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CHAPTER 1

Anthropological Perspectives on Education in Nepal: Educational Transformations and Avenues of Learning

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What is education, and who counts as an ‘educated person’, amidst the competing religious, political and pedagogical ideologies that have shaped contemporary educational practices and institutions in Nepal? How have social and political change, an increasing commodification of education, a continued reliance on foreign aid and expanded geographical horizons contributed to a reshaping of Nepal’s educational landscape and thereby altered, opened up and closed avenues of learning available to the Nepali people? This edited volume explores Nepal as a site made unique by its historical position as the only country in South Asia that was not formally colonised (Des Chene 2007) and its relative geopolitical isolation until the fall of the oligarchic, semi-feudal Rana regime in 1951 (Whelpton 2005)[1]. And yet Nepal has undergone enormous social and political change over the last few decades. Undoubtedly, the relatively late introduction of a formal education system in Nepal had implications for the development of a nationwide mass-schooling system and institutions of higher education. However, the late but rapid expansion of mass education did not occur in a vacuum, but within a set of already existing educational practices anchored in, among other things, Buddhist monastic training, Sanskrit education (*gurukul*) and an incipient British-model school education catering to children of the Ranas (Wood 1965). Although Nepal was never colonised in a

political sense, the formal education system grew steadily with strong reliance on foreign development aid during the second half of the 20th century. Coupled with the instrumental role ascribed to literacy and schooling in the ongoing national modernisation project, Western-based education became an unquestionable social good in the eyes of the public. With the restoration of the multi-party system in 1990, new visions of national identity and the Nepali state were introduced through a variety of reforms to the education system. Education emerged as a key site for instituting and negotiating a multi-lingual and multi-ethnic notion of the Nepali nation; establishing the centrality of a democratic political system; battling against the violent conflict during the Maoist ‘people’s war’; and navigating class divisions through the private-public divide in the education system.

These rapid socio-political transformations, combined with the historically rich educational diversity in Nepal, provide a fascinating vantage point from which to explore the interplay of enduring structural inequality and prospects of social mobility in and through education; the production of new educational identities and their transformative potentials; and the reshaping of educational infrastructures and institutional dynamics. Through a collection of chapters located at the intersection of anthropology, sociology and development studies and based on rich ethnographic evidence, this edited volume explores educational transformations and avenues of learning in the context of wider social and political change in Nepal. The articles capture diverse and competing educational experiences and trajectories; examine the process of construction and transmission of knowledge in different sites within and beyond institutions of formal education; and explore the interconnections between education, state and society. Through these perspectives, the volume will shed light on the multiple ways in which processes of education, broadly defined, intersect with socio-political ideas, institutions and identities. Acknowledging that practices and meanings of education are context-specific (Levinson and Holland 1996; Froerer and Portisch 2012), the volume will extend, but not

escape, schools as sites for the study of educational processes. The aim of this volume is thus threefold. Firstly, it expands and ties together the emergent and somewhat sporadic body of anthropological studies on education in Nepal into a coherent field. Secondly, it adds to the debate on educational processes in South Asia by foregrounding Nepal as a site that, in the regional scholarship, has often been perceived and treated as peripheral to India. And thirdly, it contributes to the subfield of educational anthropology by using ethnographic evidence from Nepal to rethink ‘educational locations’ more broadly and thereby help promote anthropological knowledge production on education (Pradhan and Valentin 2019).

Ethnographies of education in Nepal – a growing field of research

The field of ethnographic research on education in Nepal has grown steadily since the late 1980s. As amply demonstrated by Kathryn Anderson-Levitt’s edited volume *Anthropologies of Education. A Global Guide to Ethnographic Studies of Learning and Schooling* (2012), local concerns make certain dimensions of education more visible than others and open up particular vantage points from which to examine educational processes in specific national contexts. In other words, it is largely the ‘burning issues’ on the ground that set the agenda for educational research. This is equally true in the context of Nepal, where scholarly interest in education first emerged in the mid-20th century in the wake of the spread of mass schooling and raised new questions as to how to deal with an ethnically and religiously diverse, impoverished and mostly illiterate population in a self-proclaimed Hindu kingdom. Since then, ongoing socio-political transitions and related restructurings of the education system, combined with a general increase in the presence of anthropologists in Nepal, have drawn scholarly attention towards the domain of formal education in myriad ways.

