Remarkable Development of Basic Education in Tibet

Ben Jiao
Tibetan Academy of Social Sciences

Abstract: Although Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) is one of the most remote regions of China, the prosperity of the mainland and the central government's intention to make the TAR economically prosperous, culturally visible, nationally integrated, and politically secure, have led to steadily rising living standards for many Tibetans and tremendous progress in basic education. Today, a modern educational system with local flavor and ethnic characteristics has been established. The vast majority of the Tibetans have obtained the right to an education, which could not be imagined in old Tibet.

Tibet is the most sparsely populated region in China, with 2.3 people per square km and a total population of about 2.87 million, of which only about 20 percent resides in urban areas. The other 80 percent includes both rural and nomadic areas.

In old Tibet, a society of feudal serfdom under the system of combining religious with political rule was controlled by the government, nobles and monasteries. Prior to the peaceful liberation of Tibet in 1951, most education was religious, with some government-run and private schools in Lhasa, Shigatse, and Gyantse where there were only some 2,000 monks and children of the nobility studied. The focus was on basic literacy. Only nobles and lamas had access to education, whereas serfs and slaves, who accounted for 95 percent of the population, were deprived of the right to education.

The Seventeen Point Agreement signed between the Central Government and Tibet Local Government in 1951 stated that: "the spoken and written language and the school education of the Tibetan nationality shall be developed step by step in accordance with the actual conditions of Tibet." This statement was the starting point for modern education in Tibet and it became guiding principle for education development.

The first modern school was established in Changdu in 1951 and then others were established in Lhasa in 1952. By 1959, the number of primary schools in TAR increased to 462, with 16,300 students and, in addition, there were two secondary schools and one specialized school. School expansion occurred quickly after 1965. When China launched its economic reform and opening to the outside world in 1978, Tibet had about 6,266 primary schools, 55 secondary schools, 22 technical secondary schools, eight worker schools, and four colleges in 1979. Between 1978 and 1985, a consolidation of schools took place in Tibet and the emphasis was shift from quantity to quality. The First and Second Tibet Work Forum in 1980 and 1984 greatly emphasized the "intellectual support for Tibet" (zhili yuanzang) that aimed to gradually popularize basic education according to the
needs. By 1990, less than 20 percent of the TAR Tibetans had a primary education and only a few had much more. According to the TAR Education Bureau, the enrolment rate across the entire region was 60 percent in 1991. Until the mid-1990s, most villages had only popularized 2–3 years of education.

Rural students during the class break

Efforts had been focused on providing three year education in nomadic areas, six years in agricultural and semi-agricultural areas and nine years in cities during the 1990s. At the turn of the 21st century, there were roughly 4,000 schools, 820 primary and secondary schools, and 3,033 teaching points, 110 regular and vocational secondary schools, and four institutions of higher education. There were 360,000 TAR students in all forms and levels of education, and 19,000 teachers. The rate of qualified teachers at the primary, middle, and upper secondary schools was 67 percent, 77 percent, and 75 percent, respectively. The official figures for year 2000 indicate that 6 percent of the regions population had achieved nine year compulsory education, largely in the urban areas, 70 percent of the areas achieved six year compulsory education, and 22 percent achieved or nearly achieved three year compulsory education. The official enrolment rate was 83.4% in 2001.

During the first decade of new century, the central government has continuously allocated substantial special funds to improve the infrastructures of primary and secondary schools, particularly boarding schools, in the rural areas of Tibet, and to train teachers for local schools. Priority has been given to counties on the border, pastoral areas which distribute in a scattered way and those in a poorer condition. In order to improve access and equity in basic education, intensified teacher training, phasing out of community (min-
ban) teachers, recruitment of younger teachers and graduates of inland (neidi) schools accompany the popularization of basic education.

A young Tibetan teacher is teaching a class in a remote school in Nyima County of Nakchu Prefecture.

After many years of reform and consolidation, according to the official report the basic education of Tibet by the end of 2008 had 1,017 schools of various kinds at all levels, including 884 primary schools, 117 regular secondary schools, 10 secondary technical schools, and 6 colleges and universities. All 73 counties in the region had completed the six-year compulsory education with a 100% coverage rate. As of the end of 2010, the enrollment rate for school-age children in Tibet reached 99.2%; all counties have popularized nine-year compulsory education with a 100% coverage rate; secondary school enrollment rate increased to 98.2%; and the illiteracy rate dropped to 1.2%. Modern education is gradually adopted in rural areas of Tibet. A majority of primary, secondary, and senior secondary schools have access to modern education methods with computer, television, laboratory, audio and visual equipment. Students in farming and nomadic areas also enjoy high-quality education. School and classroom conditions are far better than they were a decade ago. The provision of good facilities and trained teachers has now places TAR schools with the capacity and potential to conduct more experimental programs and implement innovations to improve the quality of the learning environment.

The policy of boosting the fast, coordinated and healthy development of education in the TAR, with an emphasis on both self-development and assistance from the central government and other inland provincial governments is an effective sustainable development strategy for basic education in Tibet. Making schools function as a vital institutions
for Tibetan households aspiring for a higher standard of living is a basic aim of rural
and nomadic education programs. The establishment of literacy and basic education is
guided by a framework of national policies, and there are additional policies designed for
implementation in ethnic minority regions. These include provisions for boarding schools,
the Education Bureau ethnic teacher training, bilingual education, and preferential admission. The Education Bureau
of the TAR has also promulgated specific educational measures to suit the TAR's spe-
cial circumstances. Two examples are the Three Guarantees (sanbao) and Inland Tibet
School (neidi xizang ban).

