THE MAKING OF THE "ENGLISH-SPEAKING NEPALI CITIZENS": INTERSECTIONALITY OF CLASS, CASTE, ETHNICITY AND GENDER IN PRIVATE SCHOOLS

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The Story of Converse

It was the mid-2000s and the craze of South Korean movies and dramas was on the rise, especially among urban youth in Kathmandu. For Astha, a 15-year-old student at that time, there was a pressing matter at hand.[1] She was desperate to buy a pair of Converse shoes that were worn by good-looking Korean actors, and by cool and popular kids at her elite private school in Kathmandu. It was a big ask for her parents, as the standard protocol in her middle-class household was that before purchasing any new items, preferably at a bargain price, one must think about the product's usability, durability and most importantly, its necessity. Converse shoes, unfortunately, did not meet those criteria, but Astha was determined. After a series of family discussions, and a fair amount of teenage temper tantrums, Astha's mother finally bought her the shoes. That pair of Converse, however, was not from the famous Kathmandu Mall where her friends went for shopping, but from a wholesale shop in Asan bazaar[2] bought at a modest price of 600 Nepali rupees. Nevertheless, Astha was ecstatic, but her friends were skeptical as they inspected her shoes. There was no logo inside, supposedly the mark of a true Converse, yet Astha remained exuberant—it looked similar from outside anyway.

Now, in her late twenties, Astha realizes that she did not have to buy those Converse shoes. More than possession of branded goods, emulating media persona or gaining popularity at school, Astha's motives were rooted in the desire to fit in, to be accepted, and above all, to compensate for, what she identified as, her biggest shortcoming—not being able to speak the lingua

[1] I have changed the names of all my interlocutors to maintain confidentiality.

[2] One of the oldest marketplaces in Kathmandu.

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franca Nepali in its *śuddha* or "pure" form.[3] Coming from a close-knit, "high-caste" Newa[4] community, Astha's mother tongue is Nepal Bhasa. Although her school tried to enforce English as the primary language of communication, students covertly and predominantly conversed in Nepali. Astha's friends taunted her with Nepali tongue twisters, and she recalls how a Brahman Nepali subject teacher made her feel embarrassed in front of the whole class, time and again. Conscious of her accent, Astha gradually stopped expressing herself, in the classroom and among friends. She developed disdain for Nepal Bhasa, had little motivation to learn Nepali, and took comfort in learning English. Astha describes feeling insecure and inferior amidst her rich, flashy, eloquent and confident peers, and she uses the term *gumsidai jānu* (devoid of fresh air and light) to describe her schooling years.

Astha's story of Converse is not only about globalization, youth, media, class and consumption, but it is also about an individual navigating institutional ideologies and hierarchies; about familial aspirations for social mobility; and about schooling, nation-state and modernity. Drawing upon the personal narratives of interlocutors such as Astha, who studied in private schools in Kathmandu between the mid-1990s and 2000s, the broad objective of this article is to understand how private schooling contributes in shaping subjectivities and social identities.[5]

The article in particular delves into the following questions: What kinds of subjects do private schools produce? How do they train students to become citizens of imagined national and global communities? Furthermore, considering how caste and ethnicity have long been condemned as "pre-modern" and "divisive" in schooling practices (Pigg 1992; Valentin 2011), are they still relevant to the analysis of education systems in Nepal? And if yes, how are they manifested, disguised or reworked? While the growing gulf between public schools and private schools in Nepal is widely discussed, there has been less attention on private schools and how they influence identity formation. Meanwhile, the public/private divide in education is predominantly framed through the lens of class inequalities and linguistic

[3] The term *śuddha* was commonly used by my interlocutors when discussing their proficiency in Nepali language. This word is also used in the context of Hindu rituals and caste hierarchy.

[4] One of the ethnic groups in Nepal, who are the indigenous inhabitants of the Kathmandu valley. Newas have their own extensive caste system.

[5] This paper is a revised version of my master's thesis (Thebe Limbu 2020).

hierarchies, as English language has become the medium of instruction in private schools. Using the concept of intersectionality that challenges single-axis analysis, this paper will examine the interrelations of class, caste, ethnicity and gender, as well as the intertwined discourses of modernity and nationalism that underpin the everyday practices within private schools in Kathmandu.

I will begin by outlining some of the theoretical frameworks based on anthropological and sociological studies on formal schooling, inequalities and identity formations. I will also discuss the concepts of subjectivity and intersectionality. Then, I will provide a brief overview on the development of the national education system in Nepal, and the academic discourse around privatization of education in the post 1990s context. Next, I will elaborate on research methods and limitations, followed by discussions on emerging themes and observations. I will argue that while private schools are associated with affluence, modernity and middle-class identity, they do not erase, but in fact can further reinforce gender, caste and ethnic divisions. Although private schools endeavor to create the semblance of a fair, equal and meritocratic system, student success as such is mediated by favoritism and conformity to gendered disciplinary systems and institutionalized academic hierarchies. Meanwhile, unhealthy competition is fostered whereby students are trained to see themselves as individuals and competitors, rather than as subjects embedded in social relations.

Cultural (Re)production, Subjectivity and Intersectionality

Unlike the liberal conceptualization of schools as sites of self-empowerment and social mobility, critical studies on formal schooling have shown how schools reproduce existing social structures and inequalities (Levinson *et al.* 1996: 4–5). Elaborating on the process of cultural reproduction, Bourdieu and Passeron (1979) argue that schools legitimize the cultural capital of elites as superior and intelligent, naturalize arbitrary frameworks of knowledge, and inflict "symbolic violence" on students from non-elite backgrounds in the form of self-scrutiny and self-censorship.[6] While the

[6] In *The Forms of Capital* (1986: 16–17), Bourdieu differentiates between economic capital (money and property rights), cultural capital (embodied as dispositions of the body and the mind, cultural goods, and institutional qualifications) and social capital (connections and networks). Bourdieu further argues that all three forms of capital are intertwined, and they can be converted from one form to the other.

cultural reproduction theory provides an important analytical framework, it tends to be deterministic and often insufficient in explaining any divergent or non-confirmative practices that fall out of the established social order.

