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COLONIALISM, EDUCATION, AND RURAL BUDDHIST COMMUNITIES IN BANGLADESH

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Cultural homogenization through the establishment of a centralized and standardized curriculum in education has become the dominant model in Bangladesh today, a model of education that is deeply rooted in the colonial legacy of materialism, acquisitiveness, and social exclusion (B. Barua, 2004; Gustavsson, 1990). Such a model is predicated on the notion that Bangladesh “is culturally homogenous, with one language, one dominant religion, and no ethnic conflict” (Hussain, 2000, p. 52). Predictably and unfortunately, the prospects for decolonization in a “post-colonial/independence context” still appear to be bleak since the state continues to rely on a centrally controlled and standardized educational system that is committed to cultural homogenization and social exclusion—a process that is being encouraged by foreign aid and international assistance (B. Barua, 2004; B.P. Barua, 2001; Mohsin, 2001).

A process of decolonization, in its commitment to harmonious cultural pluralism, relies on people’s knowledge, action, and participation through dialogue, critical reflection, contemplation, and creative application, as opposed to imposition and domestication (Freire, 1997; Rahman, 1994). In a praxis of decolonization, “learning is always an act of self-search and discovery” (Rahman, p. 222) and a process of rediscovery of self and community previously mutilated by colonial imposition and distortion. In the process of discovery, the Buddhist learning approach encourages learners to address colonial deformations through the cultivation of the inner self and contemplative practice to liberate minds from mental defilement and delusion (Sivaraksa, 1990). The Buddhist learning approach is eco-centric rather than anthropocentric and engenders cultural pluralism and biodiversity. It benefits communities and the natural environment (Sponsel & Natadecha-Sponsel, 1997). The Buddha’s model of education is not only “confined to the philosophical and psychological aspects of the religion but extends to the field of social service and the cultivation of self-discipline” (Dham-

mananda, 1996, p. 94). In fact, Buddhist education emerged as a “movement of renouncers” (Wijayartna, 1990, p. 1) with “decolonizing” (by questioning materialism and attachment) implications for the people of ancient India. It emerged as emancipatory education against political injustice, oppression, and social discrimination (Aloysius, 1998).¹ In the Buddhist model of education, justice is not only limited to human beings, it goes beyond human rights to embrace the rights of all living creatures, nature, and the environment. The principles of freedom, liberation, and self-reliance in society are integral to this model. In Buddhist education, the emphasis is on seeing, knowing, critical understanding, contemplation of mind (*citta sikkha*) and not on indoctrination or control and destruction of nature (Rahula, 1974a; Sivaraksa, 2005). Buddha never asked people to believe anything on blind faith alone and without questioning (Saddhatissa, 1971); rather, Buddhist contemplative learning practice developed through consciousness, awareness (*nama*), and life experience (Barua & Wilson, 2005). He used the words come and see (*ehi-passika in Pali*), i.e., contemplative learning and deep practical experience were to be dialectically engaged in reflective practice to develop educated persons whom he described as, “one who knows the higher values of life, who sacrifices lower values for higher values, who sacrifices material goods for love” (Bhasin, 1994, p. 8).

This paper will excavate pre-independence (British/Pakistan) and post-independence colonial education interventions into Buddhist culture and education with the view to expose the nature and shape of colonial domination and related Buddhist efforts at cultural and educational decolonization. This will be accomplished by (a) considering a brief description of Buddhist communities in Bangladesh and the development of a critical historical and contemporary description of how pre-independence (British and Pakistani) and post-independence Bangladeshi nationalist colonial education processes have attempted to displace cultural diversity and contemplative learning practice; (b) a related discussion on the contradictions of colonial education for economic growth and Buddhist values and economy; and (c) an elaboration of Buddhist cultural resistance, resilience, and attempts at decolonization through non-violent action.

Education is understood here in its broadest sense as learners and community members engaged in education through various avenues, including formal, non-formal, and informal processes. “Universal education” is seen as being synonymous with “colonial education” which, in turn, is conceived of as being driven by the rationale of the market and colonial economic growth/exploitative imperatives; a centralized system of educational control for the purposes of affecting cultural imposition, domestica-

tion, and domination of the “cultural other”; and an education that, in the final analysis, demonstrates a total disregard for cultural differences and social values (Dei, Hall, & Rosenberg, 2000; Freire, 1985; Shiva, 1997).

