursery for refugee orphans first served as a nursery in 1960, and later became an educational centre known as the Tibetan Children's Village (TCV). The Tibetan Home Foundation, which began in 1963 with three homes and special foster parents in Mussoorie, now has 25 homes for 25 children each (Tibetan Information Office, 1981). The Tibetan Children's Education Fund was established to help send as many children as possible to Central Tibetan residential schools.

The Tibetan refugees realized that their traditional religious oriented system of education begged to be changed, if not completely overhauled, to meet the needs of altered political, social, and economic circumstances in exile.

*Schools in India.* The first Tibetan school was opened in Mussoorie in the Province of Uttar Pradesh in India, in 1960, with 50 students. A curriculum including modern secular subjects was combined with Tibetan culture and language, and new teaching methods were introduced. Since the medium of instruction in India is English, students had to learn three languages, English, Hindi, and Tibetan.

The Dalai Lama felt that integration with the host countries should be accompanied by the preservation of Tibetan spiritual heritage, Mahayana Buddhism, and memories of their homeland, in order to retain the distinctive Tibetan cultural identity (Karan, 1976). While most host countries are satisfied to look after the material well-being of refugees, the Indian government has shown a high degree of cooperation and accommodation in allowing for the religious and traditional cultural needs of the Tibetans within its borders.

The system adopted the 10+2+3 pattern, in 1977. This program consisted of general studies up to grade 10, then arts, sciences, or vocational studies for two years, followed by three years of college or university education for students with sufficiently high standards.

CTSA, originally the Tibetan School Society (TSS), took charge of schools in Mussoorie, and Darjeeling, 1961; Simla, 1962; Mt. Abu, 1964;

Kalimpong, 1964; Pachmanhi, 1964; and Dalhousie, 1969 (closed 1970). These residential and day schools received grants from the government of India and the Central Relief Committee (CRC). The teacher-student ratio was 1:40. Each residential school had an Indian principal and a Tibetan rector. Initially the majority of the teachers were Indian with a few Tibetans teaching language, music, and drama. Over the years their numbers increased, and by 1981 there were over 230 Tibetan teachers. The CTSA offered free education up to 1975; after that date subsidized school fees were introduced.

The Tibetan Information Office acknowledges the existence of over 1500 children without educational opportunity thirty years following their families' settlement in India. Most of them live in remote areas of the Himalayas, such as Lahual, Spiti, Mustang, Assam, and Ladakh.

The problem of over age students with no previous schooling was a major one. Many of them received crash courses in English, Hindi, and mathematics. These students were sent to a vocational school in Pachmarhi. Those able to catch up with their age group continued with normal schooling.

The Council of Tibetan Education set up a committee in 1960 to produce Tibetan text books for grades 1-5, which were printed and sent to all schools. The first Tibetan Education Conference in 1964 asked that texts be upgraded and prepared for all school levels, including secondary. The second Tibetan Education Conference in 1972 set up a committee to revise textbooks from kindergarten to grade 8. The new texts were published in 1978.

The Committee on Tibetan Education initially directed their efforts to children born in Tibet, because the assistance from the Indian government had been restricted to these children. Only in recent years has aid been extended to children born of refugee parents in India and neighbouring countries. The Indian government now provides 100 rupees per month for residential school students. The student enrolment in Tibetan schools stood at 10,495 in India; 1,069 in Nepal; and 300 in Bhutan in 1979 (Tibetan Information Office, 1981).

CTSA has jurisdiction over Tibetan schools only in India. Bhutan and Nepal also have several day schools. In the early 70s primary schools, grades 1-5, were started with the aid of international agencies and the royal government of Bhutan.

*Schools in Nepal and elsewhere:* The first Tibetan Refugee School was established in Nepal in 1963. In 1968 three schools registered with the Nepalese Government Board of Education, and the curriculum was adapted to

prepare students for the Nepal High School exam. The government of Nepal, in an attempt to unify the Nepalese language, required that minority languages be taught after regular school hours.

The Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies in Varanasi was started in the late 60s, representing the four main sects within Tibetan Buddhism – Kagyu, Nyingma, Sakya, and Gelak. The continuity of religious tradition of Tibet is also served by the establishment of two Tantric colleges for young monks at Dalhousie, and by the yearly seminars given by the Dalai Lama to the gathering of hundreds of Tibetan monks. The Dalai Lama, with the assistance of the government of India, set up the Institute of Tibetology in Gangtok, Sikkim, in 1958. The library of this institute houses a major collection of books and records of Tibetan religion, art, and history.

Refugees outside of Asia have also established centers of learning. A monastic institute at Rikon was opened in Switzerland in 1968, and the only Lamaist establishment in North America, a monastery near Farmingdale, New Jersey, was founded in 1958.

Dissatisfaction with Tibetan schools in India was expressed by the refugees themselves. Norbu (1976) was critical of the poverty of education in Tibetan schools. While the government of India provided modern facilities for schools, memorization was often mistaken for education. Students lacked imagination and sensitivity. Almost all teachers were lamas. When the teachers' college was opened in Dharamsala in the 60s, admission was often restricted to lamas. They continued the monastery atmosphere and were not acquainted with, or related to, every day life. Critics argued that the Tibetan national content was lacking, and it was suggested that Tibetan history, politics, religion, culture, and arts should be taught in addition to the language. Norbu strongly urged the employment of more versatile teachers and asked CSTS to set up a regular school inspection team. Khan (1976) called Tibetan education a "gift horse", and he suggested that each school should have no more than one or two lama teachers.

### *Discussion*

In a country where distance is measured by the pace of the yak, two miles an hour (Karan, 1976), and where inner perfection of one's soul is considered more important than indoor plumbing, major political, social, and economic changes have altered the system of education. For Tibetans at home, education became the primary tool for changing the traditional way of life; for Tibetans abroad, it remained the major tool for the preservation of the Tibetan language and culture.

While the political, social, and economic changes in Tibet were abrupt, and resulted in a more rapid transformation, social and political changes were more gradual for the refugees abroad. The structure of the education system has been altered for both groups, but the change in content was more rapid and pervasive for Tibetans at home, and much slower for the refugees.

While the massive reorganization of the traditional Tibetan system of education proceeded at a different pace and depth, the increase of accessibility and financial assistance from governments other than their own are common to both systems. The mutual problem, the retention of the Tibetan language and culture, threatened by the Han influence on one hand, and by the Urdu, Nepalese, Sikkimese, and Bhutanese on the other, remains at the core of both systems, but for the time being, for political reasons, joint efforts for language maintenance are not likely.

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