In one of the earliest substantial ethnographic publications on education in Nepal, Tod Ragsdale (1989) addressed what has later emerged as an overarching theme in the scholarship, namely

the instrumental role of formal education in processes of nation-building - in this case through a focus on ethnicity. This was a timely response to attempts by the Nepali state to establish a nationwide, standardised educational system of mass schooling[2], which, with substantial support from foreign donors, it was believed would lead Nepal into a ‘modern’ age of socio-economic and technological progress (Rappleye 2019). The National Education System Plan (NESP) was introduced in 1971 as the first overall strategy for centralising and standardising a national Nepali educational system (Bhatta 2011). To a wide extent NESP was successful in its attempts to promote national integration through education, but as Ragsdale’s (1989) study showed not without implications for the cultural and linguistic interests of ethnic minority groups. This challenge has persisted despite two constitutional changes[3] and is reflected in an extensive body of scholarship on ethnicity, language and education. Scholars (Awasthi 2004; Phyak 2011; Pradhan 2020; Weinberg 2017) have raised issues regarding the limitations of monolithic notions of nationalism and argued for the importance of language in shaping the educational outcomes of ethno-linguistic groups. They have pointed out that mother-tongue education is a way to redefine educational systems within broader efforts to democratise, pluralise and reconstruct public lives (Pradhan 2020), undo the effects of language ‘unplanning’(Giri 2009; Phyak 2011) and influence existing educational outcomes (Awasthi 2004). In her contribution to this volume, Miranda Weinberg extends these debates by probing the relation between language and place to show how a minority language is positioned both locally and nationally in ongoing nation-building processes.

Other studies have extended the focus on the relationship between the school as an institution, processes of nation-building and national identity by linking it to ideas of modernity fostered by planned development (*bikas*) (Pigg 1992) and globalisation (Madsen and Carney 2011). Likewise, studies have looked at this relationship through the lens of caste (Skinner and Holland 1996), class (Valentin 2005), gender (Ahearn 2001), religion (Childs and Choedup 2019) and broader

processes of inequality (Karki 2016; LeVine 2006). A related aspect is the way in which dominant ideas of ‘quality education’ have gained legitimacy in the context of a pronounced two-tier education system, consisting of underfinanced government schools for the poor and a diverse array of private educational institutions (Pradhan and Valentin 2020). Taken together, these studies have shed light on formal education as a key site for both reproducing and challenging inequality and, related to this, the failure/success of state and non-state actors in providing equal access to education. The above-mentioned literature has revealed not just the differential reach of education based on class, gender, caste, ethnicity and geography, but also the promises of social and economic progress that formal education entails from both an individual and a national perspective. As this volume also testifies, the importance ascribed to formal education as a driver of social mobility continues to be a key theme in studies of education in Nepal. This is evident across caste and social class, stretching from the most impoverished and marginalised segments of society, including rural/semi-urban students (Karki, Pradhan), the urban poor (Faye) and dalits (Adhikari and Gellner, Pfaff-Czarneka), to new elites who educate themselves for a future life outside Nepal (Wallenius).

In a context of continued inequality and social exclusion, and the limitations of national development projects, Nepal saw a decade (1996-2006) of armed conflict between Maoist insurgents and the Nepali state. During this armed conflict, schools and institutions of higher education became ideological and military battlegrounds. Maoists attacked school buildings - not only as symbols of state institutions, but also as icons of ethnic subjugation and discrimination (Pherali 2013). These political upheavals also left their mark on ethnographic scholarship, resulting in studies focusing on the Maoist movement as a community of learning (Zharkevich 2009), private schools as sites of conflict (Caddell 2006), student activism and the role of youth in the fight for a ‘New Nepal’ (Snellinger 2018) and, more broadly, higher education as a transnational socio-political field (Valentin, forthcoming). These studies have helped us to understand the contradictory and double-

edged role of education, which sometimes promotes discrimination and other times promises development and empowerment. Moreover, with an emphasis on youth agency, they have contributed to broader debates on the simultaneously disciplinary and transformative dimensions of political socialisation (Hirslund 2011). The changing socio-political context of Nepal has thus opened up a productive space to address the contradictions between the intentions of education and student practices, thereby shedding light on processes of self-making and notions of personhood emerging in and through education.

Over the last two decades, the armed conflict and subsequent political instability in Nepal, combined with an increasing global marketisation of formal education, have spurred a growing number of Nepali youth to move abroad for education. This has made student migration an object of study and resulted in a number of studies on the role of education in transnational migration. These have focused on overlapping practices of education and labour migration (Sijapati 2014; Valentin 2015), intergenerational relations and spatial representations (Kölbel 2013), the intersection between education and migration management (Thieme 2017; Hindman and Oppenheim 2014), and the issue of 'return' in relation to highly skilled female returnees (Valentin and Dhungel 2016) and to the applicability of knowledge and skills acquired abroad (Ghimire and Maharjan 2015). Contemporary practices of transnational student migration are embedded in longstanding mobility practices, with migration an integrated practice in many Nepali households. To travel for learning, thus, is not a new phenomenon and is a theme that has been addressed by scholars on different scales. This includes studies on everyday forms of educational mobility between home and school (Lind and Agergaard 2010), family-based educational migration of children from rural to urban areas (Childs and Choedup 2018) and the role of education in conflict-related youth migration from Nepal to India (Valentin 2012). Looking at, respectively, young students who have been sent away from their rural homes to boarding school in Kathmandu (Burack et al.) and the expanding global horizons within which

