

Book Reviews

Lokranjan Parajuli, Devendra Uprety and Pratyoush Onta, eds. 2021.
School Education in Nepal: History and Politics of Governance and Reforms. Kathmandu: Martin Chautari.

In 2016, I emailed Pratyoush Onta requesting guidance for an article I was conceptualizing for a national daily. I needed historical context to describe ongoing trends in Nepal's education sector. Onta directed me to his seminal paper, "Ambivalence Denied: The Making of *Rastriya Itihas* in Panchayat Era Textbooks." Its revised version appears as the fourth chapter of *School Education in Nepal: History and Politics of Governance and Reforms*. Onta also suggested that I read *Education in Nepal: Problems, Reforms and Social Change*, edited by Pramod Bhatta (2009). Among other issues, Bhatta's book describes two major educational projects piloted during the 1990s and funded by international donor agencies: the Basic and Primary Education Project (BPEP) and the Community Schools Support Project (CSSP).

In 2019, I went to Martin Chautari, once again seeking guidance regarding a long-form article I was writing about a small educational project in Sindhupalchok. Parajuli and Uprety, the other two editors of this volume, pointed out key policy reform programs from Nepal's past in order to contextualize the dynamics between local leaders in the present. Onta's article had helped me understand how Panchayat-era policies—most notably the National Education System Plan, unveiled in 1971—were in fact a political propaganda carefully designed to take control of the sector and manufacture a simplified national history. After talking to Parajuli and Uprety, I began to make sense of the lingering impact of that propaganda and how it was influencing ongoing debates related to Nepal's education policies. Having now read the ten chapters compiled in this book, I have a deeper understanding of how rulers, starting from the Rana regime, have attempted to control public education as a political strategy. I also have a broader understanding of the current federal mandate to bring school education under the jurisdiction of local governments. This mandate is a result of various dynamics, global trends as well as local histories. Different groups seem to have different understandings. Some claim that the school handover policy is against public interest because it is "a way to discourage

government spending on education and promote privatization” (p. 303), even though public education in Nepal was largely facilitated by local communities before the nationalization of education during the Panchayat era (Chapter Three). In addition, teachers’ unions are vehemently opposed to that plan because they claim that when the parliament amended the 1971 Education Act in 2001, it did not “consult with teachers institutionally even once” (p. 298), an aspect covered by Uprety in Chapter Eight.

School Education in Nepal: History and Politics of Governance and Reforms, the 105th publication of Chautari Book Series, provides invaluable historical insight into individuals whose parents might have been banned from getting schooled (during the Rana regime); into *Janajāti* communities who might have been coerced into abandoning their mother tongues in order to learn Nepali (during the Panchayat regime); and into citizens fighting to enroll children in the best private school in town (a result of post-1990s neoliberalism). Those who get ostracized and marginalized and who continue to struggle do not necessarily understand the forces that are against them. Often, they might not even understand the nature of their own ambitions and desires if they are unable to glean the bigger picture and if researchers and historians do not dedicate resources to weave disparate accounts in order to construct a coherent narrative.

And that is what the three editors of this book have done. By compiling robust research papers related to education in Nepal and by aligning them with four major political periods in recent Nepali history, they have constructed a credible narrative buttressed by numerous citations, linked to various historical sources, and peer reviewed by respected academics. The narrative itself is disheartening. The reader will not encounter empathetic leaders or inspiring ideologies. In fact, we learn that the various governments that ruled during the four political periods—pre-Panchayat era (pre-1960), Panchayat era (1960–1990), democratic period (1990–2015), and the federal transition period (post-2015)—directly intervened in and manipulated educational policies to consolidate power. Each chapter provides fascinating glimpses into the dominant mindsets of the period and how leaders, shaped by those mindsets, responded by using education as a tool to craft minds, shape identities, and manufacture a sense of nationhood. In the current federal transition period, the political class has been covertly endorsing market-led dynamics in the education sector for commercial gains. For example, the

blurred public-private boundaries and the complex financing of Nepal's state-run schools are explored by Uma Pradhan and Karen Valentin in Chapter Ten.

