

Quality Basic Education as the Foundation for Nepal's Development

Commencement Speech by Kul Chandra Gautam*

At Graduation Ceremony of Primary Teacher Training by

Rato Bangla Foundation, Bank Street College of Education (New York), and Kathmandu University

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I feel a very special sense of honour and privilege to be asked to deliver a Keynote Speech at this august gathering.

Let me start by offering my warm congratulations to the 28 primary school teachers who have completed a unique course of teacher training jointly sponsored by the Rato Bangla Foundation, Bank Street College of Education (New York), and Kathmandu University. I am so happy to note that the majority of the new graduates are women.

Along with the 115 previous graduates, we expect the teachers who are graduating today to become model teachers for quality basic education in Nepal.

Today's graduates come from diverse backgrounds, from different schools, but what unites them all, - and the rest of us who are attending this ceremony - is a deep conviction that the future development and prosperity, and even the sustainability of our new-found democracy, depends very much on the strength of Nepal's education system, starting with basic education for all.

As I look around this hall, I see so many distinguished educationists, who have made enormous contribution for the development of education in Nepal. I want to pay special tribute to Dr. Ishwor Upadhyaya, who has been inspiring trainer and a true guru for so many of Nepal's teachers and educators.

Let me also complement Rato Bangla's energetic founder-President Shanta Dixit. I have had the privilege to travel with Shantaji and visit some rural community schools supported by the Rato Bangla Foundation. I could see during these visits how deeply committed she is to improving the quality of education in rural Nepal.

It is common knowledge here in Kathmandu that Rato Bangla is one of the finest schools in this country providing high quality education to those who are fortunate enough to send their children to this special school.

What is much less known, but deserves genuine praise is that, unlike any other private school in Nepal, Rato Bangla has a true commitment to help expand quality education not just for the fortunate few but for many ordinary Nepalis throughout the country.

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Let me also acknowledge here the presence of two distinguished educators, Stan Chu and Katy O'Donnell from the Bank Street College of Education in New York. Like the famous Montessori method of pre-school education, Bank Street is well-known for its progressive child-centred educational approach.

I am so glad that along with Rato Bangla, Bank Street College is partnering with Nepal's first and premiere private university, the Kathmandu University, in this innovative training programme.

As one of the few non-academics in this gathering today, I feel truly humbled to be giving a keynote speech in the presence of so many educationists. I hope you will forgive me if my remarks sound a little shallow or ill-informed, as I am still in learning about the challenges facing education in Nepal.

My own modest credentials in education come partly from my long career with UNICEF, where my earliest jobs were as Programme Officer for Education in Cambodia and Indonesia. Later, as I rose up the ranks to be head of UNICEF offices in several countries, education continued to remain close to my heart.

As I observed the development experience of many nations, it became clear to me that investment in quality education was the decisive factor in the pace, the depth and sustainability of their development.

On behalf of UNICEF, I also had the opportunity to provide inputs for shaping the agenda of several major international conferences on education for all – from Jomtien to Dakar to the World Summit for Children and the Millennium Summit. I also worked hard to help enshrine the right to education in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and in successive strategic plans of UNICEF.

But perhaps more than my international experience, my real credentials to speak on education today come from my own personal experience of struggling to acquire a quality education as I grew up in the hills of western Nepal. Like so many other Nepalis of my generation, I grew up in a small village in Gulmi where there was no school at all during my childhood. Perhaps 95 percent of the men and 100 percent of women in my village were illiterate. The nearest primary school was at least a day's walk.

And so I started my "schooling" in the private house of a village priest who taught Sanskrit and theology to a few village boys.

From that humble beginning, through a series of lucky coincidences, I ended up attending some of the finest universities in the US, and was later able to harness the power of that quality education for the well-being of the world's children.

Nepal has come a long way since those dark days of no mass education just half a century ago. While today we rightly complain about inadequate progress in quality education in Nepal compared to other more developed countries, let us not forget to recognize and honour the tremendous contribution of our teachers, educators, even the much maligned political leaders, bureaucrats and private entrepreneurs who have brought about some great advances in education in Nepal.

On the positive side of the ledger, Nepal today has over 28,000 primary schools in its 4000 villages, with 98,000 teachers and 4.5 million students enrolled.