education is perceived (Valentin), the chapters in this volume aptly demonstrate the role that access to formal education plays in carving out and navigating new geographical trajectories. Likewise, with a focus on training of monks in a Himalayan monastery characterised by a blend of secular and spiritual education, Cameron Warner's chapter illustrates the enormous impact of migration and globalisation on the formation of today's educated Buddhist.

All in all, a fairly solid body of ethnographic evidence exists regarding education in Nepal, but it has not previously been conceptualised as a coherent field. Giving priority to field-based ethnographic (though not exclusively anthropological) studies, we have deliberately omitted broader research on education in Nepal, while acknowledging that such influential work has informed much of the anthropological work on education[4]. As such, the above review is not an exhaustive presentation of education research in Nepal, but presents major trends within ethnographic research that have developed in response to significant societal changes.

Anthropologies of education and the South Asian scholarship

The scholarly debate on education in Nepal resonates with ethnographic studies conducted elsewhere in South Asia on educational processes ranging from secular mass-schooling to other forms of institutionalised training (such as religious or military institutions) and various apprenticeship-based forms of learning (see for example Chopra and Jeffery 2005, Thapan 2014). A predominant focus has been on schools as vehicles for promoting modernity, equal opportunities and new social identities in societies with deeply entrenched social and economic inequalities pertaining to factors including class, caste, religion and gender (Jeffrey et al. 2005). Related to this, studies have shed light on the tensions between aspirations for social mobility, everyday experiences of schooling and unmet promises among underprivileged segments in India such as adivasis (Froerer 2015), dalits (Still 2011) and 'children-at-risk' (Balagopalan 2005), or the role of caste in the construction of 'merit'

(Subhramanyam 2015). These studies have provided a critical corrective to the idea of education as an unquestionable social good. Another central theme is the relationship between formal education and the formation of citizens, which is closely related to the very different legacies of the South Asian nation-states.

Recent discussions have centred on the critical role of minority identity in citizenship formation and how schools become sites for contestations between dominant national ideologies and alternative visions of minorities. In the Indian context, this has been examined with a focus on the disciplinary practices installed in schools by Hindu nationalist ideology (Froerer 2007; Benei 2008) and competing ideals of citizenship and of becoming a ‘good Muslim girl’ (Khoja-Moolji 2019; Matthan et al. 2014). In Sri Lanka, the relationship between citizenship formation and education has been approached from the perspective of Tamil and Muslim minorities (Sørensen 2008); in Bangladesh, with a focus on multiple literacies to engage with state institutions (Maddox 2002); and in Pakistan, by examining religious education (Nelson 2009) – to mention just a few studies. Across South Asia, research has drawn attention to student politics and political mobilisation in the realm of higher education (Martelli and Garalyte 2019; Pfaff-Czarnecka, Thieme and Kölbel, forthcoming). This includes studies on the politics of educated, unemployed young men in North India (Jeffrey 2010); the student-cum-activist identity of young people (Andersen 2019) and the use of social media in student politics in Bangladesh (Kuttig and Suykens 2020); and the wider practices of centralised patronage politics within which student organisations are embedded in Pakistan (Javid 2019). Together, this literature represents a substantial body of scholarship that critically explores issues of power and politics in education.

Speaking into a larger corpus of literature on social class production and middle-classness in South Asia (Baviskar and Ray 2015; Liechty 2003; Radhakrishnan 2011), and as a symptom of the global spread of neoliberal market forces, scholars have turned their gaze to education as a commodity

and the privatisation of education more broadly (Lukose 2008). Ethnographic research on the influence of neoliberal policies on education has proliferated in analyses of the relationship between education and aspiration (Mathew and Lukose 2020), as well as studies on the commercialisation of education and transnational education (Sancho 2020). To some extent, these studies build on arguments about the perceived role of education in social mobility, but with attention focused on the aspiring middle class (Jayadeva 2019; Mathew 2017), how middle-classness is performed through affective labour (Desai 2020; Babu 2020) and how schools increasingly brand themselves as ‘international’ in order to attract the middle class (Gilbertson 2014; Sancho 2020).