BUDDHIST COMMUNITIES, COLONIALISM, AND EDUCATION IN BANGLADESH

Bangladesh emerged as an independent nation state through a liberation struggle in December 1971, a struggle defined by the Bengali language and cultural identity (Jahan, 1996). Although Bangladesh is not considered an Islamic theocratic state, it is the third largest Muslim country in the world (Chowdhury, 2001). The Buddhist communities constitute about 0.6 percent of the total population of the country (Asian Studies Network Information, 1998). These Buddhist communities include the *Baruas*, *Chakmas*, *Marmas*, *Rakhaines*, *Simha-Barua*, *Tanchangyas*, *Kheyangs*, *Chaks*, and *Khumis*² (Khan, 1977, 1999; Mohsin, 1997). The languages of the Barua, Chakma, and Simha Barua belong to the Indo-Aryan group (Khan, 1977; Mohsin, 1997). Among these communities, the *Baruas*, the *Rakhaines*, and the *Simha-Barua* live mainly in Barguna, Chittagong, Cox’s Bazar, Comilla, and Patuakhali districts (Barua, 2004; Khan, 1977). These communities practice the Theravada tradition of Buddhism. The Buddhist tradition of Bangladesh cannot be separated from the culture of South and Southeast Asia (Barua, 2004; Khan, 2003). In this culture, the monasteries “became not only a spiritual center, but also a center of learning and culture” (Rahula, 1974a, p. 78). The Buddhist monasteries acted virtually as school(s) of the arts and crafts for Asia.³ The monasteries supervised even general schools in order to make life worth living (Watson, 1973). These monasteries were educational centers that were not just restricted to monks, but also catered to all community members. The educational process was dialectic (the art of debating) rather than didactic. Buddhist monks were not only trained and specialized in Buddhist teachings, but were also experts in agriculture, economics, and community development. The monasteries were able to provide diverse learning programs to the learners. The diverse curriculum emphasized a variety of issues from philosophy and arts and crafts to medicine and agriculture so as to increase the learner’s awareness of nature, the environment and social conditions (Barua, 2004; Gamage, 2001; Lama, 1990; Norberg-Hodge, 1991; Rahula, 1974b; Watson, 1994).

Historically, colonialism and colonial education in Bangladesh have worked hand in hand to displace and alienate minorities from their culture and socio-economic roots. Successive colonial and postcolonial govern-

ments have attempted to formulate their educational policies through the process of constitutional legislation and regulation in order to promote their political ideology and rapid economic development (Khatun, 1992). Models of colonial education have undermined indigenous/cultural knowledge and the ethical values of minorities while neglecting democratic political commitments to pluralism and a place for all minorities. The educational curriculum primarily nurtured and encouraged the dominant material and fiscal objectives of the colonial state in successive periods (Barua, 2004).

Colonial education in Bangladesh, which was introduced essentially for the purpose of training clerks and workers required for administration and economic profit, can be traced back to the British colonial period (Khatun, 1992). The British East India Company succeeded in colonizing most of the Indian subcontinent between 1750 and the 1850s. During this period, the villages of the Indian subcontinent were enslaved in relation to colonial capitalism and the international market. Under colonial policy, education became the paramount tool of colonialism and subjugation of the people in the subcontinent. Colonial education was founded with the establishment of the Committee of Public Instruction in 1823 in Bengal (Bandapaday, 1989). The seeds of colonial education were planted through the establishment of English education model (Anglo-Vernacular) Schools by the British ruler.⁴ The expansion of colonial education was intensified when, in 1858, Queen Victoria declared that hiring by the British government would be based on English language skills (Barua, 2004; Barua & Wilson, 2005). British colonial education was psychological indoctrination into an alien culture and values. Tagore⁵ was critical of colonial education:

The education we get does not match the lifestyle of ours, the urge for improvement of our home is not there in our books; our literature does not reflect the aspirations for changing the society where we are destined to live. We do not find the faces of our parents, brothers, sisters and friends in our education, our day to day life is never mentioned in our books, our environment including the sky, the world around, the crops, the rivers etc. is not there, then I get almost sanguine that there is no hope for matching of our life and education. The wall between the two will remain. Our shortcomings of life can never be overcome by this (English) education. This education is miles apart from the roots of our life. (Tagore, 1395 B.E, pp. 569-570)

British colonial education had molded learners through a system of rote learning in order to change their socio-cultural and ethical practices and prepare them for a market economy and industry. Such education fostered dependency rather than self-reliance and became a device for the development of a new local elite.