Net enrolment in primary schools is nearly 90 percent, and on average, we are close to reaching gender parity with 48 % of students being girls.

Today, ninety-one percent of Nepal's households are within 30 minutes walk from a primary school - not a small feat given Nepal's rugged topography, and sparse population in the high mountains and remote areas.

I will not speak much about secondary and higher education today, but even there, access to education has expanded dramatically. Not only do we have quite a few fine colleges and universities in Nepal, but graduates of Nepal's school system now attend and even teach in some of the best universities in the world. And we are beginning to see Nepalis competing successfully for high skilled jobs in international organizations, corporations and labour market

I am particularly encouraged that recently, we are also beginning to see heightened awareness on the part of parents and educators on the importance of early child development. As we all know, ECD is so fundamental for success in primary education, as well as in broader aspects of human development and success in later adult life.

Now, that is the good news. But we also have plenty of bad news on education in Nepal. Let me recapitulate some worrying facts and figures.

While 10 percent of children not enrolled in primary schools may seem like a relatively small number, they comprise a disproportionately large share of child population from the historically, geographically, economically and socially deprived and marginalized communities.

Only 38 % of children from the indigenous communities, 18 % of Dalits and a mere 1% of disabled children are believed to be enrolled in primary schools. This is totally unacceptable in today's Nepal that subscribes to the universal principles of human rights and an inclusive democracy.

Even for those children who do have access to schooling, the survival rate to grade 5 is only 87%, literacy rate among 15 to 24 year old youth is 73%. At current rate of progress, Nepal is unlikely to achieve the Millennium Development Goal #2 for which Nepal's national targets are to achieve by 2015: 100 % net enrolment in primary school, 100 % completion rate to grade 5, and 100 % literacy among the 15-24 age group of youth.

There is a colossal wastage in our school system. We all know about the high rate of failures of students in SLC exams. Last year was supposed to have been the best in a long while, with 63% of students passing SLC. But this meant 37 % of students failed, inflicting a serious blow to the self-esteem of tens of thousands of our youngsters, a huge loss of investment by poor families, and a great waste of public funds.

Such massive failure and waste of resources happens every year not just in SLC exams but in tests from primary to the university levels. We seem to have been conditioned to take such results for granted, and we expect our children to accept such failure as normal.

We thus train our children to accept being losers, rather than motivating them to be winners. This must surely change in the New Nepal.

But if lasting change is to occur, it must begin in the earliest years of a child's life, not when they are already in high school or university.

Consider this: 80 percent of human brain is formed in the first 18 months of a child's life. Whether a child will grow to live up to his or her full human potential, or the child will be condemned to be a slow learner, and poor achiever in life, is thus largely determined in the first few years of a child's life, before the child enters school.

The damage caused by malnutrition, poor child care and lack of psycho-social stimulation in early childhood often lasts for the whole life, and it cannot be easily reversed later. That is why most developed countries invest heavily in early child development.

In Nepal, 16 % of children who enroll in grade 1 drop-out, and 30 % repeat the grade. Thus only 54 % continue on to grade 2. Lack of early child care and development is a key factor for this.

A study by Save the Children Fund in 2003 showed the instrumental role of ECD in increasing the efficiency of primary education in Nepal. In this study grade 1 children with some pre-primary early child development exposure had much higher success rate than those without.

Only 6% of children with ECD exposure repeated the grade compared to 37 % without ECD; 11 % of children with ECD dropped-out compared to 22 % without it. And 83 % of children with ECD were promoted to grade 2 compared with only 42 % without it.

It is well-known that having more women as primary teachers is not only desirable from the perspective of gender equality and social justice, but in Nepal, as in many other countries, it has a very direct impact on the enrolment and retention of girls in schools.

We only have 36% female teachers at the primary level, 19% in lower secondary and a miserable 12 % in higher secondary schools. Even the very modest government objective of having at least one female teacher in every primary school has not been achieved yet.

We must go for a much more ambitious goal of having at least 50 % of all teachers up to the high school level being women. I would urge all women's rights activists to give this issue a very high priority. This is one way in which educated women in Nepal can serve as role models for our young girls, and influence the whole of our future generation to become more gender sensitive and egalitarian.