Ethnographies of education in Nepal presented in this volume complement this burgeoning South Asian scholarship on education. At the same time, they also constitute a unique contribution by expanding our understanding of social dynamics in South Asia - not least due to Nepal’s ‘non-colonial’ history, which provides a distinct socio-political context to explore the ways in which education systems have developed, educational identities have been fostered and educational practices have transformed over the years. The following section discusses some of these distinctly Nepali contributions to anthropological perspectives on education in South Asia.

Education and the ‘non-colonial’ history of Nepal

In a South Asian context, Nepal provides a unique case for exploring educational transformations because of the peculiar position that Nepal - as a nation-state and a scholarly realm - holds in the South Asian region. Discussing Nepal’s invisibility within South Asian studies, Mary Des Chene points to the importance of recognising the ‘condition of non-postcoloniality’ as a formative aspect of both Nepali history and the field of anthropology in Nepal (2007: 209). In other words, the fact that, unlike most of the Indian subcontinent, Nepal was never formally colonised by external powers, but was nonetheless deeply entangled in the colonial project through its connections with British India

and has been kept in a tight grip by India since the latter's independence complicates our understandings of both the colonial and the postcolonial. In ideological terms, the development of an anthropology of Nepal was in fact a colonising project characterised by the mapping and cataloguing of different people in Nepal, but did not gain speed until the second half of the 20th century - somewhat paradoxically, parallel to the decolonisation movement in other South Asian countries. This had significant implications for dominant anthropological representations of Nepal (as a fossilised kingdom, an interface between Central Asia and South Asia and a timeless Shangri-La); for the way in which the lack of a colonial history was equated with a lack of a national political history prior to the fall of the Rana regime in 1951; and for intra-regional imperialisms and the peripheral position of Nepal in postcolonial understandings of the subcontinent (Des Chene 2007). Of course, representations of Nepal as a historyless nation isolated from the rest of the world until 1951 have been disputed. In his historical account of foreignness in modern Nepali history, Mark Liechty (1997: 7-9) demonstrated how the ruling Rana dynasty pursued a deliberate strategy of selectively excluding certain foreign people and goods they thought would demoralise the general public, while allowing others, mainly when they enriched or otherwise benefited the ruling family. While prohibited to the public, this also included school education. In 1854, after a visit to England, the first Rana Prime Minister thus introduced English education to Nepal with the opening of Durbar High School for Rana children (Sharma 1990; Bista 1991).

Our endeavour here is to ask what this ambiguous 'non-colonised' historical context means for the study of education in Nepal. It is fair to say that 1951 marks the birth of Nepal as a modern nation-state and, given the instrumental role ascribed to formal education in nation-building processes, it is therefore no surprise that many accounts on education in Nepal, including our own work, begin at this point in time. At the time of the revolution in 1951, Nepal was characterised by an extremely low adult literacy rate (2 per cent) and primary school enrolment rate (less than 1 per

cent), as well as the limited number of primary schools (321) (Skerry et al. 1991). However, Nepal's education system underwent significant change in 1951, after the Rana regime was overthrown in a revolution led by then-King Tribhuvan and exiled Nepali politicians who were inspired by the Indian independence movement. A new constitution restored power to the king and, except for a brief period of democracy in 1959-60, marked the beginning of 30 years of royal absolutism manifested in the one-party Panchayat system from 1960-1990 (Whelpton 2005). During this period, education was nationalised and a uniform national education system was established. Nonetheless, a gradual democratic awakening, the incipient wave of modernisation following decolonisation in other parts of South Asia and, not least, an influx of foreign development aid all had significant implications for the foundation and subsequent growth of a nationwide school system. At the same time, the insistence on 1951 as a landmark in the history of Nepali education also reinforces a 'before and after' narrative and the impression of an entire population that was kept uneducated and isolated until the mid-20th century. Throughout this period of intense political change, education became a key site, where various visions of national identity were both promoted and challenged (Caddell 2007).

What then are the implications of this 'non-colonised' history for our understanding of education in contemporary Nepal when compared to other countries in the subcontinent, not least India? We emphasise three historical conditions that we believe can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of educational processes in South Asia. Firstly, unlike India, where affirmative action for various underprivileged groups in education has been a long-standing political concern (Higham and Shah 2013; Subhramanyam 2015) with a well-established body of literature that traces the discourse on caste in India to colonial origins (Cohn 1996; Dirks 2001), such policies were first introduced in Nepal in 2007. This has had critical implications - not just for access to education, but also for the broader understanding of social justice in education and the formation of marginalised identities (Middleton and Shneiderman 2008; Pyakurel 2011; Pfaff-Czarnecka 2019). Secondly,

