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Simultaneous Identities: Ethnicity and Nationalism in Mother Tongue Education in Nepal

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ABSTRACT

The scholarly works on ethnicity and nationalism have been highly dominated by binary frameworks. In addition, the normative preference for civic consciousness and the concerns of national disintegration often separate the notions of ethnicity and nationalism. This article suggests that the notions of ethnicity and nationalism cannot be understood exclusively as a choice between maintaining the integrity of the nation and completely rejecting it. Drawing on fieldwork in mother tongue schools in Nepal, the article draws attention to the ways in which school actors discursively positioned ethnic identity as imperative to national identity, the one that bolsters the notion of Nepali nationhood. By paying close attention to the everyday context within which discourses of nationalism are situated, this article argues for an analytical necessity to approach ethnicity and nationalism in relation to each other to appreciate the process of symbolic negotiations in public spaces.

KEYWORDS: ethnicity, mother tongue education, nationalism, Nepal

Simultaneous identities: ethnicity and nationalism in mother tongue education in Nepal

<i>Jigu dei jita: ya:, jigu bhay jita: ya:</i>	I love my country, I love my language
<i>Jigu mama bhasha, tasakan jita: ya:</i>	My mother tongue, I love it very much
<i>Jipi he thwo dey ya, tisa kha: chha maya</i>	We are the jewels of this country, o' mother
<i>Jimita tiya chha, chaka: sa nhalabyu.</i>	Adorned by us, smile at us once
<i>Pahad, Parvat, Himal, Tarai.</i>	Hills, Mountains, Tarai
<i>Guli na du jaati, bhasa phukka ya:</i>	We love all ethnic groups and all languages
<i>Jugu dei jita: ya:, jigu bhay jita: ya:</i>	I love my country, I love my language
<i>Jigu mama bhasha, tasakan Jita: ya:</i>	My mother tongue, I love it very much

Every morning, students in Newa School¹ gather in the main hall to sing their school song. Students, lined up neatly in their class rows, sing this song in Nepal Bhasa,² one of the 123 minority languages in Nepal. The song portrays an image of the country with its diverse terrain – ‘Hills, Mountains, Tarai’ – where members of different groups speaking various languages are ‘jewels’ that adorn the country. This call to love one’s country, while celebrating affection for one’s mother tongue,³ is one of the important ways in which Newa School seeks to institutionalise Nepal Bhasa as the language of education. In this context, the school song discursively positions ethnic identity as imperative to national identity, an identity that bolsters the notion of Nepali nationhood. These everyday practices in Newa School question mainstream scholarly understandings of ethnicity and nationalism, which often position these concepts in opposition to each other. Scholars have sometimes posited ‘civic nationalism’ against ‘ethnic nationalism’ (Kohn 1994) or ‘state nationalism’ against ‘counter-state nationalism’ (Brubaker 1999) to portray ethnicity and nationalism in dichotomous frames.

In addition, normative concerns about national disintegration often lead scholars to infer that ethnic affiliations undermine nationalism. However, in giving precedence to these normative positions, we often overlook the realities of everyday lives where supposedly dichotomous

identities are entangled with each other. This article explores the way in which apparently fragmented ethnic identities interact with a putatively comprehensive national identity in contemporary Nepal. This article suggests that the notions of ethnicity and nationalism cannot be understood exclusively as a choice between maintaining the integrity of the nation and completely rejecting it. By paying close attention to the context within which discourses of nationalism are situated, this article directs analytic attention to the ways in which ethnic identities and nationalist identities co-create one another. In conclusion, this article emphasises the need to develop scholarly accounts of ethnicity and nationalism as entwined with one another rather than as mutually exclusive concepts.

Nepal offers a fascinating entry point to study these dynamics of ethnicity and nationalism. It is a small but highly heterogeneous country, with a total population of twenty-nine million, 125 ethnic groups and 123 languages (CBC 2014). The country's social diversity and the state's varied responses have significantly shaped much of Nepal's inter-group and intra-group relations. Since 1990, Nepal has undergone a critical phase of reconfiguring its state institutions, drafting a new constitution, debating a federal system and challenging the 'state-centric' assimilationist notions of Nepali nationalism. While the state in Nepal has historically celebrated the country's social diversity, such ethnolinguistic heterogeneity was not officially recognised in official policies until the 1990s. Such official apathy made issues of ethnicity and nationalism historically highly contentious (Lawoti 2007). As scholarship on nationalism in Nepal notes, the hegemony of the Nepali language and its apparent association with Nepali nationalism has been increasingly challenged through the expression of plural, inclusive and diverse notions of Nepaliness (Gellner et al. 1997; Hangen 2010; Lawoti and Hangen 2013; Onta 2006). However, because no single group enjoys an absolute majority and different social

groups are interspersed throughout the country, any attempts to undermine an overarching Nepali identity have been considered unfeasible by politicians and scholars alike.

It is in the context of such contentious ethnolinguistic claims that Newa School was established as a private school and as a flagship programme of activism by members of the Newar ethnic community, who claim to be indigenous to the capital city of Kathmandu. The objective of establishing schools such as Newa School was to teach Nepal Bhasa, the ‘mother tongue’ of the Newar community, to the younger generation.⁴ The official space for such ‘mother tongue schools’ as Newa School opened up after the Constitution of Nepal 1990 declared Nepal as a multiethnic (bahu jatiya) and multilingual (bahu bhasik) country, and the right to have primary education in mother tongue was declared as a fundamental right. This marked a radical departure in a historical context where the use of languages other than the national language, Nepali, was considered communal and even against the law. Despite this constitutional provision, the mother tongue schools such as Newa School confronted ever-looming suspicion of ethnic particularism putatively promoted by their emphasis on ethnolinguistic identity.