A nomadic school girl is reading the textbook

The most well known sanbao policy started from 1985. This includes measures de-
signed to relieve families of many costs associated with schooling. It includes baochi. This
provides food for children who board at school. It also includes baozhu, which means liv-
ing accommodations for boarding school children. This can include school wear and bed-
dings for boarding school children. Finally, it provides baoxuefei including tuition waiver
and free textbook. Until end of 2009, the amount of the government’s special fund for
this policy has been increased eight times. Starting from 2010, the coverage will be ex-
panded from primary and secondary schools to senior high school students. The imple-
mentation of this policy has raised the enthusiasm of most families to send their kids to
school.

The other major policy with significant implications for rural education in the TAR
is the neidi xizang ban (inland Tibet secondary school), which provides for sending prima-
ry school graduates to inland secondary schools across China. The TAR government se-
jects and recommends primary school graduates of 11–12 years old for these inland schools. There were 1300 primary graduates from the seven TAR prefectures were sent to 16 classes or schools in inland cities in September of 1985. From 1985 to 2005, more than 25,000 primary graduates were selected and sent to study in these schools to study and senior middle schools and teacher training schools which have inland Tibetan classes. More than 90 universities or post-secondary institutions have admitted Tibetan students. In the first 20 years, the Central government has invested 180.5 million RMB and regional governments have invested 500 million RMB into these inland Tibetan class projects. It should also be noted that the provinces and municipalities of China send thousands of teachers and educational officials to Tibet to assist development of rural basic education. By the end of 2007, the inland junior high school Tibetan classes have an accumulated enrollment of 36,000 persons, and have fostered 18,000 qualified personnel for Tibet.

A nomadic school girl is reading the textbook Tibetan students in Hongshan Tibetan Senior High School in Wuhan City of mainland China

Contemporary Tibet's main educational policies are set within the context of a socialist state adapting to market economics, while permitting a special status for Tibet's educational needs. Education initiatives have greatly increased the number of children that receive a basic education.

Popularizing basic education in rural and nomadic regions of Tibet is a daunting task, even though major infrastructural developments have led to increased optimism. The Tibetan plateau has become more easily accessible by road, rail, and air, and telecommunication infrastructure has brought Tibet closer to the rest of China, as well as...
global village. On the one hand, schools develop the talents, expertise, values and leadership skills of all Tibetans so as to promote and sustain an adaptable, innovative, and globally conscious community. Aside from the huge financial outlay for basic education, school access targets in the TAR could not be achieved without these additional policies designed for implementation in ethnic minority regions.

The medium of instruction policy for Tibet remains a key issue. It relates closely to both learning capacity and ethnic identity. The Central Government attaches great importance to learning, using and developing the Tibetan language in the TAR and has taken concrete measures to guarantee the freedom of the Tibetan people to use and develop both the spoken and written Tibetan language in the Constitution of the People's Republic of China and the Law on Regional Ethnic Autonomy. Tibetan is a main course of study at all schools in TAR as well as in special Tibetan classes and schools in other parts of the country. Tibetan students are required to read and write the Tibetan language proficiently upon graduation from middle schools. In addition, China has done a great deal to produce school textbooks in ethnic minority languages, including Tibetan and about 21 other languages. The Five Province/region Tibetan Learning Materials Leadership Group has facilitated the production of Tibetan language learning resources and has visited other countries to learn about how bilingual education is undertaken elsewhere. Unlike many other 20th century boarding schools for indigenous peoples in other countries, the inland schools for Tibetan students offer classes about ethnic language, and literature. Moreover, the school environment recognizes Tibetan culture through its many representations of art and architecture, music and observance of Tibetan holidays.

Furthermore, the illiteracy rate in Tibet was 95% before the democratic reform. To enhance the educational level and scientific and cultural qualities of the Tibetan people, the local government has increased spending and efforts to eliminate illiteracy in young and middle-aged population. Literacy courses and evening classes are provided, reducing the illiteracy rate to under 2.4% in 2008. Tibetan language and mathematic learning is the main focus of this program.

Universalizing basic education in developing countries will remain a formidable challenge for years to come. A host of facts show clearly that China has been more successful than most developing countries. The Central Government’s specific policy framework for ethnic minority education is the basis for measures to improve educational access and equity in Tibet. Now, an education system with local characteristics has taken shape, covering education for preschool children, primary and secondary education, higher education, vocational education and adult education.

Overall, the Central Government and the local governments at all levels in the TAR have made enormous efforts to promote the progress of basic education in Tibet. Impressive advances have been made in expanding access to basic schooling. National policies, laws, and regulations are guiding the establishment and development of basic education.
The situation as regards education in old Tibet bears no comparison with the situation in Tibet today. The development of education in Tibet has enhanced the cultural level of the Tibetan people to better exercise their right of regional autonomy as an ethnic minority and attain overall development. Such rapid progress in TAR is notable and deserves recognition.

西藏基础教育的显著发展
班 跃
西藏社科院民族研究所

摘要: 虽然西藏自治区是中国最偏远的地区之一，但是祖国的繁荣与中央政府对于西藏自治区经济繁荣、文化发展、民族统一和政治安定的规划，使得西藏人民的生活水平平稳上升，基础教育取得了巨大进步。今天，西藏自治区已经建立了一套具有地方特点与民族特色的现代化教育制度。绝大多数西藏人民获得了受教育的权利，而这在以前的西藏是无法想象的。