In the influential edited volume, *The Cultural Production of the Educated Person*, anthropologists Levinson and Holland (1996) propose the theoretical framework of cultural production that is premised on the understanding of culture as a process, as opposed to a static entity that can be transferred without changes. It further focuses on the ways in which the subjects actively confront the ideological and material conditions presented by schooling. Building on this framework, various studies have shown that schools foster new ways of *being* and *becoming*, and that one of the most salient social identities they create is between "educated person" and "uneducated person," whose meanings are contingent on cultural and contextual interpretations (Levinson 1996, 1999; Rival 1996; Skinner and Holland 1996; Jeffery, Jeffery and Jeffery 2004, 2005; Carney and Rappleye 2011; Valentin 2011; Khan 2012; Subramanian 2015).

While the framework of cultural production is useful in navigating the "agency versus structure" conundrum, it is important to remain vigilant as the binary conceptualization of distinction in the form of "educated versus uneducated" tends to be much more complex and nuanced in practice. However, I will draw upon the emphasis that cultural production theory places on the agency of subjects. In particular, I will focus on subjectivity, which is described by anthropologist Ortner (2005: 31) as follows:

> By subjectivity I will mean the ensemble of modes of perception, affect, thought, desire, fear, and so forth that animate acting subjects. But I always mean as well the cultural and social formations that shape, organize, and provoke those modes of affect, thought and so on.

I find Ortner's framing of subjectivity useful as it demonstrates how the individual and the social are always intertwined. Hence, the focus on subjectivity is not just about giving importance to human experiences and narratives, but also thinking about how the "inner worlds" of subjects are connected to the larger socio-political structures. And to do so, intersectionality offers an important analytical lens through its emphasis on interrelations and complexities of social categories.

Rooted in black feminist thought, the term intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw to capture the ways in which multiple axes of discriminations intersect to perpetuate interlocking systems of oppressions for various social groups (Crenshaw 1989). Although the operationalization of intersectionality remains contested, Crenshaw, in her co-authored paper, suggests that intersectionality is best understood as an "analytic sensibility":

> …what makes an analysis intersectional—whatever terms it deploys, whatever its iteration, whatever its field or discipline—is its adoption of an intersectional way of thinking about the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power. This framing—conceiving of categories not as distinct but as always permeated by other categories, fluid and changing, always in the process of creating and being created by dynamics of power—emphasizes what intersectionality does rather than what intersectionality is. (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall 2013: 795)

This emphasis on viewing social categories as fluid, relational, mutually constituted and embedded in power structures informs my own analytical lens. I will also remain mindful of the incisive analysis provided by Choo and Ferree (2010) as they argue that intersectionality is not just about including marginalized perspectives or providing an account of those who deviate from the "mainstream." But it is also about identifying and questioning the normalized, unmarked, invisibilized and relational power structures. In the next section, I will present a brief overview on the development of the formal education system in Nepal, including some of the contemporary debates and analyses.

Formal Education in Nepal: Nation-building, Development and Privatization

The project of nation-building has been central to the development of the national education system in Nepal (Onta 1996a, 1996b, 2000; Whelpton 2005). The common narrative is that, by the end of the Rana regime (1846–1951), there were a handful of schools catering to the ruling elites, while the overall literacy rate was estimated to be less than 2 percent. It was only since the early 1950s that various national level education commissions and committees were set up to draft plans and policies that underpinned the expansion of the formal mass education system in Nepal

(Onta 1996a, 2000; Parajuli 2019). However, whether it was the short-lived democratic government (1951–1960) or the autocratic monarchy under the Panchayat regime (1960–1990), they shared similar concerns around how to foster shared national identity among their multi-ethnic, multicultural and multilingual populace. To that end, education was envisioned as a pathway for producing citizens faithful to the monarchy, the unified Nepali nation-state, and dedicated to *bikās* or development of the country.[7] Various strategies were adopted to realize those objectives. In 1956, Nepali language was introduced as the primary medium of instruction, while recitation of the national anthem and having portraits of the king became compulsory in schools (Onta 1996a). As part of the New Education System Plan (NESP) in 1971, schools were nationalized and brought under the control of the central government. However, that experimentation came to an end in the early 1980s, and after that private sector's involvement in education was encouraged (Onta 2000).

In the post-1990s context, the growing divide between public schools and private schools in Nepal has become prominent. Their interrelations, in academic discourse, are often centered around two key analytical frameworks: one, in relation to class inequalities whereby private schools are catering to relatively wealthy clientele, while public schools are becoming the residual choice for low-income families (Liechty 2003; Caddell 2006; Shakya and Hatakeyama 2008; Carney and Rappleye 2011; Valentin 2011; Kölbel 2013; Bhatta and Pherali 2017; Joshi 2019). The other is in relation to the multilingual education policies that came into effect after 2006, and the different ways in which English, Nepali and indigenous languages are ascribed unequal socio-economic values and importance (Phyak 2013, 2016; Pradhan 2017, 2020b; Phyak and Sharma 2020; Sah and Li 2018, 2020). These frameworks, however, are not mutually exclusive. They work in tandem as private schools through unanimous adoption of English language as a medium of instruction embody higher symbolic capital, and are associated with quality, social prestige and middle-class identity.

[7] For example, the New Education System Plan states: "The educational objective will be to produce citizens who, with full faith in the country and the Crown, will conduct themselves in accordance with the Panchayat system and to meet the manpower requirements of the development through the spread of scientific and technical education" (MoE 1971: page number not mentioned).

In his seminal book *Suitably Modern,* Liechty (2003) argues that educational institutions such as schools and colleges have become physical and conceptual spaces where "middle-class" is claimed, performed and practised. Liechty (2003: 213) further claims, "In these new school-based peer groups, children come to see themselves less as representatives of one ethnic or caste community and more as indices of their own family's economic standing." However, Liechty's framework exclusively built on the foundation of consumption and class production is inadequate in the analysis of middle-class schooling experiences like that of Astha's, which is featured at the beginning of this article. To reiterate, Astha's narrative is not just about consumption of foreign goods and media, class consciousness or aspirations for social mobility. It demonstrates how the institutional logic of private schools is much more than production of English-speaking upper/middle-class subjects. In fact, they operate under an unmarked, normalized and arbitrary framework of "national cultural identity" that causes discomfort and anxiety to those subjects who do not conform or fit in. Therefore, using the lens of intersectionality, I will build on Liechty's work to examine how class intersects with other social structures derived from caste, ethnicity and gender, and how that shapes subjective experiences of private schooling in Kathmandu.