This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork in Newa School conducted between August 2013 and March 2014 and several follow-up visits in 2016. During this period, I participated in the school routine, attended classes, spent time in the school grounds during breaks, conducted unstructured interviews with teachers and sometimes worked as a substitute teacher when needed. I also spent time with parents when they dropped off their children in the morning and sometimes walked home with them in the afternoon. Drawing on the data collected through participant observation and unstructured interviews, this article foregrounds the realities of everyday lives where members of minority groups negotiate these concerns from an unequal playing field. In this context, the article highlights two distinct but interrelated dynamics. On

the one hand, the language practices in the school display inward looking characteristics of (re)constructing ethnic histories, participating in ethnic celebrations and consciously constructing unified ethnolinguistic identity. On the other hand, there were outward-looking dynamics of transcending ethnic boundaries and actively engaging with the broader national education system.

The salience of these processes is the simultaneous membership of multiple groups and claims over public spaces and in the spaces of nationalism, hitherto associated with Nepali. This article builds on the Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) notion of ‘simultaneity’ to explain the contradictory ways in which people negotiate identities in their everyday lives. The notion of ‘simultaneity’ differs from the idea of ‘multiple identities’, where people possess potentially intersecting but different identities due to their different origins or traditions (Hall 2003). Simultaneity, according to Bakhtin (1981), is when the same word or identity can possess different meanings, simultaneously, in a given sociopolitical context. Woolard (1998: 4) refers to this as bivalency of multilingual contexts where speakers make ‘simultaneous claims to more than one social identity’. Here, people do not necessarily choose between contrasting elements but, rather, can thrive in their tense intersection. Within this framework, various levels of ‘unresolved co-presences’ are possible. This opens up a possibility for a variety of imagined communities that may challenge the existing status quo.

Conceptually, the analysis presented in this article embeds itself within a wider scholarly endeavour to understand identities as a process of multiple meaning-making within a given socio-political context (Anderson 1991; Cresse and Blackledge 2010). This approach also enables us to not look for the ‘intrinsic properties’ attached with ethnicity and nationalism but rather to appreciate their relational attributes. This approach is much more fruitful because, in

a heterogeneous social context such as that of Nepal, minority language education is a ‘zone of contact’⁵ where dominant and non-dominant knowledge, languages and identities form in relation with each other. This article, therefore, analyses language practices as a space where the concern is not only whether people have the right to speak different languages or the competence to do so but also about conditions in which values of different ethno-linguistic identities are constructed (Heller 2006) and the ways in which they are performed within a given socio-political context (Irvine and Gal 2000). In the empirical context of Nepal, this article contributes to the ongoing discussion on nationalism in Nepal (Burghart 1984; Gellner et al. 1997; Hutt 2012; Onta 1996a; Shneiderman 2015; Turin 2014) and affirms that the key characteristic of ethnic movements in Nepal is to open up spaces for plural notion of Nepali nationhood (Hangen 2010; Lawoti and Hangen 2013; Subba 1999).

Ethnicity, nationalism and simultaneous identities

The scholarly works on ethnicity and nationalism have been highly dominated by binary frameworks. The distinctions such as civic versus ethnic nationalism (Kohn 1994) and state-framed versus counter-state notion of nationalism (Brubaker 1999) have influenced much of the academic literature on nationalism. In his very influential work, *The Idea of Nationalism*, Kohn (1994) argued that civic nationalism emerge primarily through a political process of encompassing the population within a high degree of cultural homogeneity. The members of the nation come together by their equal political status and their willingness to be part of a nation. In contrast, ethnic nationalism is supposedly consolidated around the common heritage of people and not around the notion of citizenship. This distinction has continued to influence much of the academic scholarship and political discourse on ethnicity and nationalism. Similarly, Brubaker (1999), while criticising the ‘civic-ethnic opposition’ as the Manichean

Myth, continued to build on the two-fold typology as the conceptual building block in his study of ethnicity and nationalism. As an alternative, he proposed state-framed and counter-state understanding of nationhood and forms of nationalism. In the state-framed notion, the nation is ‘conceived as congruent with the state’ while in the counter-state notion, the nation is ‘imagined as distinct and often in opposition to ... the existing state’ (Brubaker 1999: 68). While this distinction between state versus counter-state notion of nationalism has proven to be of significant analytic utility, the binary framework has continued to remain prominent and the supposed incompatibility between ethnicity and nationalism looms large in academic scholarship and political discourses.

Although the ideological association of monolingualism and nationhood has now been widely critiqued, the belief that the citizens of a nation-state should have one shared language has proven to be quite persistent (Hobsbawm 1990). In Nepal, for example, during the Panchayat period (1960–1990) the institutionalisation of Nepali language played a very important role in the nation-building process. During this period, Nepal embarked on an exclusive project, which was popularised as a ‘uniquely Nepali’ system and was represented by the slogan ‘Ek raja, ek desh, ek bhasa, ek bhesh’ (one king, one country, one language, one dress). This placed an importance on homogeneous national identity and monolingual ideology where the Nepali language was positioned as a very powerful symbol of Nepali nationalism (Gaige 1975; Onta 1996a). Since 1990, various ethnic movements in Nepal vehemently have opposed these assimilationist tendencies and raised issues against ‘monolingual hangover, elitism, and displacement of local languages’ (Phyak 2011). Increasingly, there has been a demand for the use of mother tongue at least in primary education (Awasthi 2004; Tumbahang 2010; Yadav 1992). Discussing the ethnic movements in Nepal, Hangen and Lawoti (2013: 8) described this as ‘people-centric nationalism’, which may often be referred to as ‘ethnic nationalism or ethno-

nationalism’, and drew attention to the ways in which ethnic movements challenge the homogenising ideology of Nepali state and make ethnic identities a site of strategic contestation (Gellner et al. 1997; Hangen 2010; Lawoti and Hangen 2013; Onta 2006; Shneiderman 2013). They also pointed out that, while in some parts of the world these movements might become exclusionary, in heterogeneous societies, these movements give voice to the marginalised groups.