The British colonial past remained a major influence in the educational curriculum of the national system despite official independence from British colonial rule in the mid 1900s. The people of Bangladesh continued to be ruled by the government of Pakistan, with little change from British colonialism. During 25 years of Pakistani rule, educational policies neither fulfilled any socio-cultural aspiration nor did they meet the economic demands of the common people. Although Pakistan attained its independence based on the principle of *Pakistani nationalism*, it promoted educational policies based on religious ideals as the basis of education. Such values were safeguarded with the declaration of Islam as the state religion within the constitution of Pakistan in 1956 (Khatun, 1992). Unsurprisingly, social and cultural domination of Bangladesh by Pakistani rulers encouraged a political yearning for liberation and freedom. Over this period, Bangladeshis struggled to protect their cultural and linguistic rights within the political space of Pakistan. For instance, the people of Bangladesh sacrificed their lives for their linguistic rights in 1952. The Language movement of the Bengalis implanted the seeds of Bengali nationalism. This language movement sparked the liberation movement to re-establish Bengali cultural, social, political, and economic rights (Mohsin, 1997).

The liberation movement was launched in 1971 in the hope of establishing a secular state and to promote the cultural knowledge of the people and democratic education through the Bengali language (Khatun, 1992). In other words, the liberation movement mobilized the people to build a culturally homogenous state based on a Bengali identity. In so doing, the cultural identities and rights of ethnic minorities in the post-independence state were neglected in the new Constitution (Mohsin, 1997). At the same time, Bangladesh was predictably shaped by the cultural ideology of the majority Muslim community and the agenda of an emerging corporate political-economy. In 1975, the socio-political environment of the country turned towards a model of *Bangladeshi nationalism* by adopting religion within the constitution in order to mobilize the majority community of the country. This Bangladeshi nationalism evolved into a tool of domination as the diffusion of the religious ideology of a majority group in the politics of Bangladesh was initiated by disregarding the principles of secularism (Chowdhury, 2001; Mohsin, 1997). The country followed a path towards "religious orthodoxy" (Khondker, 2003, p. 14) which promoted a particular type of religion with the support of political parties that eventually marginalized ethnic minorities. The state further enhanced its Islamic character through the Proclamations (Amendment) Order of 1977. Additionally, the eight amendments to the constitution in 1988 transformed the state by adopting Islam as the

state religion (Chowdhury, 2001; Mohsin, 1997). Under this constitutional amendment, educational policies shifted toward the pre-independence/Pakistani era in an effort to promote an Islamic ideology while ignoring the cultural diversity of the country (Khatun, 1992). It created ambivalence and a contradictory environment within the educational system of the country. The well-known educationist, Khatun (1992), asserted:

But inclusion of this [aim] in education is a debatable issue because there are believers of other faiths who might not subscribe to this belief. Besides teaching such an aim would not be an easy task for the teacher when there are children of many faiths in his/her classes. (p. 72)

Even though Bangladesh initially attempted to overhaul the colonial education system, this effort succumbed to internal political conflict and wrangling in the country. Khondker (2003) eloquently remarked:

The historically rooted social and political conditions in Bangladesh have contributed to a return to the pendulum like movement in the construction and reconstruction of national identity. Today secular, tomorrow Islamic and again secular, and now Islamic Bangladesh as a nation seems to be unable to make up its mind (sic). The swings of national questions, the construction and again reconstruction can be attributed to the interface of local traditions and global forces. (p. 10)

As a result, the socio-cultural values of minority communities have again been neglected through the politics of centralized authority. The state mechanisms continue to determine and shape the cultural conditions of the people through a generalized curriculum in light of the constitutional framework and party politics.

As the educational policy "could not overcome the colonial pattern of development of the British and the Pakistan periods" (Khatun, 1992, p. 123), social exclusion was continued in the country through an educational curriculum that proclaimed nationalism and cultural homogenization (Barua, 2001; Barua, 2004; Mohsin, 1997). Although in recent times educational intervention has been able to eliminate some disparity with regard to gender equity and access to schooling (Chowdhury, Nath, & Chowdhury, 2003) in the name of universal education, it has excluded the socio-cultural values of ethnic minorities⁶ through the practice of a centralized curriculum. The centralized curriculum policy has, in fact, ignored the issues of spirituality and ethical values of ethnic minorities in the country (Barua, 2004).