Historical accounts become fascinating if the evidence presented complicates conventional wisdom or problematizes ideas easily accepted by mainstream culture. For example, in the first chapter, Parajuli writes that instead of completely barring public education, late-Rana rulers conducted experiments, most notably the introduction of the Basic Education System practiced in India. During much of their cruel regime, the Ranas had prohibited the masses from having any access to education. By the time of Chandra Shamsheer's reign in the early decades of the twentieth century, there was a need for more skilled workers to manage the expanding bureaucracy. He set up *Śrestā Pāthśālā*, a book/record-keeping school with the aim of producing low-level clerks (p. 36). Chapter Two, written by Jeremy Rappleye, is perhaps the most illuminating. It is an account of Nepal's modern education system framed through the untold story of an American professor and his country's development assistance in the 1950s. Masked as a project planned to uplift Nepal "through the advanced technical knowledge of the United States" (p. 81), the aid program was actually not about education; rather, "it was once again about meeting foreign policy objectives" (p. 106). During that period, professor Hugh Wood wrote a report which continued to get cited over the decades despite the fact that he had ignored the concerns of a commission of Nepali experts tasked to advise him. Instead, he wrote in his own vision of "an ideal (Western) education system" (p. 80). The Nepali experts' worries about social inequalities and doubts about applying a Western system were blatantly disregarded.

Ironically, this underlying thematic tension—a clash of cultures playing out in the education sector—has rumbled through the decades and intermittently pokes its head out. The Community Sector Support Project (CSSP) is a flagship project planned to "maximize efficiency and economic productivity by internationalizing educational processes" (p. 259), and it is also an example of "the interaction between the global drive for educational decentralization and incompatible local contexts" (p. 258). Pherali details the complexities of these trends in Chapter Six and describes how they "largely undermine the agenda of educational equality" (p. 245) by "ignoring the fundamental problems of social injustice in these societies" (p. 244). Pherali goes on to note that "modern educational processes are less appreciative of indigenous knowledge and the needs of local economies" (p. 248). This

leads us squarely to a question: What, then, is the purpose of education? It also leads to a criticism of this book: How come there wasn't any space allotted to this question?

In the introduction jointly written by Parajuli and Onta, they attempt to clarify their stance: “we write in our capacity as historians of modern Nepal with an interest in education” (p. 2). Arguably, the four big words in the book's subheading—history, politics, governance, and reforms—are not directly related to pedagogy. We know from the onset what kind of book this is going to be: an academic, almost anthropological, study of political trends and governance. Referring to the 1971 Education Act in the twenty-first century, Uprety writes in Chapter Eight, “Public discussions about school education in the last two decades have focused around the causes and consequences of these amendments” (p. 295). It can be implied that there has not been much discussion about the humane, altruistic objectives of education in recent years; rather, the discussion has largely centered on legalities. Including a chapter dealing with the philosophical aspects of education and intersecting ideas would have contributed more to the readers' understanding.

We know that John Dewey (1916) wrote extensively about the relationship between education and democracy. In his classic essay, “A Letter to a Young Teacher,” Joseph Featherstone (2008) has explored this idea further and advocated that if a society is to be truly democratic, its young students should begin to practice democratic behaviors as early as in primary school. Such behaviors include how to listen to each other, how to respond, how best to express one's ideas, and more. If we agree with Pherali and argue against efficiency and economic productivity, then we need to describe educational goals that highlight various creative, community-oriented skills abundantly found in indigenous communities. Maxine Greene (1994) has been very influential in highlighting how education and the arts can trigger social changes. What is the role of literature in a society where social inequality is entrenched? Where are those studies questioning and challenging curricular experts from the past? Does a rich language arts curriculum in early grades shape students' characters and make them more empathetic? We know that the mega-structures of global capitalism favor the private sector and support a culture of competition and standardized testing. If this kind of dominant culture is taking over, then we need more educational research studies that focus on assessments and their impact on students' motivations and mental

health. While this collection of academic papers is crucial to understanding Nepal’s educational sector, I wish the reader had opportunities to grapple with the aforementioned ideas as well.

After reading this book, we realize that the leaders of our nation were so busy exploiting the education sector that they hardly had any time to mull over and consider these bigger ideas—that is, how to connect indigenous knowledge with innovative ideas, what happens when tradition meets technology, and how we might imagine an educational program that incorporates Nepal’s numerous languages. We should not be surprised that our political leaders did not consider any of this. Here’s hoping that the dedicated and devoted scholars behind this project will make attempts to address these concerns in future publications.

References

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