Scholars have thus identified the post-1990 period as the time of ‘ethnicity-building’ (as opposed to the period of nation-building before 1990), where ‘new identities have been forged, new organisations set up, and new claims made’ (Gellner 2007). Discussing the significance of ethnic politics, authors like Des Chene (1996) have termed this period as *janjatiyug* (an era of ethnic groups). Other scholars such as Leve (2011), discussing the emergence of new Buddhism, have attributed this trend to the global ‘identity machine’ that is producing the categories of identity and encouraging people to rework their selves. This period is often contrasted with the previous period of nation building (1950s), where diverse groups of people were brought together under the vision of unified Nepali nationalism (Burghart 1984; Whelpton 1997) and ‘one nation, one language’ policy propagated through a uniform education system in Nepal. This increasing centrality of ethnicity in Nepali politics has spurred opposing reactions.

On the one hand, some ethnic activists and policy makers have favoured ethnic movements’ demand for mother tongue education from the standpoint of social justice, human rights and access to education and as a challenge to the hitherto homogenising tendency of the Nepali state (Bhattachan 1995; Gellner 1986; Giri 2011; Phyak 2011; Sonntag 1995). On the other hand, other scholars identify mother tongue education as predominantly groupist in its

orientation and as hindering the prospect of a unified national community (Bandhu 1989; Sharma 1992). The increasing demands for imparting mother tongue education and for the use of minority languages in official contexts (Bhattachan 1995; Gellner 1986; Sonntag, 1995) have rendered the issue of ethnolinguistic identity, a highly contentious and politicised topic in Nepal. Among the forty-point demands put forward by Maoist armed group, before the start of a decade-long armed conflict, was a call for the right to use all the languages spoken in Nepal, along with demands for ethnic identity-based federal restructuring of the state. The Maoists publicised a map of Nepal that was divided into nine ‘autonomous’ regions, six of which were named on an ethnic basis. They further proposed that local languages be adopted as official languages of each region, reflecting its ethno-linguistic identity. The end of the war saw the dissolution of the monarchy, restoration of parliamentary democracy and the Maoists becoming a potent political party in what has come to be called the New Nepal.

Since the end of the civil war, the issue of identity-based federal restructuring of the country has become even more contentious. Two successive Constituent Assemblies have debated the possibilities that such a restructuring might allow for the accommodation of ethnic groups. However, the sheer number of ethnolinguistic groups, their further divisions along caste and religious lines and their dispersal across the country rather than concentration in given geographic regions have reduced considerably the viability of identity-based federal restructuring. As a result, possibilities of following models provided by multi-nation state such as the UK, linguistic federations such as India and ethnic states such as the former Yugoslavia. Indeed, political analysts suggest that unease over the proposal for identity-based provinces resulted in the poor performance of the incumbent Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) in the 2013 election and might even have influenced the province-level election results in 2017. Both

in academic scholarship and in political discourse, the preference for civic consciousness and the fear of national disintegration often separate the notions of ethnicity and nationalism.

Unsettling the boundaries between neat dichotomies of ethnicity– nationalism and the reified notions of identity, new developments in the sociolinguistic literature have increasingly highlighted the importance of paying attention to the dynamics around language exchanges. Approaching language as a social practice, many scholars now argue that linguistic nationalism involves much more than whether people can speak one or more languages (Heller 2006: 10). It includes the process in which various languages come to represent certain meanings in a given context (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994). These authors investigate the ‘ shared bodies of common sense notions’ (Rumsey 1990: 346) that are often shaped by the relationships from which it is generated. Such research focuses on the construction of power and hierarchy in everyday language exchange to illustrate that people often use language to discern their ‘locatedness’ in a group and negotiate the dynamics of identity formation. As Irvine (1989) found, in the context of Wolof villagers, people construe linguistic differentiation in relation to social differentiation. Linguistic behavior is, thus, seen as apparently deriving from speakers’ social, political, intellectual or moral character (Gal and Irvine 1995; Irvine 1989).

Much research shows how indigenous and language movements around the world often utilise language as important ways to make claims on the state (Bilaniuk 2004; Gustafson 2009), articulate ideas about ethnicity and nationalism (Aikman 1999; Heller 2006) and express community memberships (Turin 2014). Whether in the form of organised indigenous movements for minority languages (Aikman 1999; Bilaniuk 2005; Gustafson 2009) or informal translanguaging practices in the teaching– learning process (Cresse and Blackledge 2010; Garc1 a 2009), a variety of discursive practices are utilised as a response to homogenising impulses of mainstream education and in order to negotiate the legitimacy of the minority

languages in education. In Nepal, many studies now recognise that the social and political position of a language has to be understood in tandem with the development of Nepali state (Gaige 1975; Guneratne 2002; Hutt 1988; Onta 1996b; Turin 2007). In a linguistically diverse country like Nepal, the role of the state in placing diverse groups of people under a specific category and positioning them in a particular social order is bound to have consequences of ‘ inter-group boundaries and ethnolinguistic identity within Nepal’ (Sonntag 1995: 118). While a neat distinction between ethnicity and nationalism undoubtedly helps to focus on the way the Nepali state has approached the issue of language, it also obfuscates complex negotiations that take in everyday practice.