Educational, economic, political, and cultural environments are controlled by the politics of *nationalism* and Islamization in Bangladesh (Barua, 2001; Mohsin, 1997). This trend is often promoted by the party politics

of *confrontation* in order to establish domination and control in society/educational institutions through the use of *mastaans* (*institutionalized muscle men*) as political resources (Sobhan, 2001). This political confrontation has become so severe that people split into groups that fight one another in an attempt to secure state power in the name of democracy. Minorities who do not hold equal power within the politics of the nation state, are then forced to learn the culture of the dominant or majority group. For Buddhist communities, it has become difficult to establish their own educational, social, and cultural rights within this politics of contestation in Bangladesh. Their voices are neglected or relegated to the margin by centralized policy and the domination of majority party politics (Barua, 2004). Since they are isolated from the politics of power, they are not able to practice their culturally based education within the framework of the generalized curriculum of the educational institutions in Bangladesh.

The texts and books of the schools in the areas of social studies, agricultural science, general knowledge, geography, history and economics do not focus on the Buddhist culture and society. The education usually offered at the primary and secondary schools are dissimilar to the Buddhist values. (Rona, research participant cited in Barua, 2004)

Unfortunately, Bangladesh educational planners neither understood Buddhist socio-cultural and ethical values, nor did they realize the plight of the Buddhist community. Rather, the educational curriculum has tended to separate villagers from nature and life. In education, Buddhist culture and civilization are excluded from the curriculum. For this reason, boys and girls are not able to learn the social history, culture, and civilizational contributions of their society.

The present curriculum or syllabus of formal education is not based on Buddhist ethics or culture. It does not even address the issue of our village context. The curriculum mostly focuses on the city and urban economy. After attaining a formal education, it is difficult for a person to survive in the village. They do not find any status and life. For this reason, they feel more comfortable living in the city. To be honest, the educated one lives in the city. (Barun, research participant cited in Barua, 2004)

In fact, for all intents and purposes the present system does not offer anything meaningful to the Buddhist community. The centralized curriculum has influenced the Buddhists towards Western science and a materialistic way of life. This has been at the expense of Buddhist ethical values and their own socio-cultural and economic base, all in the name of modernity and development (Ariyaratne, 1996; Norberg-Hodge, 1991).

Education does not give us any moral or ethical values. Now we have a fancy school building, but we do not receive any real education suitable to our culture and land. The education that we receive through formal or non-formal settings teaches us to disregard our culture, elders, society and environment. (Mona, research participant cited in Barua, 2004)

Such destruction of ethical values and culture is contrary to Buddhist learning. Notably, the construction of Buddhist knowledge is deeply ingrained in nature and the environment, which is always centered on the welfare of all living beings (Sivaraksa, 1992). In contrast, the colonial form of education is generated within the four walls of buildings for the benefit of a few individuals without any connection to nature and the environment. Because of this “post-colonial” policy, the Buddhist approach of integrated learning has been displaced through the introduction of rote learning by the current school system in the country. As a result, we see cultural homogeneity or cultural denial, degradation of the environment and dislocation of local economics (Bowers, 1997; O’Sullivan, 2002; Sobhan, 2001). Such environmental devastation, discrimination, and imposition contradict Buddhist educational values, learning, and ethics.

THE CONTRADICTIONS OF COLONIAL EDUCATION FOR ECONOMIC GROWTH AND BUDDHIST VALUES AND ECONOMY

The present centralized form of education is geared towards the investment of human capital to ensure higher economic growth for the global export market. Educational content as per the human capital approach emphasizes technical skills and knowledge with little regard for ethics and human rights. This centralized control model of education continues to be dependent upon external knowledge inputs rather than on the diversity of local knowledge and resources. The human capital approach indoctrinates learners in to the urban-based economic growth model with the financial and technical assistance of bilateral and multilateral donors in the country (Barua, 2004; Khatun, 1992; Rahman, 1994). In other words, it tends to destroy cultural diversity through the promotion of a single culture. Education has been involved in disenfranchising learners through a system of mimic learning in order to prepare them for the market economy and to sustain export-oriented growth in the free-trade zones of Bangladesh. “Pursuit of knowledge has become a thing of minor importance in the existing system” (Siddiqui, 2000, p. 159) of education. It is mostly concerned with class lectures, theories, degrees, certificates, and cities rather

than social engagement and critical learning. This trend often compels the Buddhist community to abandon their socio-cultural roots and cultural knowledge. Over the years, this education has pushed the rural Buddhist communities off their land to a city-based livelihood in order to ensure their economic and social survival. According to Chaudhuri (1982):