Methods and Limitations

For this study, I conducted online semi-structured interviews with 19 interlocutors: 14 of them were based in Nepal, one in the UK and four in the US. My interlocutors are in their twenties and early thirties; all of them grew up and studied in private schools in Kathmandu in the 1990s and 2000s. While I have anonymized the personal details of all my interlocutors, I have used the broader caste/ethnic clusters, which also function as socio-political categories in Nepal, to indicate their caste/ethnicity. To elaborate, my interlocutors come from Dalit[8] (3), hill Brahman/Chhetri[9] (2), Madhesi[10] (3), Newa (5), and

[8] Hindu "lower caste" groups from both hill and Tarai regions in Nepal.

[9] Hindu "upper caste" groups from hill region that are the dominant social groups in Nepal. They fare better across all socio-economic and political indicators compared to other caste/ethnic groups in Nepal. See Bennett (2005), DFID and The World Bank (2006), and Government of Nepal and UNDP (2014).

[10] Regional/ethnic groups from the southern lowland Tarai region of Nepal. They have a distinct caste system, and share cross-border kinship and cultural ties with communities in north India.

Adivasi Janajati or Janajati[11] (6) social groups. Although Newa social group is categorized under the Janajati cluster officially, I have chosen to mention Newa as a distinct social category as they are indigenous to Kathmandu and have significant socio-economic clout. Their representation in my sample was also high compared to other social groups. In terms of gender-disaggregation, 15 of my interlocutors identified themselves as female, and four of them as male.

The interviews were conducted between July and October 2020 using online platforms such as Zoom, Skype and Facebook Messenger, where I conversed with each interlocutor in English and Nepali languages for one and half hours on average. All the interviews were transcribed, and thematic analysis was conducted, which involved an iterative process of coding data, and identifying and reviewing themes. Then, aligning with the themes generated, I further selected ten interviews that were detailed and comprehensive for further narrative analysis, whereby I focused on personal stories in their entirety, including the ways in which they were framed and narrated. I have used those narratives to foreground and substantiate various emerging themes in this article.

My study takes a "retrospective gaze" as my interlocutors are former students who have gone through the private education system in Nepal. In that sense, the interviews and personal accounts that emerged rely on memories. But of course, memories are hazy, fragmented, incomplete and suppressed. And they are also open to re-discovery, re-interpretation and re-telling. Whether it is relying on memories or real-time experiences, interviews offer a glimpse into the world of the others, however, by no means are they enough to understand the social worlds of the subjects (Skinner 2012). For example, how do people *actually* navigate, perform and negotiate within the given social and material conditions, beyond the personal narratives they provide? Or what kind of "thick description" (Geertz 1973) emerges through microscopic interpretations of particular context, events or institution? These are not the questions that my study will be able to answer.

Reflecting on my positionality as a researcher, my own private schooling experiences in Kathmandu have shaped this study significantly. For example,

[11] Indigenous ethnic groups that speak Tibeto-Burman languages and have a historically distinct cultures from Hindu caste groups. There are numerous and diverse indigenous ethnic groups, exhibiting varying levels of (non)assimilation into the dominant Hindu culture.

one of the sections in this paper focuses on the institutionalized academic hierarchies within intermediate private schools.[12] Most of my interlocutors who attended those schools expressed particular dissatisfaction towards the academic hierarchical systems that were in place. As I attended an intermediate private school myself, I was very familiar with the system in question, and so I used my "insider" position to formulate probing questions during interviews, and later in the analyses of those narratives. However, I have also come to appreciate the sheer diversity of schooling experiences through this study, as although there are many common themes, each interview was different as the process of remembering tends to be both subjective and contextual.

Private Schools as a Heterogeneous Set of Institutions

The Education Act of Nepal defines private schools as those schools that operate without receiving any funding from the government (Bhatta and Pherali 2017: 22). They are liable to pay taxes, and they are further required to allocate 10 percent of the places as scholarships for students from poor and marginalized communities (Bhatta and Pherali 2017: 22). According to the government's economic survey, there are 6,566 private schools in Nepal, out of a total of 35,601 schools (MoF 2018). Most of the private schools are concentrated in urban towns and cities, particularly in the Tarai region of Nepal. The enrollment of students in private schools has steadily increased over the years. As of 2015, around 17 percent of the total students are enrolled in private schools in the primary, lower secondary and secondary levels (Bhatta and Pherali 2017: 27).[13] However, the data reflects gender disparity as the enrollment share of boys in private schools is fourteen percent more than that of girls (Bhatta and Pherali 2017: 29). The capital city of Kathmandu has one of the highest concentrations of private schools across the country. Within the Kathmandu Valley, around 68 percent of all schools in Kathmandu and Lalitpur districts are private, and 66 percent of all students attend these schools (Bhatta and Pherali 2017: 29).[14]

[12] I will elaborate on the differences between local, intermediate and elite private schools later.

[13] I have taken the numeric data from Bhatta and Pherali (2017) and calculated the average figures.

[14] See the comment in the previous footnote.

The division between public schools and private schools is becoming entrenched. However, private schools are often discussed as a coherent, homogeneous entity. In a few cases, "elite" and "budget" private schools are mentioned to mark the intra-group differences (Caddell 2006), albeit without much elaboration on their characteristics. Based on my interlocutors' narratives, three distinct types of private schools emerge: first, the *elite private schools,* which are a prestigious set of schools established in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s that are renowned for their long-standing history and their association with ruling elites and foreign patrons. This category also includes new schools that were established in the late 1980s and the early 1990s that charge some of the highest tuition fees of all private schools in Nepal. These new elite schools, compared to the old elite schools, pride themselves in liberal values, creative pedagogy and foreign institutional affiliation. Both old and new elite private schools are known for their competitive entrance exams. They have an average of 60–100 students per class, and those students are further divided into smaller sections with 30 students or less in each classroom. Second, the *intermediate private schools*, which are predominantly characterized by their overwhelming number of students. They have around 200–400 students per class, divided into numerous smaller sections with 35–40 students in each classroom. They tend to have large-scale physical infrastructures, on a par with some of the elite residential schools. Intermediate private schools also offer residential or boarding facilities. Some of those schools were also popular for producing "board-first students" (referring to students who attain the highest marks in the national level secondary board examinations). Third, the *local private schools,* which are relatively small, both in terms of physical infrastructures and student numbers. They are also less expensive compared to other elite or intermediate private schools. They usually cater to students who live nearby or locally, and they tend to be lesser-known outside their specific localities.