Moving beyond the a priori notion on ethnicity and nationalism, scholars now urge us to approach identities not as a matter of ethnocultural facts but as shaped through imagination (Anderson 1991), forged in public narrative (Somers 1994) and asserted as a political claim (Brubaker 2004). As a product of situated social action, ethnolinguistic identities may shift and recombine to meet new circumstances (Bucholtz and Hall 2004: 376). Drawing our attention to the multilingual contexts in Europe, scholars such as Garcı a (2009) have pointed towards varied discursive practices in multilingual contexts where speakers draw on several languages and associated identities, simultaneously. By placing the focus on multilingual speakers, as Woolard (1998: 3) showed, we are able to appreciate the ambivalent but ‘ simultaneous messages that are communicated in linguistic contact zones, and speakers’ simultaneous claims to more than one social identity’ . The notion of simultaneous identity allows one identity to make claims to multiple membership simultaneously, unlike the notion of multiple identities where people are making claims to multiple but parallel memberships (Hall 2003).

This idea of ‘simultaneity’ is inspired by Bakhtin’s conceptual system that rejects binarism. Bakhtin proposed that this allows us to appreciate various social processes that tend to cross boundaries and move away from reductionist approach to identity. In Bakhtin’s words (Bakhtin 1981: 314), ‘this interaction, this dialogic tension between two languages and two belief systems, permits authorial intentions to be realized in such a way that we can acutely sense their presence at every point’. In this process, ethnolinguistic groups are able to construct their own subjectivities by utilising the various resources available to them and can respond in, sometimes, unpredictable ways. As Holoquist (1990: 67) mentioned, while explaining Bakhtin’s concepts, simultaneity is a ‘dialogue between the different meanings the same word has at different stages in the history of a given national language’. While the idea of simultaneity does not reconcile the power hierarchies, it nonetheless opens up the possibility of multivalent identities to emerge. Within this view, it is possible for apparently conflicting but simultaneous claim on different positions. Woolard (1998: 4), discussing the theoretical utility of this concept, identified that simultaneity allows the possibility of real co-presence of ‘contrasting elements in tension’. The idea of simultaneity, therefore, is a helpful analytical lens to broaden our understanding of multilingual settings and appreciate its complexities.

Ethnolinguistic right as a constitutional right

As a flagship programme of Newar ethnic activism, Newa School was established as a private but government-recognised school with the objective of teaching Nepal Bhasa to the younger generation, after the constitution declared Nepal as a multilingual and multiethnic country in 1990. The school was well-known for using Nepal Bhasa as the medium of instruction. During my conversation with various people in the school, I particularly noted that the idea of mother tongue education as the constitutional provision predominantly shaped the discourses around

the mother tongue instruction in these schools. It was one of the ‘ much-trumpeted gains of the 1990 Constitution’ (Gellner 2004: 7) that the right to have primary education in the mother tongue was declared as ‘ fundamental right’ . However, even after these constitutional provisions, the state is not obligated to financially support mother tongue schools thus leading to the incoherent and non-committal positions. Despite this, the ethnic activists take the current provision on mother tongue education as a huge achievement compared to pre-1990 period where the Nepali state sought to ‘ banish mother tongue from school premises’ (NNEPC 1956).⁶

Within this view, the discourse of mother tongue was seen as a way to position ethnic groups as an important element of this plural vision. Newa School was clearly established with an aim to revitalise Nepal Bhasa , a language spoken by the Newars. The Newars are considered the natives of the Kathmandu Valley, a capital city of Nepal, though their population is spread all over Nepal and beyond (Bista 1976). According to the population census of 2011, Newars are 5.2 per cent of Nepal’ s population, and the majority of them are concentrated in Kathmandu Valley. Although Newars are officially classified as ‘adivasi janajati’ (indigenous nationalities), to denote the socio-politically marginalisation by the Nepali state, scholars have noted that Newars are atypical of the janajatis generally because of their concentration at the centre of the country and their relatively advantaged position on most criteria of development (Gellner 1986; Shrestha 2007). Officially, Newars have been classified as ‘ advantaged group’ in its a five-fold classification put forward by Nepal Janajati Adivasi Mahasangh (Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities [NEFIN]), an umbrella organisation of fifty-nine ethnic organisations. Nonetheless, Newar ethnic activism has been one of the most vocal ethnic mobilisations that has put forward campaigns for mother tongue education as a focal point for wider socio-political recognition of ethnic groups. In Kathmandu, where Nepal Bhasa is not

as commonly spoken by the younger generation,⁷ the deliberate use of this language in the school was a conscious effort to institutionalise it as a language of formal spaces.

Many recent studies on language use in Nepal have pointed out the gradual decline in the proportion of younger generations who speak their mother tongue (Turin 2013) and that the intergenerational transfer of language is weakening (Pettigrew 2000). According to Census 2011, only sixty-four per cent of the population registered as Newars speak Nepal Bhasa as their mother tongue. Discussing use of Nepal Bhasa within the family, Gellner (1986: 143) points out that Newar parents started to speak the national language Nepali to their children, instead of their mother tongue Nepal Bhasa, to avoid sounding ‘rustic and uneducated’. However, Newar ethnic activism has reacted to this decreasing use of Nepal Bhasa with ‘aggressive assertion of Newar identity based on language and culture’ (Gellner 1986: 143). Consequently, there has been a slight increase in the percentage of people speaking the mother tongue in Census 2011. Though, as Turin (2014) points out, the census figures on language may not always reflect the actual language proficiency. The census figures are highly influenced by the active campaigns by the ethnic organisations urging people to return their ethnic languages as mother tongues regardless of actual competence in the language (also see Hausner and Gellner 2012: 12).