The touch of modern (colonial) education gave them a broad outlook and an undaunted zeal to upgrade their standard of living as well as a means of livelihood... One will not find among the Baruas and Chakmas only farmers and cultivators, but also scores of distinguished doctors, engineers, professors, school teachers, respectable service holders, advocates, judges, businessmen and the like.⁷ (pp.59-60)

This economically oriented educational system acts as a process of dislocation of "human resources" from rural areas to the urban centers. Such a model not only contradicts Buddhist values and spirituality but fundamentally alienates the community members from their social and cultural environment and does not help learners to practice an art of community (*sangha*) living. It neglects the inner contentment of learners (Lama & Cutler, 1998; Vipassana Research Institute, 1994). The primary focus is on technological development and economic growth without wisdom. "Knowledge without wisdom is suicidal and self-destructive" (Ariyaratne, 1996, p. 152). Such knowledge has brought the earth to the edge of extinction.

On the contrary, the Buddhist model of education tends to focus on learning about the world within. This helps learners to learn the *art of collective living* (*sangha*) through cultivation of inner contentment. It provides an integrated learning approach in education in order to foster eco-centric development and happiness within the community (Badnier, 1990; Lama & Cutler, 1998; Vipassana Research Institute, 1994). The Buddhist model promotes the cultivation of wisdom rather than the use of mere information and narrow skills in the learning process. If wisdom (knowledge and skills) is not cultivated toward the benefit of the community, education becomes meaningless (Ariyaratne, 1996). For the Buddhist communities, the educational foundation must be grounded in and practiced through the cultivation of mindfulness, awareness, and wisdom and the promotion of contemplative learning and sustainable development through profound engagement (Barua, 2004; Barua & Wilson, 2005).

The Buddhist perspective includes an economics of sufficiency rather than greed-based growth economics. The minimum consumption of resources also helps to sustain a locally self-sufficient economy. This requires simple living and modest consumption. The production of local resources for local needs is the most appropriate mode of economic life in

a Buddhist society. This model does not encourage the stimulation of unlimited goods for individual benefit. The foundation of a Buddhist economy culture is not based in an accumulation of needs but in the refinement of human quality (Badnier, 1990; Gohlert, 1991; Jones, 1988; Schumacher, 1973). It is eco-centric and promotes cultural diversity and pluralities of knowledge. The Buddhist educational approach sensitizes learners to think reflectively without dependence on external support to control unbridled materialistic desire, greed and destruction in society. It makes learners spiritually committed in order to practice *siladhamma* (sila refers to ethical practice and dhamma refers to truth, or justice or education) for the well-being of all living things. The Buddhist model of education does not disconnect economic and social issues from ethical values or spiritual practices (Batchelor, 1990; Goulet, 1991; Norberg-Hodge, 1991; Sponsel & Natadecha-Sponsel, 1997).

CULTURAL RESISTANCE THROUGH NON-VIOLENT ACTIVISM

Having encountered social oppression and imposition, Buddhist communities have always been persistent about reclaiming their cultural identity and re-establishing their own educational model through non-violent action in Bangladesh. In this effort, the mobilization of Theravada Buddhism, a non-violent cultural resistance movement in 1864 empowered the Buddhist communities and established their socio-political and cultural rights in greater Bengal. During this period, Buddhist cultural learning was included in the English schools' curriculum (Barua, 1978; Chaudhuri, 1982; Khan, 1977). All of these English curriculum based institutions were established in close proximity to monasteries being operated under the guidance of local monks. A few model English schools were also established, with apparent Buddhist complicity, in the Buddhist majority villages of Bangladesh in the latter part of the 19th century (Barua, 2004; Chaudhuri, 1982). Such an extension of English education within the Buddhist community was perhaps a political strategy to influence British colonial rulers and to continue to establish *Buddhist cultural identity* "within English schools" while simultaneously gaining some measure of British "colonial protection" from social and cultural oppression of Buddhist society by other communities in "greater India." Perhaps the Buddhist communities also felt that domination by British colonial agents would be less severe than by local dominant groups and rulers due to their (British) more distant geographic location. Although the Buddhist communities were al-

lowed to include cultural learning and *Pali* language courses in these educational institutions, the British colonial administration was also engaged in an attempt at displacing monastery-based education and indigenous schools through the expansion of a colonial model of education in the Indian subcontinent (Barua, 2004).