Over-crowding in our classrooms is another huge problem, especially in the Terai. Compared to the recommended national average of less than 40 students per teacher at the primary level, the average in Terai districts is 60 students per teacher, and it is not uncommon to see over 100 children per class in many schools. There cannot be any meaningful teaching and learning in such huge classes.

It is estimated that Nepal has a shortage of at least 60,000 primary teachers, and the need to regularize some 18,000 existing temporary teachers. Rather than inflating the number of civil servants in many already over-staffed government offices, here is an opportunity for Nepal's new government to create jobs that are really needed for our educational development.

But teachers without adequate training and motivation are unlikely to help improve the quality of education in Nepal. Currently 38 % of our primary teachers are untrained. As most trained teachers gravitate towards better schools in urban areas, the vast majority of teachers in rural schools are effectively untrained and unskilled.

Nepal needs to invest massively in teacher training and ensuring that trained teachers are motivated enough to impart quality education. This is where the experience of Rato Bangla Foundation can be very helpful.

Finally, as Nepal is now committed to creating a more inclusive, egalitarian society, it is important to review the school curricula, textbooks and other educational materials and teaching methods, including the languages of instruction to ensure that it reflects the rich cultural and linguistic diversity of Nepal in a meaningful manner.

Honouring diversity without encouraging ethnocentric tendencies, adapting to the challenges and opportunities of the fast pace of globalization while preserving our unique local cultures is going to be a tricky balancing act for Nepal's leaders.

As basic education is likely to be a subject dealt with by the new local federal governments, this balancing act will become all the more important.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Having presented this diagnostic – of the good news and bad news in basic education in Nepal - let me share with you some recommendations and action points, including a possible role for the Rato Bangla Foundation.

Here is a 10 point agenda I would propose to make education a strong foundation for Nepal's development:

- 1. Quality Education for All:** With 90 percent net enrolment, quantitatively Nepal has made great progress towards universal primary education. But in terms of quality of education, we have a long way to go. Our new slogan should *not* be just education for all, but *quality* education for all.

Experts can agree on the minimum learning requirements, in terms of knowledge, aptitudes and skills that we expect students at different grade levels to acquire. Let us seek the help of schools like Rato Bangla with a track record of providing quality education and commitment to helping public, government schools to achieve such standards.

It is often said that huge financial investment is needed to provide quality education that poor countries like Nepal cannot afford. However, the Rato Bangla Foundation's outreach programme has shown that much can be done to improve the quality of education with relatively modest additional investment.

Use of locally produced educational materials in different types of Tin Trunk Library that RBF, World Education and UNICEF provide in Nepal is one example. Greater involvement of parents in the education of their children, is another helpful approach, as is genuine multi-grade teaching.

Many of these interventions require changes in attitudes and behaviour, not necessarily huge capital intensive investments.

- 2. Affirmative Action for the Disadvantaged:**

As with all basic services, in education too, reaching the last 10% is much harder than reaching the first 50%. With business as usual, incremental approach, it will take an unacceptably long time for Nepal to reach all the children who are not currently enrolled in primary school.

What is needed is an aggressive affirmative action plan to ensure that children of the Dalits, indigenous communities, children with disabilities and others who are disproportionately disadvantaged do get extra support for access to basic education.

Targeted scholarships, free textbooks, school meals and other incentives should be provided to reduce the opportunity cost for families of disadvantaged children. In recent years, a targeted “Welcome to School” campaign has already produced some good results. More such programmes are needed.

A rights-based approach to basic education can be helpful to secure greater public support for such affirmative action. Even well to do private schools and companies can be encouraged to support such affirmative action as part of their corporate social responsibility, if necessary with tax and other incentives.

3. Make Schools Truly Child-friendly:

Far from being safe, wholesome and joyful centres of learning, many schools in Nepal are places where children fear to go. Teachers are often untrained, uncaring, and quick to give corporal punishment. Schools are dirty and lack minimum sanitary facilities, especially for girls. There are no sports activities or recreational facilities. The method of instruction involves rote learning rather than encouraging children to explore, analyze and understand what they are learning.