‘Bhay Chhya sa Bhay Lyani’ (if the language is used, the language will survive) was often quoted in various conversations during my interaction in the school. The school signboard also clearly mentioned that the school uses ‘mother tongue as a medium of instruction’. The school management and administration used Nepal Bhasa for all official communication and insisted that the students use it at least within the school premises. However, it is also important to note that the school, at no point, sought to establish themselves as separate from the national

education system. On the contrary, their efforts were geared towards engaging with the state more effectively. This emphasis on working with the state is also prominent in the 10-year anniversary souvenir book published in 2001. The souvenir book published by the school in Nepal Bhasa included a letter of commendation from Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala praising the 'exemplary' work done by Newa School (written in Nepali). This was followed by a letter by the president of the governing committee, Mr Laxmidas Manandhar, appreciating the Prime Minister for supporting the school (written in Nepal Bhasa). Various other letters included in this collection refer to the constitution of 1990 that ensured the right to education in mother tongue. In this process of seeking space within the state, the school drew upon different legal provisions for the development and use of minority languages. One of the most important ways in which various actors sought legitimacy of the mother tongue education was by referring to the rights guaranteed by the Constitution of Nepal (Article 18.2). The constitution provided a widely endorsed framework that served to bring various conflicting groups in consensus.

The language activists, who were in the management committee, always referred to their demands for mother tongue education as demands to make the state accountable to provisions guaranteed in the constitution. As Newa School negotiated the institutional spaces for less-dominant languages from a comparatively powerless position, it also needed to negotiate the legitimacy of the very language they were attempting to institutionalise. For the school, strong engagement with the state was essential for gaining both recognition and legitimacy for mother tongue education. The implication of this discourse was that Newa School was extending the meaning of languages to imagine Nepal as a multilingual country where ethnolinguistic groups occupied a central position. While minority languages were indeed used in the school to signal ideas of authenticity and belongingness, the use of these languages also indicated a wider

process of negotiating the space for otherwise disappearing minority languages. This changing discourse fulfilled various socio-political functions in Nepal. As Pfaff-Czarnecka (1997: 443–50) notes, the recent period in Nepal is characterised by the ‘patchwork of minorities’ as a new notion of nationalism (cf. Lawoti and Hangen 2013). This reconfiguration of the social spaces was also indicative of the evolving balance of power and emergence of potential new hierarchies in the context of political transformation in Nepal. At a discursive level, then, the use of minority language was presented as a way to rethink Nepal as a country with diverse population and languages where each social identity would fall within a broader framework of being a Nepali.

‘To love your jati is to love your country ’

When a minority language is used as a language of education, this practice unsettles various taken-for-granted assumptions on education by calling upon multiple narratives on nationalism and competing assertions of ethno-linguistic identity within its framework. In their everyday functioning, Newa School was, therefore, drawn into multiple directions: firstly, to offer education in the minority language and secondly, to work closely with the homogenising national systems of education. The school management used Nepal Bhasa for all official communication and in school textbooks. As one of the objectives, the textbook mentioned ‘to love your jati is to love your country’. This move to invoke the love for one’s country, while declaring the love for one’s mother tongue, was one of the important ways in which the school positioned ethnic identity within the idea of Nepali nationhood. Education therefore was not only about getting the marginalised groups in and through the schools successfully but also about changing the nature of education itself both in its organisation and in its curriculum.

Inside the classrooms, especially in Nepal Bhasa classes, this manifested in a variety of different ways. On the one hand, the school textbooks presented the claims for jati itihias (ethnic history) by introducing several new characters into the list of national heroes and presented new histories. For instance, Nepal Bhasa textbook Luhiti for Class IV talks about Siddhidas Mahaju,⁸ who was honoured with the title ‘The Great Poet’ (Mahakavi). The lesson mentions that he is considered one of the ‘Four Pillars’ of Nepal Bhasa. Throughout the chapter, the lesson presents Siddhidas contribution to a long history of language struggle. Similarly, Class II has a chapter on Shankha Dhar Shakwa, a mythical figure, who is believed to have started the Nepal Sambat, a calendar followed by Newars (see the following section for a detailed discussion). On the one hand, it is also notable that these books retained most of the familiar stories from the ‘history of Nepal’: martyrs of Nepal, the great poet Laxmi Prasad Devkota and the history of the monarchy in Nepal (see Onta 1996a, for a detailed discussion on how various icons of Nepali nationalism were included in school textbooks). The school iconography also displayed the paintings of national symbols such as the national flag, the national flower (rhododendron), the national animal (cow) and national colour (crimson). These images in the school premises, though not part of the formal school curriculum, displayed the symbolic affirmations to the nation.

Inside the classrooms, teachers often sought to ensure that the children used the ‘correct’ Nepal Bhasa, at least in the classes dedicated to Nepal Bhasa language and literature. On the blackboard, dates were written in Nepal Sambat, the calendar that is considered to be the ‘authentic’ Newar calendar, for example, N.S. 1133 Gunla Thwa 14 Chaturdasi (20 August 2013) (for more discussion of the calendar, see below). Though this dating system is not commonly used in Nepal,⁹ the teachers and school administration in Newa School used this in all formal communication. Similarly, Nepal Bhasa teachers insisted that the students use

specific terms for the punctuation signs, for example, Puwa chi for full stop (.), Nhyasa chi for question mark (?) and Dipa chi for comma (,). I observed that the students in the primary grades found these especially difficult to remember, as these were not commonly used terms. The teachers also continuously reminded the students to use Nepal Bhasa words to refer to festivals that were coming up such as Gunpuni instead of Janai Purnima or Rakhsya Bandhan, Saparu instead of Gaijatra.¹⁰ Similarly, Jwajalapa was the form of greeting that was most commonly used inside the school, instead of Namaste. Responding to my confusion on the need to use these not-so-common words, the school teachers explained that if all the Newars gradually started using more regularly, they would soon become common practices. Many other researches around the world also document similar strategies on how language is often to solidarity within ethnic movements, to challenge dominant hierarchies and to create alternative identities (Aikman 1999; Bilanuik 2005; Gustafson 2009).