Having understood these political realities, Buddhist communities also engaged in a process of decolonization through monastic education in the village. An organization called *Shanga Shammalani* was established in 1874 to mobilize and facilitate Buddhist ethical education throughout the country. The monks and the people were united based on their Buddhist ideology rather than on any national or ethnic identity. Great efforts were taken to train and educate monks and community members on Buddhist ethics and values. The monasteries were re-mobilized with the support of the community in the Buddhist villages. In this effort, the monasteries of each village were used as a center of learning, social empowerment, and development in their respective communities (Barua, 2004).

At the same time, socially engaged Buddhists of Bangladesh and greater Bengal founded the *Chattagram Bauddha Samity* (Chittagong Buddhist Association) in 1887 in order to establish Buddhist cultural identity and community in "greater India." When first founded, the Samiti officials informed the colonial authorities of their separate identity in Bangladesh, as well as in greater India. In 1892, this struggle created space for the birth of the *Bauddha Dharmankur Sabha* (Bengal Buddhist Association) in Calcutta. This organization established political contact within the larger Buddhist community in Asia (Barua, 1978; Chaudhuri, 1982). However, the momentum of the Buddhist cultural resistance movement eventually became stagnant due to the partition of the Indian subcontinent. In other words, the movement could not mobilize on a greater scale due to the changing political situation. Ethnic conflict between the Punjabis and Bengalis during the period of Pakistani rule (Barua, 2004; Dewan, 1990), the major political distraction of the time however, enabled the Buddhist movement to sustain itself largely unnoticed as a marginal minority in the broader landscape of ethnic strife.

Despite the odds, Buddhists continued to redefine and re-organize education by reinventing the concept of Buddhist learning and cultural diversity. For example, village communities have been engaged in mobilizing contemplative learning practices such as *vipassana* through the network of monasteries (Barua, 2004). The word *vipassana* means seeing things as they really are in their right nature. *Vipassana* meditation can be explained as a method of purifying the mind from its base nature so

that one begins to manifest the proper human qualities of goodwill, kindness, sympathy, tolerance, peace, humanity, and equanimity. The practice of *vipanassa* or mindfulness is not an escape from the social environment, rather it prepares learners for re-entry into the community with deep commitment and devotion to offer and ensure better quality services to all living beings without greed and hatred (Hanh, 1992; Jones, 1988). In the District of Chittagong Hill Tracts, *Raj Bon Vihar* of Rangamati and *Pannya Pssnaram Vihar* of Bandarban have been actively engaged in promoting ethical practices in order to nurture peace and social development in the villages (Barua, 1997; Thra, 2004).

In addition, Buddhist villages are deeply engaged in practicing the *pabbajja* ceremony and other cultural events in monasteries. Usually every male member of a family ordains as a novice Buddhist monk for at least a period of seven days in order to learn Buddhist ethics and practice non-violent action in a monastic environment (Barua, 1978). In Watson's view (1973), "whereas parents gave life, monks imparted a way of life and knowledge which made the life worth living" (p. 517). Buddhist monasteries have been sustained as educational centers in the villages despite social and cultural oppression (Barua, 2004). In recent times the engaged Buddhist social movements have also been in the forefront in Bangladesh with the support of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists in order to extend the education of engaged Buddhism in the country (Sivaraksa, 2005). In this effort, the Arakanese Research Society of Bangladesh has been active in promoting education through publications in the country. Its journal *Arakanese Research* is prominent and available for both local readers in Bangladesh and an international readership.