despite its geopolitical importance, squeezed between two giant neighbours, Nepal as a nation still has a very peripheral position in the global economy. Classified as a Least Developed Country by the UN, Nepal has remained a ‘development target’ since the mid-20th century, which has resulted in a pervasive belief in *bikas*, the Nepali term used to describe modernist ideas of progress, and a heavy reliance on foreign aid. That formal education is considered a driver for progress and social mobility is, of course, not unique to Nepal, but the massive conflation between education and development has reinforced a strong sense of belonging to an ‘undeveloped’ nation and of ‘being behind’, with implications for how ideas and practices concerning ‘education’ and ‘the educated person’ are understood. Thirdly, and related to the previous point, a widespread lack of faith in future prospects in Nepal has led to very high levels of migration, including young people seeking education abroad. While education has been an element in long-standing migration practices from Nepal to India, the fact that Nepal was not formally colonised means that there are no historically established pathways for educational migration to Europe, as was the case for the elites in the former colonies. As such, contemporary forms of transnational educational migration from Nepal are not founded on colonial ties, but have emerged in response to an increasingly commercialised, global education market.

These three aspects – the approach to institutionalised inequalities, the internalisation of the dominant development discourse and the powerful imaginaries of a better world outside Nepal – are all entangled with each other and have shaped contemporary educational practices and institutions in Nepal. It is with an awareness of this distinct social, political and historical context that this edited volume explores the ways in which Nepal as a case can provide a unique contribution to anthropological knowledge production on education.

An anthropology of education of Nepal and the discipline of educational anthropology

The volume invites readers to learn about education in contemporary Nepal, its multiple locations and the many meanings ascribed to it. It provides solid new empirical evidence of one of the most fundamental experiences in human life - namely, the transmission of skills and knowledge, whether this transmission takes place inside or outside institutions of intentional learning. More than that, it places Nepal on the global map of educational anthropology as a discipline and thereby adds a comparative dimension to cross-cultural debates on formative processes known variously as education, schooling, learning and socialisation, translating them into terms that are meaningful in a Nepali context. Some chapters achieve this by applying novel perspectives that expand existing ideas concerning established empirical sites of education, namely formal school-based learning at public (Karki, Pradhan) and private schools (Faye, Wallenius) and at universities (Pfaff-Czarnecka). Other chapters open up new avenues of learning and new educational horizons - migration as a learning experience (Burack et al., Valentin), changing learning trajectories of dalits (Adhikari and Gellner), co-existing practices of spiritual and secular education in Buddhist monasteries (Warner) and the instrumental role of mother-tongue education in language activism (Weinberg). These sites and perspectives present us with a plethora of issues of comparative interest, such as competing sites of mass socialisation, education-related migration, privatisation and commodification of education, the changing role of religious education, educational infrastructures and intergenerational transfer of skills and knowledge.

Our attempt to sketch an ‘anthropology of education of Nepal’ builds on previous anthropological work that has explicitly addressed the global dimensions of education through a comparative, context-sensitive approach. This includes the seminal volume *The Cultural Production of the Educated Person: Critical Ethnographies of Schooling and Local Practice*, by the American anthropologists Bradley Levinson, Douglas Foley and Dorothy Holland (1996), which called for

moving beyond the school itself to examine other contexts and imaginaries through which people develop ideas about, and constitute themselves as, 'educated persons'. Western-style mass schooling, they claimed, represents a historically distinct, but globally predominant form of institutionalised education, which has to be understood in the context of multiple and competing ideas of education that exist across the world. While their work was founded on a corpus of socialisation and enculturation studies, emerging from the American tradition of cultural anthropology from the 1930s onwards, and on school and classroom ethnographies anchored in British sociology of education from the 1950s (Delamont 2012; van Zangen 2012), it is still fair to say that the analytical approach presented in the book marked a shift in anthropological studies on education. Questioning schooling's status as the predominant form of education opened up new sites of education, both geographically and institutionally, and influenced coming generations of educational anthropologists. Likewise, Kathryn Anderson-Levitt's two edited volumes, *Local Meanings, Global Schooling. Anthropology and World Culture Theory* (2003) and *Anthropologies of Education. A Global Guide to Ethnographic Studies of Learning and Schooling* (2012), have brought the global, comparative perspective to the fore within educational anthropology. The first of these works does so by emphasising the tensions between the increasingly standardised and homogeneous model of education following the expansion of Western-style mass schooling since the mid-20th century and its locally appropriated, divergent forms. Meanwhile, the second of these volumes shifts its focus towards the discipline itself and, through presentations of a number of 'national anthropologies of education' from around the world, it argues for the need to acknowledge the plurality of educational practices, regionally varying research themes and the different disciplinary traditions which shape anthropologies of education in different national contexts.