This emphasis on the ‘correct’ language raised various concerns. As one of the students of Class V, who also worked as student helpers, mentioned: ‘Many of my friends speak Nepal Bhasa only in front of the teachers. But whenever the teachers are not around, they prefer to use Nepali’. Students’ lack of interest in their mother tongue has been the common concern of the teachers and student helpers. In one of the training programmes for teachers that I attended, the teachers discussed the difficulty in teaching ‘correct’ language. The problems included a general lack of competence in using correct grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary and the mixing of words from other languages. This anxiety was mainly on two specific issues: first, the younger generation increasingly shifting to Nepali/English and second, even in the situations where the students do speak the mother tongue, they were highly influenced by these dominant language codes. Nepal Bhasa teachers saw this as a huge challenge. This attempt to revive the ‘pure’ version of language was especially challenging in the context where those

who still used it in daily lives are increasingly mixing Nepali and English vocabulary in sentences, even while using Nepal Bhasa grammar. This was clear in the everyday use of language in the playground, where students used a mix of Nepal Bhasa , Nepali and English with their friends.

The emphasis of mother tongue teaching in these schools was also about the survival of the language. In the staffroom, teachers often talked about the urgency in keeping Nepal Bhasa alive. Nepal Bhasa teachers often exclaimed to the students, ‘ If you don’ t speak Nepal Bhasa , who will speak this language? We must continue to use this language’ . Especially given the increasing language shift in the younger generation, the school used several incentives to the students, such as Rs 1,000 (approx. USD 10) cash prize for all the students who opt for Nepal Bhasa in the School Leaving Certificate (SLC) examination and Rs 25,000 (approx. USD 226) for the student who scores the highest grade in Nepal Bhasa in the SLC. In one of my conversations in the staffroom, the teachers were discussing the difficulties that the school management committee faced in registering the school. The head teacher explained, ‘ One of the reasons why it is difficult to work on language issue is because Nepal Bhasa is considered the responsibility of only Newar community. But Nepal Bhasa is Nepali. It belongs to Nepal not just Newars’ . I asked her to explain it further. She explained that all the languages of Nepal are Nepali. The language that is conventionally called ‘ Nepali’ should be known as something else. This sentiment is reflected in the dominant janajati discourse that have often demanded that the language currently known as ‘Nepali’ is relabelled as ‘Khas Nepali’, and all other languages in Nepal be called Nepali languages, that is, the languages that belong to Nepal. This is now symbolically reflected in the constitution of 2015, which state that all languages spoken in Nepal are now rastrabhasa (language of the state).

This discursive move attempts to emphasise the plurality associated with the very term Nepali. In the situation where the younger generation were increasingly moving towards Nepali and English, the school sought to counter this trend by creating formal spaces of learning and using mother tongue, in school and in public places. In everyday language exchanges, however, these linguistic demarcations were transcended in everyday practices, as I observed in a hopscotch game of a group of friends during the lunch break. One of the girl in a group shouted, ‘Tyo phyala na, Tyo 2nd ma phyala na!’ (Throw that there, throw it on the second box – in the Nepali language). Another girl threw the piece of flat stone out of the box. The first girl shouted with happiness, ‘Ye, chha out jula (You are out! – in Nepal Bhasa with English words). Wa line ye thila chha (You touched that line – in Nepal Bhasa with English words)’. The third girl who was waiting for her turn came forward, ‘Out! Mero turn aba’ (You are out. It’s my turn now – in Nepali with English words). Ethnographies of youth culture around the world have documented how youth and adolescents use ‘translanguaging’ practices by mixing different linguistics codes (Cresse and Blackledge 2010). Inside and outside of classrooms, students appropriate and use languages in often ‘unpredictable, idiosyncratic ways to build identity, affiliation and cultural practice’ (Canagarajah 1993). Students used a variety of language, understanding and learning styles that they possess in their everyday exchanges. In Jigu School as well, we discern a variety of ways in which language is used and a highly prevalent practice of mixing various languages. However, these assertions of ethnolinguistic identity at no time represent unambiguous move beyond the nation-state.

Nepal calendar, national calendar

In Newa School, the efforts to form collectives around ethnolinguistic practices took various forms. The Bhintuna Rally is one of such public events in which the students participated on 4

November 2013. The Bhintuna Rally has been celebrated every year since 1979 during the months of October and November. Bhintuna in Nepal Bhasa means ‘ good wishes’ . Every year, a Bhintuna celebration committee organises a rally extend good wishes and to celebrate Newar New Year, popularly known as Nepal Sambat and started in AD 879. Gellner (1986: 122), describing the early development of Bhintuna Rally, shows the scepticism against Nepal Sambat that ‘ the campaign for it is an attack on national unity and will be followed, if successful, by an attempt to impose a minority language on the majority’ . Shankha Dhar Shakwa, a mythical figure, is believed to have started this calendar after clearing the debts of people in Kathmandu. On 18 November 1999, the government declared Sankhadhar Sakhwa as one of the national heroes of Nepal. Since its first public celebration, various Newa ethnic organisations have been active in celebrating Shankha Dhar Shakwa and Nepal Sambat as a symbol of ‘ authentic’ Newar and Nepali identity. More recently, Nepal Sambat has been promoted as Nepal’ s ‘ homegrown’ calendar that marks the beginning of the more equitable society rather than a victory of a particular ruler (see Shrestha 2015, for a detailed discussion).