Here again, there are excellent child-centred learning approaches pioneered by institutions like the Bank Street College of Education and introduced in Nepal as part of RBF’s outreach programme. UNICEF, UNESCO, World Education and others have rich experience world-wide in child-friendly schools. Nepal needs to benefit from these experiences, and make going to school a truly joyful and stimulating experience for our students.

A test of whether a school is truly child-friendly is to ensure that it is especially girl-friendly. Worldwide experience has shown that girl-friendly schools are beneficial for boys as well, whereas the other way around is not always the case.

Listening to children’s views and promoting their participation are other features of child-friendly approach.

4. Expand Early Child Development Programmes:

Societies derive extraordinary long-term benefits from investing in early child development. Among the most tangible, early benefits are in school performance by children. Nepal’s very high

gross enrolment rate in grade 1, as well as the high rate of drop-outs and repetition in the early grades is in large part attributable to lack of any pre-primary education and psycho-social stimulation of children.

While there has been quite fast growth of kindergartens and pre-school centres in urban areas and district headquarters of Nepal, the quality of these centres leaves much to be desired. In rural areas such facilities are very rare.

Still, it is reported that there are some 16,000 ECD centres of varying qualities in different parts of Nepal.

The Nepal government's goal is to establish 74,000 ECD centres and reach 80 % gross enrolment by 2015. This worthy goal deserves full support, with concomitant investment in training and deployment of pre-school child care workers, monitors and teachers.

5. Vastly Increase Women Teachers

Nepal needs at least 60,000 additional primary teachers right away, and perhaps a similar number of early child care monitors. Further increases will be needed as net enrolment reaches 100 % and the concept of basic education going up to 8th grade is introduced as part of the School Sector Reform starting in 2009.

In hiring additional primary teachers, as well as pre-school monitors, priority should be given to recruiting qualified women.

Instead of the current target of having at least one female teacher in every primary school, we should adopt a more ambitious goal of having at least 50 percent of all teachers being women by 2015 or sooner. Given that currently only about a third-of the teachers are women, to compensate for this imbalance we should adopt an affirmative action policy of recruiting at least two-thirds of the new teachers to be women.

In Nepal, as well as elsewhere in the world, it has been shown that having women teachers is conducive to attracting and retaining more girls in school, especially from some of the more conservative families, and making schools more child-friendly. Having more women teachers also helps serve our broader national goal of gender equality and empowerment of women.

However, to attract and retain women teachers, and to deploy them where they are needed most, it is necessary to provide them with certain special facilities for their safety, security and comfort. This should not be considered an extra expense, but a valuable investment for Nepal's development as a progressive society.

6. Make Education Inclusive and Multi-cultural

Nepal's population is a mosaic of many ethnic, cultural and linguistic groups. But historically our education system has not been responsive to or reflective of this diversity. Our text books, other educational materials and teaching methods tend to perpetuate certain stereo-type images.

The language of instruction for the most part, has been one national vernacular, Nepali, although in recent years there has been a fashionable tendency to use English as medium of instruction, especially in private schools. Both the neglect of mother tongues and over-emphasis on rote learning of English starting at pre-primary level is pedagogically unsound.

Nepal needs a judiciously calibrated language policy for basic education. Experience of many multi-lingual countries can offer valuable lessons for Nepal. Depending on the level of development of the children's mother tongue, the wishes of their parents, and the demographics of the local community, a bilingual or tri-lingual policy maybe introduced. This usually involves initially using the child's mother tongue as medium of instruction, while gradually introducing a major national link language, and then a favoured international language.

But it would be unwise to follow a rigid formula in this regard. Pedagogical soundness and parents' wishes should be given priority over the wishes of ethnic or linguistic activists. Regardless of the language of instruction, the curricula should be sensitive to Nepal's rich and diverse cultural heritage, while preparing young Nepalis to be enlightened citizens of a rapidly globalizing world.

7. Cultivate Public-Private Partnership in Education

Basic education must be made a constitutional right of all children, and the government must invest adequate resources to provide all children with quality basic education. Nevertheless, in a democracy, parents should have the choice to send their children to private or parochial schools, if they so choose.

Indeed, private sector investment in education has flourished in Nepal in recent years, especially in urban areas. While some private schools offer high quality education, many are seen as highly commercialized money-making enterprises. Some religiously-affiliated private or community schools are also seen to be giving undue importance to proselytizing over academic excellence.