These are by no means an exhaustive set of categories, and they are open to contestations. While household income mediates access to different kinds of private schools, I have refrained from identifying them as "upper class," "middle class" and "lower class" schools because the correlation between class divisions and the types of educational institutions was not always evident. For example, many of my interlocutors' parents have struggled financially to send their children to elite or intermediate private schools, and a few have studied with scholarships. These categorizations are also

relative and subjective. For instance, Meera's mother was determined to send her daughter to an old, elite all-girls' private school for "good education." Belonging to a Janajati background, Meera's mother's school choice was also intertwined with her aspirations for social mobility and prestige. Their family friends would often tell Meera's parents—*ghā̃ṭī herī hāḍ nilnu parcha* (the literal translation: one should swallow a bone depending on the size of one's throat). However, Astha—who initially went to an expensive new elite private school—regarded the same all-girls' private school as *sasto* or cheap when she had to join the school, after secondary level, due to financial reasons.

Despite their ambiguities, I will be using the categories of "local," "intermediate," "old elite" and "new elite" private schools to highlight how private schools are a heterogeneous set of institutions. They share similarities in some regards, but there are also variations in their organizational set-up, the ways in which they are imagined, and in the kinds of cultural and symbolic capital they are perceived to embody, which I will examine further in the next section.

Differences between Local, Intermediate and Elite Private Schools

Interlocutors who switched from local to intermediate private schools recall being struck by large numbers of buildings and school buses. During an entrance examination at an intermediate private school, Smriti, a female Janajati former student, remembers how visitors were enthralled with swimming pools, football grounds, basketball courts and libraries. Likewise, Jyoti, a female Janajati former student, who studied at a local private school, remembers visiting intermediate and elite private schools, and her encounters with other students, during inter-school competitions:

> They had basketball courts, which was a very new thing for us. They had big classrooms. Our toilets were smelly. Our shoes were old. Their English was *khatrā* (great), our English was bad, like—"Don't do that *na hau.*" Because of that, they used to make fun of us.

In Jytoi's narratives, the differences within private schools are premised on physical infrastructures, cleanliness, student appearance, and in particular *khatrā English* or "good English." While both elite and intermediate private schools are imagined as institutions where students develop "good English," there is no unanimous consensus on what is considered as "good English."

However, some of the common descriptive words used by my interlocutors are—"clean accent," "clear pronunciation," "without strong Nepali accent" and "fluency." In fact, fluency in English was considered to have direct bearings on whether a student was considered as intelligent or not. Other studies in Nepal have shown that proficiency in English has become a key indicator for measuring the quality of education (Phyak and Sharma 2020; Pradhan 2020a).

The importance accorded to English language in Nepal should be understood in a context where there has been an increased flow of goods, capital and technology, as well as a steep rise in international migration for foreign employment and education. Further, Phyak and Sharma (2020) argue that private schools should be seen as "neoliberal projects" that reinforce market-based values of languages, and render students as individual consumers in the global neoliberal market. This interrelation between language and consumption is also reflected in my interlocutors' narratives. As such, the importance of acquiring "good English" is not only associated with better education and employability prospects, but it is also about being able to consume "global" arts, movies, music, fashion, literature that enables one to participate in conversations and social activities that take place in and outside schools. However, whether a school is considered as "prestigious" or not is further determined by their track record in getting students to successfully transition to educational institutions in foreign countries.

Elite private schools are perceived as gateways to universities abroad. They tend to incorporate the British and/or the American curriculum, which are considered to be more prestigious than the Indian curriculum taught in many intermediate schools. Besides Nepali language classes, many elite schools teach the government prescribed curriculum only in the years when students have to undertake national/district board examinations. They tend to have strong alumni networks, and some of the new elite schools have designated staff to assist students with their university applications. Some elite schools allocate certain hours for "community service," and include involvement in extracurricular activities as one of the criteria in students' annual performance review. Furthermore, the possibility of being able to study abroad was a big motivational factor for students. For example, Dinesh, a male Dalit former student at an elite residential school, mentioned:

> After SLC [secondary level board examination], there used to be a filter—75 percent would proceed, 25 percent wouldn't. We became aware that by the time we were in class 9 and 10, we had to do well, so that we can do A-levels here [at the same school] and get good college placements abroad.

Overall, elite schools are believed to endow students with cultural capital and social networks that will enable them to make a successful transition to foreign universities, predominantly in the US.

Based on the analysis of Panchayat-era school textbooks, Pigg (1992: 502) argues that schools are primary institutions of *bikās*, whereby schools produce an "educated person" who embodies urban, modern, progressive subjectivity, in contrast to the "uneducated person" who is associated with a rural, backward population in need of *bikās.* Further, the idea of an "educated person" (*paḍhe-lekheko mānche*), under the Panchayat regime, had a specific linguistic dimension, and that is, as a person well-versed in Nepali language (Pradhan 2020b). However, in light of the discussions around the differences within private schools and what makes them prestigious or not, it becomes evident that the idea of "educated person" in Nepal has become much more nuanced. The importance is placed on not just acquisition of "good English" and developing an urban, modern, cosmopolitan subjectivity, but it is also about being able to transition to higher education institutions abroad, predominantly in the West. In that sense, modern subjectivity and transnational mobility are intertwined in the making of an "educated person." However, does the emphasis on production of "good English-speaking modern subjects" mean that the importance placed on Nepali language and the "national cultural identity" under the Panchayat regime have become less relevant in the post-1990s context? Are class and consumption the most important markers of differences in private schools? I will explore these questions for the rest of the paper.

Everyday Schooling Practices: Enforcing Discipline and Gendered Morality

The school assembly that took place every morning dealt a blow to Kala's self-esteem. Students from each classroom formed two separate lines, one for girls, one for boys. They would stand accordingly in order of their height, the shortest at the front, the tallest at the back. Being a short student, Kala

always had to stand at the front. Kala uses the term *pradarśan* or spectacle to describe her school assembly, in a sense that not only did it create a "neat and tidy" semblance of order, but it also established hierarchy as though the school was telling its students—"this is how it is." Kala is a female Janajati former student who attended an intermediate private school. Her description of school assembly as a "spectacle" is striking as it captures the visual, immersive and affective experiences incited through such regular congregation. In this section, I will explore some common features of school assemblies as well as material culture within private schools. However, it must be noted that the following accounts are not based on ethnography or participant observation as such, but I have structured them relying on shared experiences and common themes that emerged in my interlocutors' narratives.