‘Nepal Sambat, Our Identity’
On the Occasion of National Calendar Nepal Sambat 1134
Best Wishes to All Nepalis - Best Wishes to the World
We extend our heartfelt invitation for the
Cultural Rally and Post-rally Congregation
In Basantapur, 6.30 am onwards
On Kachalathwa Paru (18th day of Kartik month) Monday
Nepal Sambat New Year National Celebration Committee 1134

This A3-size invitation card was printed in Nepal Bhasa on one side and in the Nepali language on the other. Both sides used devnagari script. The president of the organising committee explained that the committee used Nepali language and devnagari script so that both Newars and non-Newars could easily read it. Nowhere on the invitation card is it mentioned that it was an exclusively Newar celebration. In fact, the invitation card extended best wishes to all Nepalis (sampurna Nepali) and to the world (Biswa), thus presenting this celebration as a

national celebration (if not international). Through this, the committee sought to make claims on Nepali identity, while simultaneously displaying distinct ethnic identity. This celebration and the invitation card sought to ‘normalise’ Nepal Sambat and Nepal Bhasa as Nepali identity. Moreover, the committee also invited the prime minister to preside over the ceremony as the chief guest. This practice of inviting the prime minister has been followed since 2006 (2066 BS) when Krishna Prasad Bhattarai (then prime minister of the interim government) inaugurated the programme as the chief guest. Echoing similar perspective, Shrestha (2015: 124) in his article on Nepal Sambat concludes

... the term ‘Nepal’ does not belong to a certain group but to all Nepalese. Therefore, no reason exists for only the Newar to feel proud of Nepal Sambat because the term ‘Nepal’ implies that it belongs to all the Nepalese people.

The school participated in this event every year. In 2013, around fifty students and teachers had come to join the crowd of around 5,000 people. As more people joined in and the crowd got bigger, the teachers asked us to stand together behind the school banner. While waiting for the rally to begin, I started talking to one of the students who actively participated in this rally. She said it is fun to come to Bhintuna Rally because it is the day to get dressed up. She was wearing ‘traditional’ Newar attire, red and black saree wrapped around like a knee-length skirt. She told me that this is her own dress, but some of her friends hired or borrowed the dresses they were wearing. She met at her friend’s house, and they helped each other dress up. ‘I can’t do this hair on my own, so I asked my friend to do it for me’, she said. She had tied her hair up in a bun. She was not too keen on talking to me, as she was joining her friends in shouting the slogan Nepal Sambat, Rastriya Sambat (Nepal Calendar, National Calendar). While she was walking, she waved at and met many friends and family on the way who were standing on the side of the roads watching the procession. She shouted Nhu Daya Bhintuna (good wishes for the New Year) to the onlookers; many reciprocated. It was a fun moment for her and her friends

to be part of this annual public spectacle that has gradually begun to come into practice especially in Kathmandu.

The students also participated in car rally on 3 November 2013, a day before Newa New Year (Nepal Sambat). The rally was jointly organised by a group of approximately forty-five schools that used Nepal Bhasa as a medium of instruction and/or subject. They planned to visit and greet each other on the occasion Newa New Year (Nepal Sambat). The school had been preparing for this car rally for weeks now since the proposal was made by one of the Newa school principals. A series of meetings took place thereafter to plan various activities. Each school agreed to arrange for one decorated vehicle and mobilise an average of five to ten people to visit. The management committee (comprising of representatives from ten schools) drew the route for the car rally. They also decided to stop in ten to fourteen different schools to meet and greet each other. For this day, the playground was cleaned up, decorated with colourful flowerpots and the banners with school name were put above the school gates. The second entrance door, which is usually kept closed, was also opened up for the occasion. The vehicles were decorated with balloons, streamers and banners with various slogans. The slogans on the cars read: Teach in Newa Bhay, Teach Newa Bhay (Newa Bhasan bwanka disa, Newa Bhay bwonka disa), Our language, Our progress (Jhigu Bhave, Jhigu Nhyaye), Let's teach in Nepal Bhasa, Let's retain our identity (Newa Bhave Bwonke, Jhigu Mhasika Lyenkey) and We are Newars, We will always be Newars (Newa Jhi, Newa ye Jui). Each of these cars carried teachers and students from different schools. When the cars stopped in front of the school premises, the teachers and students got down and greeted each other with Happy New Year. Two motorcycles, with traffic policemen, escorted the vehicles and redirected other vehicles on the road so that the rally cars could pass through easily. Students stood next to the main entrance with the teachers to welcome the visitors with khadas (a piece of cloth put around the

shoulders as a symbol of felicitation) and red vermilion tika on their forehead. The Bhintuna Rally and the car rally portrays an effort to build a sense of community amongst Nepal Bhasa schools and attempt to express solidarity. Like Bhintuna Rally, this car rally was a public display of distinct identities that the schools stand for; it was not a private programme conducted inside the school.

In addition to these programmes, the school also participated in various other programmes such as inter-school scriptwriting (lipi) competitions and celebrations of the birth anniversaries of Siddhidas Mahaju and Jagat Sundar. These attempts to pluralise the public places have been one of the important features of Nepali public activities post-1990s. There is a 5-min news broadcast on Radio Nepal, the state-run radio station, in a number of ‘languages of the nation’ and a weekly page in the Gorakhapatra, the state-run newspaper, for various languages other than Nepali. The Royal Nepal Academy has included research on ethnic languages in its programmes since the 1990s. Though the Nepali state introduced some minor reforms in the 1990s, they have not been enough to bring about major changes (Kramer 2008: 192). It nonetheless has opened up spaces for more plural public places for production of knowledge and demonstrates the Nepali state’s commitment to embrace the diversity in its population. As the onlookers watched the Bhintuna Rally’s display and performance of Newa culture and tradition, more people joined in. The morning Bhintuna Rally is followed by motorcycle rally in the afternoon, where people will follow an expanded route around the Kathmandu valley on their motorcycles. As the Bhintuna Rally moved around the old city of Kathmandu, some other students joined in waving the Nepali flag. The sounds of Newa slogans while carrying the Nepali flag was not seen as contradictory.

