

The Bias Behind Nomadic Education

Education is an issue of utmost importance in the world we live in today. Education is seen as a basic right and the means to achieving one's full potential as a human being. It is also viewed as the means to overcoming social and economic inequality. Unfortunately, although education is essential, it is not a simple endeavor. Those seeking to bring education to nomadic people have generally met with failure. Few people take the time to study the underside of formal education projects, and to recognize the inherent problems of the education of nomadic peoples.

There are four major barriers to success in nomadic education projects. First, state education has underlying political goals of assimilating and integrating groups into the state and thereby strengthening the state. Political leaders seek to create a sense of state identity in the students and to instruct them on their duties as citizens. At the same time, ethnic identities are dismissed or ignored in schools. Nomadic people, with strong ethnic identities and often suspicious of meddling governments, avoid the schools. If education is coupled with efforts to restrict the movement of nomadic people or encourage a change of lifestyle, nomadic people are given even more reason to distrust them.

Secondly, the cultural irrelevance and insensitivity of school curriculum can cause disinterest and high drop out rate. Curriculum generally reflects the cultural goals and outlook of the state or the outside world. Classes are often taught in the national language which young children cannot understand and in the cultural context of a sedentary lifestyle which is equally foreign. Formal education projects often have the goal of transforming nomadic pastoralists into wage laborers, sedentary farmers, or modern livestock producers. Education has failed to increase livestock productivity for nomadic pastoralists, and educators have failed to realize that local knowledge passed down from generation to generation and specially suited to a group's distinct environment is valuable and cannot be replaced with modern production techniques. They also fail to realize that pastoralism is more than an economic mode of production but a way of life in which livestock represents one's cultural identity. Social relations and communal living are built around livestock. Livestock provides the owner with social capital and prestige which can be more valuable to the owner than cash. Nomadic people are understandably disinterested in formal education which does not enhance but undermines children's ability to follow the group's unique lifestyle.

Additionally, formal education can disrupt the social workings of communities. It is important to recognize that there is informal education already in existence in every society and that formal education can potentially disrupt this system. In pastoralist societies children learn from their elders through their participation in household or community tasks. Outsiders are quick to demand that parents stop depending on children for labor and send them to school. In reality, children are not only playing a role in the community's survival but are being prepared for adulthood and learning specialized knowledge such as animal husbandry, agricultural techniques, weaving, food preparation, oral histories, and conflict resolution. Formal education changes the social norms and relationships in the community as teachers replace elders as figures of authority and

school subjects replace knowledge children need to continue the nomadic pastoralist way of life.

Formal education is seen as necessary for the nomadic people to interact economically with the outside world and be represented politically in their state.

The world we live in is one of increasing privatization, monetization, and commoditization of labor, and assumptions are often made that those following a traditional nomadic lifestyle are backward and out-dated. Education is often an effort to link nomadic people to national or global markets. It is undeniable that the needs of nomadic people are great. They are frequently on the periphery of national society with little representation, low literacy rates, and a lack of essential services. Education is important but must be developed with clear goals that take into account the nomadic lifestyle and strengthen their cultural heritage rather than undermine it.

Due to the difficulty of the task, it is imperative to study carefully past education projects for nomadic people and seek to replicate the successful practices and discard the unsuccessful practices. The Qashqa'i education project was successful in many ways and the Center for International Study and Development will reproduce vital aspects of the Qashqa'i project. The Qashqa'i are a nomadic people who live in Fars province in south and southwest Iran. They are Shi'i Muslim, Turkish-speaking and are made up of a number of tribes and sub-tribes. During Reza Shah's reign, the Iranian government sought to break the political power and ethnic identity of the Qashqa'i and introduced a settlement program and education meant to create in the Qashqa'i children a strong national identity. Many returned to their nomadic lifestyle, and the Qashqa'i reemerged as a political entity during the 1940's after Mohammad Reza became Shah in 1941. Those who had received a formal education during the years of forced settlement were a valuable resource to the Qashqa'i leaders and were able to represent the Qashqa'i to outsiders and the Iranian regime. After the failed coup in 1953, the political climate changed in Iran. In 1957, the Shah disbanded the Qashqa'i confederation and exiled Qashqa'i leaders who did not support his regime.