Nevertheless, private schools do meet a felt need of parents for quality education. Even many critics of private schools vote with their wallets to send their own children to such schools.

Instead of threatening to close private schools, or disempowering them through excessive political interference and over-regulation, Nepal should harness the power of public-private partnership to improve the quality of basic education.

Private schools should be required to meet certain minimum basic standards of the national curricula; safety and security of their students, teachers and staff; and ensure transparency in their

operations. Private schools should also be encouraged to reach out to and accommodate some poor but bright students, which some schools are already doing.

Beyond that, private schools should be encouraged, if necessary with some incentives, to help improve the quality of public schools in peri-urban and rural areas. In this context Rato Bangla offers a good example that is worth emulating and replicating.

This is an era of mutually beneficial public-private partnership. Given the proliferation of many private schools, Nepal could profitably harness such partnership for the benefit of public education.

8. Transform Schools into Zones of Peace

During the decade of conflict, many schools became battle zones, and were used by the Royal Nepal Army as their temporary barracks, and by the CPN-Maoist as recruiting grounds for their PLA. Much intimidation and violence was inflicted against children. And education was seriously interrupted.

The Maoists even used primary schools to teach a subject called “military science” that taught children how to make and use explosives, to serve as sentries and informers and to glorify revolutionary violence.

Alarmed by such exploitation of children and violation of their human rights, a number of Nepali NGOs and international organizations came up with the idea of considering children as a zone of peace.

Over a year ago UNMIN identified many under-age combatants in the Maoist PLA cantonments. The fact that they have not yet been released and rehabilitated, indicates that the sanctity of childhood, and respect for internationally-agreed children’s rights continue to be violated in Nepal.

To counter the culture of violence and impunity, we must teach our children peaceful resolution of conflicts and non-violence as core values of a new humanistic education system. And children as a whole and schools in particular must be regarded as inviolable zones of peace and tranquility.

9. De-politicization of Basic Education:

Currently Nepal suffers from hyper-politicization that affects all aspects of life. Teachers’ unions, student’s organizations and educational institutions, even at the primary level are not exempt from political activism, often quite unrelated to genuine educational issues.

All political parties in Nepal are guilty of such politicization of education. But as we are about to get a Maoist-led government, I want to share with them one profound observation made by Amartya Sen, the famous Bengali Nobel Prize winning economist.

He said that historically whenever Communist parties came to power, although they did many bad things, they had a consistent record of good achievements in basic health and education – in countries ranging from Russia, China, Vietnam, Cuba, Nicaragua, and elsewhere. But he had seen one major exception – West Bengal, where a reformist-sounding Communist Party had been in power continuously for over 18 years, but that the situation of health and education there was hardly any better than in Bihar or UP or other backward states of India.

Analyzing the reasons for this, in the case of education, Amartya Sen came to the conclusion that a major reason for this was the hyper-politicization of teachers in West Bengal. Unlike in other countries with Communist-led governments, party-affiliated teachers in West Bengal had become full-time political activists and neglected teaching. Hence the poor record of basic education in West Bengal.

I would hope that all our political parties, and especially the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ones, would learn from this experience and desist from over-politicization of teachers and students' unions, especially at the level of basic education.

10. Education as Genuine Peace Dividend for Nepal

Finally, I hope that our children's education will be the major beneficiary of the new era of peace and genuine democracy in Nepal.

Education suffered greatly during the decade of conflict. Not only were many schools destroyed and rendered dysfunctional, the construction of new schools, and expansion of rural education came to virtual standstill. Students, teachers and parents were all traumatized.

Even in urban areas, strikes, demonstrations, chakka-jams and jana-andolans led to prolonged closure of schools. Instead of pursuing higher education, hundreds of thousands of our youth went abroad in search of employment often braving great risk.

Now that peace and democracy are at hand, we must make up for all the lost time and opportunity.

Let us redouble our investment in education, by creating a "peace dividend" of reduced military expenditure, and other wasteful expenses. Let us recognize that education is not only a human right, it is the engine of all human development.

The 10 year war was fought by both sides in the name better future for our children. Now that peace and democracy are with us, let us redirect all our resources and energies for that better future – starting with quality basic education for all our children.

Thank you.