This volume adds to the above-mentioned work by attempting to compile a 'national educational anthropology of Nepal'. This inevitably raises a question of representation and the voices

through which such an account is told. Education is, as Agn s van Zanten reminds us, not a discipline, ‘but a field of study at the intersection between academic and social interests’ (2012: 306), which involves a disciplinary blurring not just between major disciplines, but also between anthropology and ethnography as respectively an epistemological orientation and a research methodology. Whether the field is defined as ‘educational anthropology’ or ‘educational ethnography’ depends on the specific research traditions on which it is grounded and their disciplinary roots (Anderson-Levitt 2012). While most of the contributors in this volume are anthropologists by training, a few also have a background in sociology, linguistics, religious studies or development studies. What they have in common is a qualitative, field-based approach, which privileges participant observation and in-depth interviewing as well as explanatory frameworks that emphasise the interplay between subjective experiences and interpretations, social practices and structural conditions in a variety of educational domains.

We similarly acknowledge that this volume is limited by its publication in the English language and that not all authors are sufficiently competent to read Nepali sources. Also concerning the issue of representation, this draws attention to the relationships of power, identity and inequality inherent to processes of knowledge production. On a personal note, this volume is born out of a shared dedication to the discipline of anthropology, the field of education and, not least, to Nepal. However, our widely different backgrounds as, respectively, a ‘dark’ South Asian, Nepali citizen trained and based in the UK and a ‘white’ European, Danish citizen trained and based in Denmark with research experience from Nepal over a span of 25 years, obviously have implications for the way we enter the field and the relationships we establish (Pradhan and Valentin 2019). These contrasting positions highlight general dilemmas of insider-outsider positions and, related to this, the problematic distinction between ‘native’ and ‘non-native’ anthropologists. This is characteristic for the entire volume, which draws on the perspectives of both Nepali and non-Nepali researchers writing about

Nepal. We thereby recognise that the volume's contributors belong to an ambiguous terrain of both familiarity and unfamiliarity (Narayan 1993) with Nepal. Several of the Nepali contributors have received part of their academic training from universities in the US and UK, while the non-Nepali contributors have been engaged with universities and research institutions in Nepal for years. Irrespective of where they received their academic training, most of the contributors thus draw from both their exposure to 'Western' disciplinary frameworks and their embeddedness in Nepali academic environments. We hope that the diverse ethnographic perspectives presented by scholars from a variety of backgrounds help in appreciating ethnography as a process through which researchers examine 'the ways in which each of us is situated in relation to the people we study' (Narayan, 1993: 678), thereby contributing to a rich ethnography of education in Nepal.

New themes and perspectives

The contributions in this volume extend existing scholarship by bringing in new empirical sites, unexplored avenues of learning and novel analytical perspectives through which to study contemporary educational processes in Nepal. They do so in light of the specific historical circumstances and Nepal's position in the South Asian region as a sovereign nation-state, which has never been formally under the control of foreign powers, but nonetheless has developed a strong dependency on the 'foreign' in economic, political and, not least, ideological terms. As demonstrated in various ways by the chapters in this volume, formal education has been ascribed an instrumental role in this ever-present, but continuously changing Nepali nation-building project of Nepal – from the homogenising modernisation project entailed in the notion of *bikas* to the federal restructuring and related official recognition of a plurality of voices. As such, the collection will enhance understandings of education as a social practice and the cultural production of the educated person (Levinson et al. 1996) and explore the ways in which ongoing social and political changes are

reshaping the educational landscape of Nepal, and vice versa. In some way or another, each chapter is centred around institutionalised forms of intentional learning – from primary school to university and across public-private divides – thereby reflecting the enormous social, economic and moral value ascribed to formal schooling in Nepal. While some chapters focus on dynamics within these institutions of learning, others look beyond the spatial confines of these institutions to examine contexts and imaginaries through which people – pupils, teachers, school leaders, parents etc. - develop ideas about and constitute themselves as ‘educated persons’. The chapters in this book are presented in the following three cross-cutting sections.

Section I: Inequalities and processes of social differentiation

The first theme, inequalities and processes of social differentiation, sheds new light on prevalent concerns in scholarly and public debates on formal education as an instrument in the social and economic upliftment of certain segments of the Nepali population and the nation as a whole. Since the mid-1950s, the education system has grown massively and reached almost all corners of Nepali society, both in social and geographical terms. Nevertheless, as the chapters in this section show, increased access to schooling does not necessarily translate into a reduction in social and economic inequalities. It is not merely access to education that matters, but also the kind of education being offered. Despite the high expectations that many people have regarding its transformative potentials, formal education continues to be distributed unevenly among different segments of Nepali society. The differential educational experiences of elite students (Wallenius), the urban poor (Faye), rural/semi-urban students (Karki) and dalit students (Adhikari and Gellner) support well-established arguments concerning the role of formal education in reproducing social inequality across generations (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990[1997]). The chapters in this section show that the rapid expansion of Nepali education and the emergence of a multiplicity of education institutions have helped to

reproduce entrenched structural inequalities. Equally important, however, they have also created new educational pathways for individuals and groups who would not have had access to formal education a few decades ago.