A school assembly is a daily ritual where everyone is reminded of their respective places in the school's hierarchy. It also functions as a primary mechanism for enforcing homogeneity in relation to gendered appearance and bodily comportment. Except Astha, who went to a liberal new elite private school, the rest of the interlocutors had strict assemblies that consisted of various components. The assembly would usually start off with prayers either related to Hinduism or Christianity (in convent schools). In the case of one new elite private school, students would recite a Nepali poem by a famous Nepali poet with messages of self-reflection. In some schools, assemblies were structured to allow students to practice their public speaking skills as they recited poems, motivational quotes, short stories, and narrated important news of the day. The assemblies also functioned as a platform for rewarding "good behavior' and "student success," which would involve winning inter-school competition or any other academic or extracurricular achievements. And there would always be the collective act of singing the national anthem.

However, the most time-consuming ritual of the assembly was "disciplinary checks." The teacher or a student "class monitor" would check each student's nails, teeth, hair and uniform. Failure to adhere to the school dress codes would mean public shaming and/or varying level of corporal punishment. For boys, having short hair was of utmost importance, otherwise the head teachers, on a few occasions, would cut a student's hair in front of the whole assembly to enforce compliance. For girls, the rules were rather long—vest inside the school shirt, skirt or pinafore dress of "right length" as in "not too long, not too short," no make-up, no eyebrow threading, no hair color and straightening, and medium to long hair neatly plaited using

ribbons. Some of the schools prided themselves in having "gender neutral" clothes, whereby female students would be allowed to wear trousers just like male students that had to be of the "right length" and "right diameter." The color of the uniform also mattered—not too dark, not too light, not too faded, not too old; and so did the fitting of the dress—not too big, not too small.

At the same time, in many schools, Hindu symbolisms and practices were pervasive. There would be statues and/or photos of *Saraswati*, the Hindu Goddess of knowledge, and school prayers were dedicated to Hindu deities such as *Saraswati, Brahma* and *Vishnu*. There would be special celebrations on the day of *Guru Pūrṇimā*, in honor of teachers, with its significance rooted in Hindu mythology. The major holiday breaks would be during the Hindu festivals of *Daśaĩ* and *Tihār*. In Pratibha's local private school, her principal was a devotee of *Sai Baba*, an Indian spiritual leader, and the school, which operated like a family business, was filled with *Sai Baba*'s photos. Before the board examinations, *Sai Baba* and *Saraswati* were worshiped together, and students were given *ṭīkā*, flowers and *prasād* (substance offered to a deity and later consumed as a gift) as a sign of good luck. These examples demonstrate how private schools perpetuate and normalize hegemonic religio-cultural norms, beliefs and practices, amidst its ethnically diverse student body.

Historically, under the Panchayat regime, the standardized curriculum and school textbooks, all published in Nepali language, played an important role in promotion of Hinduism, the Hindu monarchy and the "Nepali cultural identity" based on socio-cultural practices of hill Brahman and Chhetri caste groups. Those textbooks introduced multi-ethnic pupils to standardized written Nepali language and literature, shared "national history," "national heroes," Hindu rituals, folktales, festivals, deities and customs, as well as the importance of development or *bikās* (Pigg 1992; Onta 1996a; Skinner and Holland 1996). In the post-1990s context, many private schools use a blend of national and international curriculum. However, the examples above illustrate how it is not only through school textbooks or curriculum, but also everyday practices and material symbolisms through which familiarity with dominant cultural and religious frameworks is nurtured. Moreover, everyday practices such as the school assembly further ingrains the notion of modernity through its association with specific kinds of attire and appearance.

However, Western style school uniforms and daily assembly are common features of most schools in Nepal, whether they are public or private. The

question then becomes what makes such practices within private school distinct? One argument could be that ensuring students strictly adhere to the school dress codes are performative acts through which private schools strive to maintain their distinction from public schools. In doing so, they also attempt to mask the visibility of any form of material or class differences as everyone wears the same uniform. Some interlocutors also drew connections between their strict private schooling environment and the boarding schools in India, where many of their teachers had studied. In fact, the system of appointing students as house captains and prefects (or "class monitor" in many schools), which can be seen as a mechanism of indirect control, has its roots in the British public education system (MacDougall 1999: 12). Various geopolitical and socio-cultural encounters, exchanges, learnings and emulations that have shaped the practices of private schools in Nepal require a broader and deeper analysis. Here, I would like to focus on how disciplinary power in particular is exercised through school assembly.

Disciplinary power, unlike the direct use of violence, produces subjects that are compelled to internalize and perform norms of social control (Foucault 1977). It further sheds light on how the body is not just a living, biological entity, but it is both an object and target of power (Foucault 1977: 136). The school assembly through a combination of disciplinary checks, public shaming, reward mechanisms and student "class monitor" system is designed to produce obedient, compliant and disciplined students, and in doing so, it further establishes the authority of teachers over students. The students' bodies become a central site for establishing hierarchical social order, which has a specific gendered dimension. The extensive rules for female students concerning their public appearance can be read as the school's deliberate attempt to control their sexuality, with particular onus placed on female students themselves. Meanwhile, the repercussions for non-compliance and resistance extend beyond the momentary public shaming that might occur during the assembly. Shristi's narrative below illuminates the moral policing that occurs within the context of complex power asymmetries.

Shristi, a female Madhesi former student who went to a new elite private school, was favored by her teachers. Anti-Madhesi and anti-Indian sentiments were pervasive in her school, and the class divide was explicit, with Shristi feeling conscious about her family not owning a car or being able to go abroad for holidays. Despite that, Shristi grew up in a household full of books; her brother listened to English music; she was good in her studies; she

had a lighter shade of skin color; she spoke Nepali without accent; she was considered as a "good Madhesi"—in that sense, she felt she could relatively "pass." Some of her teachers reached out to her regarding her foreign college applications, and they kept advising her on how to build her CV. Shristi had good grades, but so did her close friends. However, they were treated rather differently as they did not receive the same preferential treatment from their teachers. When questioned about her likeability, Shristi reflected that she had always been an "obedient child"—soft-spoken, always submitted her work on time, and her teachers considered her as "mature." However, one of her close friends, whose grades were better than hers, was considered as "very strong-headed." When they reached class 7 or 8, her other close friend went through a bout of "teenage rebellion." She started wearing "low-cut shirts" (as in leaving a couple of buttons undone from the collar and rolling sleeves up), which were considered as being "sexual in public." In the past, teachers used to praise her friend profusely, but they seemed to have decided that she was not "the good, conservative kind of girl" anymore. And so, although her friend's grades did not change, their teachers' attitudes towards her certainly did, and Shristi's friend did not receive the same level of support as her.