Conclusion

The everyday practices in schools such as Newa School illustrate that neither the ideals of a homogeneous national identity nor those of a reified ethnic identity can explain the complex ways in which people negotiate their lives. The discussions above lead us to question mainstream scholarly understandings of ethnicity and nationalism. The ideas of homogeneous cultural unity that tend to characterise such approaches have led to sharp boundary-making between different groups, where ethnic and national identity is often seen as mutually exclusive. Dynamics in schools such as Newa School show that the students do not neatly choose between ethnicity and nationalism but instead demonstrate the simultaneity of these apparently contradictory ideas in their everyday practice. On the one hand, the students participate in the construction of a distinctive ethnic identity by using their mother tongues in school, participating in ethnic celebrations and dressing up in traditional attire. On the other hand, students uphold Nepali nationalism in these festivals by holding Nepali flags and presenting themselves as proud Nepali citizens. Moreover, the students seek to maintain their membership into multiple groups, by discursively positioning Nepal Bhasa as emblematic of both ethnic identity as national identity and therefore of local and national consequence simultaneously.

This possibility of actors choosing to act ambiguously, maintaining uncertainty of meanings while they gauge how to proceed, open up the new ways of practising identities. The students and teachers in these schools transcend the compartmentalisation of their social life on the basis of these categories but conform to these as an expression of their belongingness. Even as they engage actively with a putatively particularistic ethnic identity, such an identity is positioned simultaneously as a redefined notion of Nepali nationhood. To explain this, I have drawn on Bakhtin's idea of simultaneity. As illustrated in various sections on this article, with

simultaneous memberships in multiple groups, the school and the students through their practices engage in redefining these universal spaces of national education. In doing so, even while the school conforms to existing institutional norms of the education system, they seek to transform those same conventions by the distinctive ideas and practices that they bring to the fore. Of course, in practice, the coexistence of language and positions do not always assure their equality. Teachers and activists committed to the revival of Nepal Bhasa fear that multilingualism would ultimately favour dominant languages such as Nepali. Indeed, the school's efforts to institutionalise mother tongue does not dislodge the position of Nepali language. The idea of Nepal persists, often in strong nationalistic terms. However, what is under negotiation is the evolving role of ethnolinguistic identity, which is positioned simultaneously as a redefined notion of Nepali nationhood.

This article therefore argues that in a socially heterogeneous context like Nepal, it is intellectually and politically fruitful to approach different identities in relation to each other and to appreciate their entanglements. Such an approach allows us to step beyond the ossification that characterizes discourses on ethnicity and nationalism in contemporary Nepal. The idea of simultaneity discussed in this article allows for the co-presence of apparently contrasting elements in tension and appreciates the multiple scales in which identities are expressed. While there is an obvious power hierarchy between these identity positions, there is a need to continuously negotiate such a hierarchy. In political contexts where the ideas of monolithic notions of identity have often resulted in conflicts between various social groups, this possibility of simultaneous identities may help us to approach issues of identities in a more open-ended way.

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Notes

1 All the names are pseudonyms.

2 Nepal Bhasa is the language spoken by Newars, one of the ethnic groups in Nepal. Although 'Nepal Bhasa' literally means Nepalese language, it is different from 'Nepali', which is the official language of Nepal. Nepal Bhasa is also commonly known as Newari. However, many ethnic organisations have strongly opposed the use of the term 'Newari'. The census of Nepal now uses 'Nepal Bhasa' to denote the language spoken by Newars. In this thesis, I have used Nepal Bhasa, to reflect the term chosen self-consciously by Newar ethnic activists and used by Nepali state as census category.

3 I have used the term 'mother tongue' to reflect both popular and official usages. The census formally classifies the Nepali population using 'mother tongue' as a category on the basis of language spoken by any ethnic groups as their first language or language associated with the group as their heritage language. The terms 'ma bhay' ('mother tongue' in Nepal Bhasa language) were frequently used in my fieldwork site to allude to these associations.

4 There isn't any reliable database on the total number of Nepal Bhasa schools in Nepal. However, according to a rough estimate by one of the activist, there are around 100 schools in Kathmandu that formally teach Nepal Bhasa in school. This number is also reported in one of the online news article – Nepal Mandal, 2013. Rato Bangala School ye Nepal Bhay, online resource accessed in Dec 2014 <http://www.nepalmandal.com/content/19558.html>, 3 May 2013.

5 Pratt (1991: 34) describes these zones of contact as 'social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power ... as they lived out in many parts of the world today'.

6 According to the National Educational Planning Commission Report (1956: 96–7): 'Local dialects and tongues other than standard Nepali, should be banished from the school and playground as early as possible in the life of a child ... The study of a non-Nepali local tongue would mitigate against the effective development of Nepali, for the student would make greater use of it than Nepali, at home and in the community, and thus Nepali would remain a 'foreign' language. If the younger generation is taught to use Nepali as the basic language, then other languages will gradually disappear and greater national strength and unity will result'.

7 According to Census 2011, only sixty-four per cent of population registered as Newars speak Nepal Bhasa as their mother tongue.

8 Siddhidas Mahaju was at the forefront in the endeavour to revive literature in Nepal Bhasa, especially during Rana period. In his lifetime, Mahaju wrote more than forty-four books of poetry, epics, short stories and essays.

9 Bikram Sambat calendar is commonly used in all government communication and media, such as newspapers and radio. Increasingly, the Gregorian calendar is becoming more popular in the urban areas like Kathmandu.

10 Gunpuni/Janai Purnima/Rakhsya Bandhan is a festival where Newar families prepare soup with nine lentils. The elders of the family tie a sacred thread the wrists of family members as a symbol of protection. In some communities, brothers tie thread around sister's wrist. The latter is increasingly becoming popular through Bollywoodmovies and was been expressed as amatter of concern bymany teachers in JSB. Saparu/Gaijatra is a festival where theNewar families, whose familymembers died in that year, go around a city for a procession with one or more children symbolically dressed as a cow. Some families also take actual cow in the procession.