Wallenius's chapter elaborates on the role of education in producing 'Nepal's new rich'. Through an ethnography of elite education, he shows the extent of the commercialisation of education and the ways in which consumption practices of the 'new rich' serve to solidify social class status in Kathmandu. Similarly, Faye sheds new light on the privatisation of education by discussing how urban low-income families in Nepal strategically navigate a landscape of public and low-budget private schooling. Despite evidence that low-budget private schools do not necessarily provide 'quality education', families nonetheless invest heavily in such schooling in their attempts to increase their children's social status. Karki's chapter advances this conversation through a discussion of formal education as a 'positional good'. Based on an intergenerational analysis, his chapter shows that, while parents hold high expectations for their children's education, the actual life trajectories of children show that it does not necessarily deliver the promised outcomes. Similarly, Adhikari and Gellner's chapter presents the changing school experiences of dalits. They show that, while their exclusion from formal education has declined considerably, dalit students still face difficulties, mainly due to limited social and cultural capital. Moreover, their access to formal education is also hindered by a devaluation of their hands-on technical skills in favour of formal education. Thus, the four chapters in this section together question the promise of education as an uncontested social good and show how access to education continues to be determined by social positions such as caste, class and gender.

As these four chapters show, imaginations of the prospects of formal education have undoubtedly expanded considerably with the increasing privatisation and internationalisation of education over the past two decades. While wealthy families try to negotiate the promise of education

using their class positions, as discussed by Wallenius and Faye, such opportunities are severely limited for those in more lowly social positions, as discussed by Adhikari and Gellner and by Karki. In the context of the increasing availability of a wide range of educational options, the chapters in this section thereby point to a fundamental paradox of schooling - namely, on one hand, its role in continued processes of social differentiation and, on the one hand, its potentials for social change.

Section II: Mobilities and expanding educational landscapes

Partly due to the topography of Nepal, partly due to the late development and uneven distribution of educational institutions, geographical mobility has long been a precondition for gaining access to formal education, from primary to tertiary level. With the exception of a tiny elite, who were able to pursue educational careers in India, until the 1990s such mobility was largely restricted to Nepal, with opportunities of obtaining an education abroad virtually non-existent. However, the rapidly changing educational landscape within and outside the country has since become both an outcome and a source of intensified geographical mobility. People not only travel for educational purposes, they also learn while travelling (Newman et al. 2019; Olwig and Valentin 2015). Hence, educational migration operates as a site of self-transformation and is in most cases intricately linked with aspirations of upward social mobility.

The second section of this volume, ‘Mobilities and expanding educational landscapes’, includes three chapters highlighting the intersection between education and migration: two focusing on subjective experiences of education-related migration (Burack et al.; Valentin) and one exploring migration and globalisation as significant contextual factors in the transformation of contemporary monastic education (Warner). In different ways, these chapters detail the ways in which extended geographical horizons, both experienced and imagined, offer new spaces for educational discourses, practices and interactions. Tying together ethnographic material collected over a span of two decades

on educational strategies among squatters and later studies on the role of education in transnational migration, Valentin's chapter examines the role of education in interconnected social, geographical and existential mobility processes across specific temporal and spatial contexts. On a different scale, Burack et al.'s chapter explores the life trajectories of first-generation schoolchildren as they are sent from rural to urban areas to attend boarding schools. As children become familiarised with these new institutional set-ups, they begin to develop new educated identities, embed themselves in new kin-like networks and pursue new career aspirations. These new identities and aspirations, most often, contradict parents' expectations concerning their children's future responsibilities in taking care of the household and fulfilling religious duties. Warner's chapter on 'modern education' in a Tibetan Buddhist monastery explores another crossroads, namely that of secular schooling and monastic training. Aimed at preparing trainee Buddhist monks for a potential secular life outside the monastery, the institutional arrangement itself reflects the attempts of a Himalayan Buddhist community to adjust to profound demographic and societal changes over the last decade and a half caused not least by migration.

In combination, these three chapters more or less explicitly point to the role of globalisation in setting the direction for both individuals and educational institutions, whether in the form of an actual physical relocation, an imaginary frame or an adjustment to the curriculum that reflects and responds to societal changes caused by, among other factors, migration. This in itself is a reflection of the wider geographical circuits within which most Nepalis orient themselves today, irrespective of the scale and type of geographical mobility involved.