Shristi's experiences and observations are supported by many interlocutors' narratives, as well as op-eds written by former students about their schooling experiences (Shrestha 2017; Dahal 2020) that collectively emphasize how likeability and favoritism are deeply gendered. The underlying message is that along with good grades, female students must also demonstrate "good" gendered behavior and morality—that is, they need to be obedient, engaged, confident, but not "strong headed." And it is important to conceal any signs of sexuality, which means wearing uniform in the right way, not laughing out too loud, not speaking back to teachers, and not hanging out with boys. Hence, the publicly enforced rule on appearance, and the unspoken rule on gendered behavior collectively influence how female students are monitored, and the kinds of rewards and punishments they receive within the school environment. However, the lens of intersectionality is important as discriminations can occur in a number of different ways (Crenshaw 1989: 149), and so it is crucial to move beyond gender, ethnicity or class as a stand-alone or single-axis framework of subordination. A case in point is Shristi's personal experiences that further reveals how different social identities and power structures intersect. On the one hand, conforming to gendered moral codes played an important role in facilitating Shristi's cordial relationship

with her teachers, on the other hand, being able to "pass" as a Nepali was vital in abating the impacts of ethnic discrimination at her school. In the next section, I will examine what it means to "pass" as a Nepali, and when caste and ethnicity become visible or not.

Manifestations of Caste/Ethnic Differences and Discriminations

During her schooling years, Aditi thought that there were only three caste groups in Nepal—Bahun (colloquial term for hill Brahman), Chhetri and Newar.[15] Majority of her friends were from Newa social group. At school, whenever anybody asked her what her surname meant, she would either say Chhetri or that she did not know. She remembers one particular incident when a dance teacher inquired about her surname. Her response was that she did not know. However, one of her friends interjected and said that according to her grandmother, Aditi's surname belonged to *sāno jāt* or "lower caste." Aditi still remembers feeling uncomfortable, but she is quick to emphasize that it was the only caste-related incident that she experienced at school. Only later, when she was pursuing her Bachelor's degree, Aditi realized that she would be categorized under Dalit social group. Unlike her school, there were plenty of Chhetri students at her college, and she could no longer get away by saying that she was Chhetri. She felt awkward and confused, and clearly remembers searching on Google—"What is Dalit?"

Aditi studied at an intermediate private school that taught Indian board curriculum. The school also had a large number of Marwari[16] students. Caste, tribes and reservation system are not unfamiliar topics in India, however, Aditi does not remember reading or discussing those issues in class. What she does remember is the anti-Indian sentiments directed towards Marwari and Indian students at her school. Reflecting back, Aditi argues that "because there was a struggle between Nepali students and Indian students," her caste did not become an issue as she was Nepali. In that sense, she considers herself as a privileged Dalit. In Aditi's case, her surname is not one of the "common" surnames associated with Dalit community in Nepal, and that ambiguity helped offer some form of disguise, which Aditi's mother wanted for her children as she did not want them to feel conscious about their caste identity.

[15] Aditi uses the term *Newar*, although the usage of emic term *Newa* is increasingly common.

[16] Hindu and Jain caste groups, traditionally engaged in trade and commerce.

The discourse of caste and ethnicity, or the political events such as the Maoist conflict never featured in the everyday school conversations, nor in the curriculum, or classroom discussions or even as topics of debate competitions—that is the unanimous consensus of my interlocutors. So what explains this institutional silence? As highlighted in the earlier sections, the development of the formal education system in Nepal is deeply intertwined with the project of nation-building and modernity discourses. Valentin (2011: 105) argues that caste is seen as "pre-modern, irrational" structures, antithetical to the dominant narratives of modernization and development in Nepal, and thus it is "explicitly condemned in official school discourse." Meanwhile, class-based differences have become more pronounced through commodification of education and expansion of private schools catering to different classes (Valentin 2011). However, does that mean caste/ethnicity is an irrelevant framework within private schools? Aditi's narrative above illustrates how caste seems to matter less when there is the "Nepali versus Indian" cleavage, whereas Kabita's narrative below shows how caste becomes visible, time and again.

Every year when students progressed onto a new class joined by a new cohort of students and teachers, for Kabita and her sister, there was a question that never changed—"What *jāt* is this?" That question would always come up when a new teacher was taking attendance. Spurred by their teachers' reactions, their fellow students would also question them with piqued interest, and they would stand out once again. Kabita's standard response was that her culture was similar to Rai, Gurung and Magar, which are some of the commonly heard hill Janajati ethnic groups. Then, the query would end, or at least it would be enough for the time being. However, some off-hand comments would emerge every now and then:

> I still remember like, when we were in class 8 and 9, people used to tease us like—"Yeah, you guys must be like nomads, Raute types, Chepang like"....We had no clue what our culture or ethnicity was because we grew up in Kathmandu, with mum and dad basically. Both of them used to work, and who had the time to teach you culture? Thinking about it now, they must have thought—"Oh they probably come from an inferior caste." That type of thought, that was probably there.

Kabita observed how another student who belonged to a minority hill-Janajati ethnic group stood out in similar ways. Instead of addressing him using his first name, which was the norm, fellow students would address him using his “uncommon” surname. In the context of Nepal, where surnames represent caste and ethnic identity, Phyak (2016) argues that “familiar” and commonly heard surnames, usually from the dominant Brahman and Chettri caste groups, are never questioned, while the “uncommon” surnames usually of minority communities and indigenous ethnic groups are questioned and often subjected to ridicule. To that end, which surnames stand out and do not is reflective of unequal power structures.

One of my interlocutors Astha said, “Caste was not openly discussed in school but there was a difference. Those who looked different, those who spoke differently, they were affected in some way or the other.” I find this narrative particularly useful in thinking about how manifestations of caste/ethnic differences are multitude, unstated and insidious. For example, Astha, whose narrative is featured at the start of this paper, expressed her insecurities for not being able to speak Nepali language in its “pure” form, untainted by her mother tongue (Nepal Bhasa) accent. Many of my Newa and Janajati interlocutors felt a “sense of guilt” for not being able to speak “pure” Nepali or write Nepali well. Just like the discourse on “good English,” which is discussed in the earlier section, there appears to be a discourse on “good Nepali”—the one that is devoid of any traces of mother tongue languages, and considered crucial to “pass” as a Nepali.