During the late 1950's, Mohammad Bahmanbaigi, a Qashqa'i man who had studied law at Tehran University and had worked with Qashqa'i leaders, developed a the Qashqa'i literacy program. He garnered support from the Iranian government who saw it as a means integrating the Qashqa'i into the national society and gaining greater control over them. The United States supported the program as well. The project had the unforeseen result of strengthening the Qashqa'i cultural identity rather than subverting it as the Iranian regime had hoped.

Bahmanbaigi began by training sixty teachers. Over the course of the project, 8,921 teachers were trained. Bahmanbaigi required that the teachers have at least an elementary school education, be at least 17 years old, pass a written exam, have a nomadic and tribal background, and be interviewed by Bahmanbaigi. Bahmanbaigi purposefully chose applicants from lower socioeconomic levels but encouraged elite families to send their daughters to teacher training in order to decrease the high male to female ratio and to persuade non-elite families to send their daughters to school. Otherwise, teachers from

lower socioeconomic levels were deemed more appropriate for the task at hand. Teacher training was a twelve month program. Trainees were given free food, lodging, and tuition. Successful teachers often visited to demonstrate successful techniques and give feedback on the trainees teaching skills. Upon completion of the program, they were given a white canvas tent, chalk and chalkboard, a Persian dictionary and a box containing materials for basic scientific experiments.

The elementary schools were mobile co-educational tent schools for grades 1-5. The teachers traveled with the camp and transported the school equipment from camp to camp. The elementary school graduates either continued their education at the boarding high school setup in Shiraz especially for the nomadic children or went on to the teacher training school. Many parents could not afford to send their children to higher levels of education after completion of elementary school. Nevertheless, the basic education the Qashqa'i received had a tremendous effect.

It was essential to Bahmanbaigi, that the literacy program not be an alien, destabilizing force that would breed hostility. He worked to harmonize the project's goals with the traditional Qashqa'i culture. The teacher trainees participated in a weekly cultural activity. The women did circle dances traditionally danced at weddings and the men played stick games. Bahmanbaigi would often speak before the activities began, lecturing on the power of literacy, a power they could spread to their people. Once a year for several days, a gathering called *ordu* was organized. Students, teachers, trainees, and government officials gathered. Students were examined and successful teachers were rewarded and low performing teachers were sometimes shamed in public. Music was played during the festivities of *ordu* and attendees remember it as a time of high excitement similar to the gatherings of Qashqa'i leaders and their best fighters in preparation for an attack in days gone by. Bahmanbaigi was aware of the changes education would bring and was careful to guide it on a course that was natural and incremental. He spoke of literacy replacing guns in a fight against ignorance. Instead of training warriors, he was training teachers. The schools and training centers, and annual gatherings brought scattered Qashqa'i together to learn and achieve in cooperation with each other. Qashqa'i students' sense of ethnic solidarity grew, and they grew to realize the power and expanse of the Qashqa'i. Schools taught children about their history and gave them the power through literacy to express their cultural identity through writing. Every teacher was required to own and wear a set of traditional ethnic clothing. The ethnic dress of their teachers taught children that education and the % culture were compatible. While many children had seen their fathers begin to replace their ethnic clothing with urban styles, they were given role models who embraced the % ethnicity and showed them that ethnic solidarity and progress could go hand in hand.

Youth with an education took on important roles within communities as they became useful to their elders. Teachers took on a leadership position in the community as they became the liaisons between communities and government officials and the outside world. The education program not only promoted unity and strengthened the % youth's cultural awareness but also removed the % from their isolated state and gave them the ability to engage the Iranian government and gain recognition as a sector of Iranian society. While in the past, the % viewed outsiders with suspicion, the education project

taught them tolerance and how to interact with outside world. Youth learned how to resolve disputes and address the needs of their people through legal channels and involvement in civil society. % began to gain positions in civil employment which enabled them to represent their people. Education helped the % preserve and promote their culture but at the same time they became aware of and participants in the national society, just as the Iranian government had hoped. The % strengthened their sense of ethnic identity while at the same time gaining a sense of their national identity.