Similarly, many Buddhist villages continue to take issue with state-controlled "universal models" of education through non-violent action in the villages. For instance, villagers send their children to the monasteries for education and the promotion of development that benefits all society, despite the massive expansion of universal education and schooling in the villages (personal observation). The communities also realize that the colonial model of education has persistently engaged in constructing an allegiance to materialism and an alien culture which are contrary to Buddhist values. For the Buddhists, it is a question of finding the middle path between materialistic illusions and a non-violent means for achieving the right livelihood in society and it is this understanding that keeps villagers engaged with education in the monasteries.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

From a Buddhist standpoint, the post-independence Bangladeshi nation state has not transformed colonial policies and regulations. The agendas and policies of the post-independence state have continued to follow the path of assimilation and homogenization and are biased towards the dominant Muslim majority. The political context of today's Bangladesh has been confined to Bengali nationalism, Bangladeshi nationalism, Islamic Bangladeshi/Islamism and a market economy agenda. None of these agendas attempt to uphold cultural diversity and cooperative living in the country. This politics of nationalism has alienated or marginalized Buddhist communities. Moreover, this politics has shaped educational interventions in the country, interventions that continue to ignore cultural diversity and the need for decolonization of the curriculum. This practice of education destroys existing cultural capital and local economic resources for the sake of the global market economy and constructs an artificial social fabric in the country. Such an agenda is a threat to cooperative living and learning.

Regrettably, the educational planners of Bangladesh have neither understood Buddhist socio-cultural values, nor have they realized the plight of the Buddhist communities. Rather, the centralized curriculum design policy has neglected the emotional, spiritual, cultural, and contemplative learning practice of Buddhist communities. Historically, the British colonial form of education was designed to dis-empower rural Buddhist communities in Bangladesh. As this colonial education has persisted in creating the image of progress through industrialized society, the people in Buddhist villages have also been engaged in processes of decolonization through non-violent means. In this effort, the villagers send their children to the monasteries for education and to practice ethical values through contemplative learning. For the Buddhist communities, it is a question of finding the middle path of education through the cultivation of peace, right action, and eco-centric development in society for the good of all. From this perspective, a Buddhist approach to education continues to offer a contemplative learning environment that emphasizes critical awareness (*nama*), contemplation of mind (*citta sikkha*), compassion (*karuna*), and loving kindness (*metta*) in order to nurture cultural diversity, democratic values, and a sense of belonging in the community. It rejects the notion of social discrimination and does not resort to imposition and domestication in the learning process. Most importantly, the Buddhist learning approach sensitizes learners to cultivate the notion of *ahimsa* (non-violence) and practices cultural diversity in the learning process in order to develop healthy communities. This approach certainly offers a unique perspective

on the learning process, a process that nurtures collective living and seeks to develop mutual respect between diverse communities in the country.

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NOTES

¹For example, it is worthy to mention that Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian Constitution, mobilized social movement against social injustice in post-colonial India. He reconstructed Buddhism as an emancipatory education in order to establish the rights of the Dalits in India. Million of Dalits embraced the Buddhist social movement in order to liberate themselves from the oppression of the caste system from 1956 to 1966. The establishment of the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement of volunteer

work camps in Sri Lanka applied Buddhist concept of education to empower the marginalized people in the rural areas (see Aloysius, 1998; Ariyaratne, 1996).

²These groups also known as Maghs, Jummas and Upajatis. The word Magh, Jumma and Upajati are used in a derogatory sense by the mainstream population in Bangladesh. The Baruas have never embraced these terms in order to avoid cultural humiliation. See Barua, 2004; Dewan, 1990; Khan, 2003.

³For example, the famous Nalanda was built in BC 415-455. In the tenth century, there were ten thousand resident students. They came from all parts of India and foreign lands. The conqueror, Ikhtiyaruddin Baktiyar Khilji, destroyed and uprooted the famous education center including the library. See Bandapaday, 1973; Khan, 1977.

⁴An English school was first established in Chittagong region by the British Colonial Government in 1863 and eventually a high school was opened in 1869. Apart from government aid or government inspection, Bangladesh had quite a few indigenous schools. See Hunter, 1876.

⁵The Nobel Laureate, Rabindranath Tagore, was noted for his great respect for Buddhism. Notably, his work, 'Chandalika' (Untouchable Girl) clearly reflected the teachings of the Buddha. Tagore built the Visva-Bharati University in West Bengal on the model of the Buddhist monasteries that were centers of education and development in ancient India. In his school curriculum, he included philosophical aspect of Buddhism to promote eco-centric education and community development. See Bandapaday, 1973.

⁶A total of 45 distinct ethnic groups live in Bangladesh. See Sagar & Poulson, 2003.

⁷Unfortunately, this notion was applied in the belief that indigenous education is inferior and weak.

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**THE DECOLONIZATION OF
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