In the last couple of years, there has been a spate of op-eds and blog posts (Kunwar 2016; Gurung 2017; Lal 2017; Shrestha 2017; Dahal 2020; Gupta 2020; Suwal 2020) that chronicle personal experiences of discrimination and trauma in elite private schools in Kathmandu. Budhanilkantha School (BNKS) in particular has been featured in many of those articles. Established with support from the British government in 1972, BNKS is one of the oldest elite educational institutions in Nepal. BNKS has a special institutional policy—students’ surnames are replaced with roll numbers, which is intended to create a level playing field. Former BNKS student Gupta (2020) highlights how the roll number system did not prevent “racism, both explicit and subtle” towards Madhesi students and faculty members, who were frequently subjected to ethnic slurs and harassment. Gupta (2020) describes his former school as “a nationalist place and a haven for anti-Indians” where

the supremacy of Nepali language, the cultural dominance of hill Brahman Chhetri social groups and glorification of their history were prevalent.

Many of my interlocutors also emphasized how if you come from Madhes/Tarai region, have relatively darker skin color, and speak with an accent, you are more likely to be harassed in schools and public spaces. Moreover, the cross-border kinship and cultural ties that Madhesis share with communities in north India have always been regarded with suspicion by the Nepali state, which provides a broader framework within which racial and ethnic discriminations against Madhesis manifest. However, for one of my interlocutors—Dinesh, a male Dalit former student who also studied at BNKS, the roll number system was an experimentation that worked. Unlike his cousins who experienced varying levels of caste discrimination at their schools, Dinesh argued that he was never made an outcast at BNKS. One explanation could be that coming from a hill Dalit background, Dinesh shares similar physical and linguistic features with the dominant hill Brahman and Chhetri social groups, and hence why, he did not stand out as "the others." But that does not mean the cultural dominance did not exist or that caste identity was erased.

Dinesh recalled a few incidents that left him with a sense of discomfort and confusion. After holidays, when he went back to his residential school, his Brahman-Chhetri friends returned wearing *janai* (a thread worn by "high caste" males after their initiation ceremony). His friends would name themselves as "*janai* gang." Dinesh was asked to show his *janai* as well, he said he did not have one. One time, there was an extensive discussion among his friends about which caste, clan, *gotra* (lineage) they belonged to. Few days after the discussion, he realized that his friends had stopped inviting him to their secret hangout, where they would usually eat together. There was also a time when his friends boycotted him for few months after he received the highest grades in Maths. Dinesh found that moment highly unusual as many of his friends were good in studies, so he wondered if he was being boycotted because of his caste.

What becomes evident in many interlocutors' narratives is that there was, as phrased by my interlocutors, a sense of anxiety, discomfort, confusion, guilt, unease, feelings of standing out and being out of place. But there was no framework as such to articulate, analyze or make sense of what was happening to them back then. The intersectional thinking on "the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power" (Cho, Crenshaw and

McCall 2013: 795) is of particular relevance here, as it helps to explore when and why caste/ethnic differences become visible or not. The themes that have emerged in this section—Nepali vs. Indian cleavage, common and uncommon surnames, standing out due to one's physical features and accent are reflective of the ways in which same and differential treatments are mediated. They further illuminate how one's level of proximity to the arbitrary frameworks of the "Nepali national identity," which is built on anti-Indian sentiments and the supremacy of hill, Hindu cultural, physical and linguistic features, determines how and when caste/ethnic differences become visible or not. Therefore, while schools may not create caste and ethnic divisions, they certainly reinforce those schisms through their institutional silences, unchecked biases, and normalization of religio-cultural hegemony. However, private schools, in general, tend to project an image that everyone is treated equally, regardless of their backgrounds, and students are differentiated and judged based on one criteria alone—academic merit. In the next section, I will explore how private schools promote the idea of meritocracy and competition by normalizing the hierarchical stratification of the student body.

Constructions of Acceptable Differences and Meritocratic Hierarchies

"Which section are you in?"—the question that Kabita dreaded the most, whenever she had to attend family gatherings, where parents would ritually and enthusiastically compare their children's academic performances. They would brag about their "A-section kids," who were considered as smart and intelligent. However, those in the C section and below were grouped together as lazy, average, *bigreko* (spoilt). Kabita fluctuated between C and D sections throughout her schooling years, and witnessed first-hand how teachers and parents, whose care and support are often considered as fair and unconditional, behaved differently depending on your academic grades, ranks and sections. At a personal level, Kabita describes the experience as "scarring," and concludes how low self-esteem and self-doubt tend to follow you lifelong.

While academic grades provide the central framework for assessing the competence, capabilities and intelligence of students across private schools, intermediate private schools in particular have a rigid system of hierarchical stratification built on academic grades. Between 200–400 students are classified into sections such as A, B, C, D based on their academic grades.

For example, the first 30 students who receive the highest grades in their annual exams are placed in the top-most section A. In that order, the second last section will have students with the lowest grades. And the last section is allocated to new students, who have just joined the school. Depending on academic grades, students can move up and down the academic hierarchy.

Smriti, a female Janajati former student, compared her intermediate private school to a factory that produced a large number of products and accumulated profit. The school management could argue that such stratification helps in supporting students better, as depending on their academic calibre, those considered "weak" could be given more support, and those considered "strong" could get further encouragement. Meanwhile, all students would feel motivated to work hard, either to "move up the ladder" or retain their position at the top. In practice, however, the system worked rather differently. First, various labels were attached to different sections. Being in top or "higher" sections was considered as "superior" as those students were associated with various positive attributes such as intelligent, smart, responsible, hard-working, disciplined; while those in bottom or "lower" sections were considered as lazy, distracted, boisterous. Second, teachers would behave differently depending on the sections. Smriti recalls how faculty head teachers, who had power in setting the internal exam question paper or were more cognizant of departmental activities, were usually assigned to the top-most sections. Because the school's reputation relied on producing exemplary secondary level board examination results, the students in top sections were given more attention and support by teachers. Third, students would internalize those labels, and start considering themselves as "superior" and "inferior" depending on their position within the hierarchical system. This is particularly revealed in the shame and stigma that is associated with "falling" from "higher" into "lower" sections.