Section III: Institutions and transformations of educational sites

The third and final section, 'Institutions and transformations of educational sites', traces the ways in which Nepal's ongoing socio-political changes have found their way into both schools and

universities. Unlike India, the education system in Nepal did not reserve any places or institute any quota for students of marginalised backgrounds; schools and universities were expected to overcome existing inequalities without any affirmative action programmes. Nor did Nepal follow the three-language formula known from India, instead implementing a firm monolingual policy in the public sector, including educational institutions. In response to the pro-democracy political movement in the 1990s and the transformation from constitutional monarchy to federal republic in 2015, the responsible government bodies have attempted to adjust to new political agendas by transforming educational institutions into inclusive spaces. However, these changes were put under severe pressure with the devastating earthquake in 2015, which led to a massive collapse of school buildings around the country. While this obviously had very serious implications for both schools and pupils, it also provided school authorities with an opportunity to experiment with various projects of ‘building back better’.

The three chapters in this section explore how the shifts in the social composition of the student body, the new school infrastructures and new languages in education shape educational experiences and, in turn, transform educational sites. Pfaff-Czarnecka’s chapter explores the issue of caste in universities. Following the academic trajectories of dalit students and academics, her chapter uses a relational lens to capture processes of inclusion, modalities of exclusion and difficulties in forging a sense of belonging in academic spaces. Pradhan’s chapter furthers this theme in her study of post-2015 earthquake reconstruction of government schools. Her chapter explores what it means to construct a ‘good’ school through an analytical focus on the interconnected dynamics of materialities of schooling and its affective experiences. The chapter by Weinberg addresses the issue of language and education in the context of language policies that privilege the official national language, Nepali. She examines this issue through the lens of mother-tongue education. Looking at

scale-making practices of Dhimal language activists, this chapter shows that they seek recognition - both based on their affiliation to a particular locality and as members of a larger Nepali nation.

This section points to the ways in which transformations within educational sites shape and are shaped by the transformation of student identities. The dynamic trajectories of students and their presence also shift the socio-spatial nature of these educational institutions. Whether it is the presence of dalit students and academics at universities in Pfaff-Czarnecka's chapter, the construction of new infrastructure in Pradhan's chapter or the use of local languages at schools in Weinberg's chapter, the changes in educational institutions and the experiences of their students are closely intertwined. With a focus on what goes on within educational institutions, the chapters in this section bring the educational experiences of individual students into dialogue with broader institutional dynamics.

Overall, the proposed volume brings together a variety of underexplored themes, which, in combination with rich ethnographic evidence from Nepal, contribute to the burgeoning body of scholarly literature on educational anthropology. By exploring new manifestations of inequalities, formations of new educational identities and transformations of educational sites, this volume aims to rethink 'educational locations' more broadly and thereby to contribute to the field of educational anthropology from a localised, comparative perspective.

Notes

[1] The Ranas refer to members of the ruling political dynasty 1846-1951. This dynasty played an important role in establishing Nepal's first school and university, but these were only open to members of their family and a very select few. See Parajuli 2012 for detailed discussion.

[2] Nepal has come a long way since 1951, when there were only 321 primary schools in the entire country, the literacy rate was 2 per cent, and less than 1 per cent of Nepal's school-aged children were

enrolled in school (Skerry et al. 1991). In 2017, Nepal had 34,806 schools, the literacy rate was approximately 70 per cent, and the net enrolment rate in basic level was 87.4 per cent (GoN 2017).

[3] In 1990, the constitution declared Nepal ‘... a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, democratic, independent, indivisible, sovereign, Hindu and a constitutional monarchical kingdom’. The Interim Constitution of 2007 endorsed this idea of Nepal. In 2015, a new constitution was promulgated in the aftermath of the prolonged transition period that followed the second People’s Movement. This constitution restructured Nepal from a constitutional monarchy to a federal republic. In this new system, responsibility for ‘social development’ sectors, including education, has been transferred from the state to rural and urban municipalities.

[4] For example, the issue of social inequality and social mobility has been dealt with in qualitative (though not ethnographic) studies on educational planning (Carney and Rappleye 2011; Shields, R., and Rappleye 2008), school leadership and conflict (Parker et al. 2013), education and the aid industry (Bhatta 2011), education and inequality (Stash and Hannum 2001; Dixit 2002), language education (Yakkha Rai 1997; Yonjan-Tamang 1996), the private-public divide (Bhatta and Budhathoki 2013; Joshi 2015) and higher education (Bista et al. 2019). Likewise, historical work has contributed with important perspectives on education during the Panchayat (Onta 1996) and Rana eras (Parajuli 2012).

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