Smriti, Kabita and Kala, all female former students from Janajati background, also recall how students in "lower" sections in their intermediate private schools were predominantly from Janajati social groups. Being one of the few students in top two sections, Smriti was acutely aware how her presence was considered as an anomaly, and remembers one of her friend's offhand remarks that she was not like "other Janajati." Kabita further elaborates the stereotypes against Janajati students:

> Our indigenous groups were distinct. There were Rais and Gurungs. And if their behavior was notorious, then "Rai, Gurungs are like that." That kind of label was given to them. Because it was a Newar dominated school, and besides them, Bahun Chhetri were also in high ratio. Indigenous group was very small. If some of them behaved badly, bunked classes, then "these people are like that"—that kind of tagline was used by everyone, especially from the teachers.

Many Janajati students came from households where usually one or both of their parents were working abroad. They were considered to have more "pocket money" but less parental guidance. However, what is striking is the role that some teachers play in perpetuating caste/ethnic stereotypes, and essentialised narratives on how certain caste/ethnic groups excel academically and others do not. In doing so, the focus shifts away from the wider structural factors including social and cultural capital that influence students' academic performance (Chaudhary 2073 v.s.).

It also becomes evident how the intermediate private schools' institutional hierarchies resemble the model of Hindu caste hierarchy—considering how the language of "higher" sections and "lower" sections develop; how the attributes of superiority and intelligence are assigned to "higher" sections, and that of inferiority and laziness are assigned to "lower" sections. Further, the language of *jharnu* or "to fall" from "higher" to "lower" sections, and the shame and stigma that such "fall" carries are again similar to the Hindu caste hierarchy where there are various rules that govern demotion and promotion of caste rankings. Kala observed how the opportunities given to students at her school were unequally divided. For example, competitions like debate, spelling, essay writing would be open to students from "higher" sections, whereas dance and sports competitions would be open to those from "lower" sections. This association of "higher" sections with mental aptitude and "lower" sections with physical aptitude is also reflective of the caste hierarchy. However, the difference is that unlike the *ascribed* status in the *actual* caste system, in the intermediate private schools' institutional hierarchies you can *acquire* the status through individual hard work. In this way, as argued by Bourdieu (1986), arbitrary frameworks of intelligence and knowledge are naturalized, and the socio-cultural capital required for students to succeed in schools is overlooked, as the system places exclusive onus on individuals and their "natural aptitude" to succeed.

Furthermore, intersectional thinking is useful in understanding how acceptable and unacceptable forms of differences are constructed. While there is an institutional silence on caste and ethnicity, as discussed in the earlier section, the differences and hierarchies based on academic grades are deemed acceptable, justified on the grounds of meritocracy and individual hard work. However, what becomes apparent is that the existing caste/ethnicity based hierarchy is further integrated into the academic hierarchy, whereby Janajati students are essentialised as low performing students, and their performance is further attributed to their "culture" and ethnic identity. At the same time, there is also a hierarchy of moral students that is mediated by conformity to gendered disciplinary systems, as highlighted in the earlier sections.

While schools attempt to create the semblance of a fair, equal and meritocratic system, many of my interlocutors emphasized how schools functioned as sites of favoritism and unhealthy competition. For example, Smriti recalls how a vice principal pulled strings to make his son as the head boy, despite there being many other eligible candidates. Pratibha remembers how a student, from a lower income background, was caught cheating during exams. She was forced to kneel down outside the principal's office, and later, she dropped out of the school. Pratibha realized the hypocrisies of her teachers and school management as other students cheated as well, in fact cheating was common, but it was only that poor student without an influential background who became the target. In Neha's case, despite excelling in her studies and being favored by her teachers, she recalls feeling bothered and pressured by the narratives that some of her teachers promoted such as *jitchu bhanera paḍhnu parcha* (you have to study to win). In the earlier section, I have also discussed how likeability and favoritism are deeply gendered.

Nevertheless, even if you conformed and excelled at school, despite its arbitrary standards, there are limitations to how far your "acquired status" can take you. While further studies are required to understand how formal schooling shapes post-schooling journeys, and the long-term implications they have on subjectivities and social mobilities, the narratives by Meera (a female Janajati former student) and Dinesh (a male Dalit former student) provide a vignette. Both of them went to elite private schools, and mentioned that they were not bothered by class differences. As Meera puts it, despite not having "tuna sandwiches for lunch" or experiences of going abroad for holidays, like Dinesh, she was optimistic that she could "make it anywhere" with the cultural capital she acquired at her prestigious school. But in the

post-schooling phase, after comparing their friends' and their own higher education and professional journeys, they realized how cultural capital can only take you so far, as you need both economic capital and social capital to advance further. And the latter two forms of capitals are mediated not only by class, but also structures of caste, ethnicity and gender in Nepal.

Conclusion

School is a site of encounters—students invariably come with their personal histories, gendered identities, class/caste/ethnic backgrounds, social networks, prejudices and assumptions among others. Their encounters with the other subjects, institutional practices and symbolisms, disciplinary systems and hierarchies, in addition to their own agency and their social worlds outside school, contribute to the project of becoming a self. In this paper, I have explored how students' subjectivities and identities are shaped by their multifarious encounters within private schools in Kathmandu. I have also argued how private schools as a category consists of a heterogeneous set of institutions that embody varying levels of symbolic capital, which is entangled with notions of "good English," "modern" subjectivity and transnational mobility.

This paper further explores how private schools endeavor to project an image of a fair, equal and meritocratic system where the only acceptable form of difference is students' academic performances. Private schools normalize academic hierarchies, maintain institutional silences on social differences and discriminations, and actively construct disciplinary systems premised on gendered morality. They train students to become competitive individuals who believe in meritocracy, disavow caste/ethnic differences and divisions, and take responsibility for their own success and failure. In doing so, private schools strive to produce competitive, entrepreneurial, cosmopolitan, modern individuals. In practice, however, favoritism appears to be rampant with student success dependent on conformity to gendered disciplinary systems and institutionalized hierarchies.

Various studies have shown that formal schooling reproduces inequalities, and private schools in particular accentuate and exacerbate those divisions. This study corroborates those analyses as it argues that private schools in Nepal do not *just* perpetuate class inequalities and production of middle-class identities; they also reinforce gender, caste and ethnic divisions. Using the lens of intersectionality, the study further demonstrates how these social

divisions are relational, and how their (in)visibility is contextual and mediated through exclusionary and hegemonic religio-cultural frameworks, which are often disguised under the veneer of equality, modernity and meritocracy.

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