

Post-conflict Identity Crisis in Nepal: Implications for Educational Reforms

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Scene 1:

A pahadeⁱ hawker knocks on the gate of Kathmandu city's house with strawberries in his traditional hilly basket.

The landlady asks: *Dai kafal kasari ho?* [Elder brother, what rate are the strawberries?]

Pahade hawker: *Bis ruppe mana ho bainee.* [Twenty rupees per *mana*ⁱⁱ, younger sister.]

The landlady: *Bis ta mango bhayena ra dai? Milayera dinus na?* [Isn't twenty expensive, elder brother? Could you consider the price please?]

Scene 2:

A Madhesi hawker shouts outside the gate – *Ye ... Aalu, kauli, ramtoria, tamator...* [Potatoes, cauliflowers, ladyfingers, tomatoes ...]

The same landlady asks: *Ye madhise golbheda kasari ho?* [Hey Madhesi, how much are the tomatoes?]

Madhesiⁱⁱⁱ hawker: *Hajur... kilo ko dus rupaiya parchha hajur* [My lady, ten rupees per kilo madam.]

The landlady: *Kati mango, ali sasto de.* [That's expensive. Make it cheaper!]

Background

The above two scenes can be read as textual and linguistic representations and political allegories of the negative attitudes of Kathmandu city dwellers towards impoverished 'hawkers' in Nepal. They also depict the tensions between two prominent ethnic groups in contemporary Nepali society: *Pahade* and *Madhesi*. In this paper, we suggest such prejudice is not uncommon among the many different castes and indigenous groups of Nepal. It is rather a typical reflection on culture, and of the mindset of socially and politically privileged classes (living in the hills) towards people of the fertile southern plains (Terai/ Madhes). Against this backdrop, we argue it is the persistent negligence and symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1977^{iv}) of the state against the many marginalised castes and ethnic communities, which creates a timely intervention for oppressed groups to rebel

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violently against Nepal's political system. This, we suggest, has serious implications for notions of national identity and citizenship, as well as the critical role of education in producing social and political change in the era of post-war transitional politics. The analysis here primarily focuses on the context of Nepali society but also provides useful insights into similar post-conflict scenarios in other regions where post-conflict educational reconstruction and peacebuilding face significant challenges: for example, those widely publicised by the recent Global Monitoring Report on the impact of armed conflicts on educational processes in conflict-affected societies (UNESCO, 2011). Before developing our analysis of Nepal's education system, we reflect briefly upon the political antecedents that create a context for writing about education, identity and conflict in Nepal.

In February 1996, the then Communist Party of Nepal [Maoist] [CPN-M] announced a 'People's War' in Nepal, with the aim of overthrowing the constitutional monarchy and establishing 'a new socio-economic structure and state' (Bhattarai 2003; Maoist Statements and Documents, 2003). The ensuing conflict spread rapidly across the country as a consequence of failing to respond to longstanding social inequality (Murshed and Gates 2005), abject poverty and deprivation (Deraniyagala, 2005; Bhattarai, 2003; Do and Iyer, 2007), and the lack of insights into, or political will to deal with the rising insurgency through peaceful means (Thapa and Sijapati, 2004; Bohara et al., 2006). Over 17,000 people were killed by the war, before the *Comprehensive Peace Accord* (CPA) was eventually signed between the Government of Nepal and the CPN-M in November 2006. However, while the 'People's War' emerged in the context of widespread public dissatisfaction – (generated by several post-Panchayat [1990] governments), it also surfaced in response to deep and historically embedded socio-economic divisions. In the last thirteen years, Nepal has suffered a significant loss in social and political stability, resulting in a breakdown or malfunctioning of state institutions and leading to a gradual decline of public trust towards state functionality. Yet ironically such marked political change has led also to improved public participation, where historically suppressed castes have begun to challenge the state's dominance.

Throughout, we reflect on the 'People's War' in Nepal to examine the recent crisis of identity among the multi-ethnic and indigenous populations. In the midst of a rebellion against state nationalism and in response to a profound rupturing of Nepali tradition, the tensions of identity formation in the context of an evolving state are examined. Here we employ the frame of post-accord transitional politics to examine the concept of national

identity, and also critically consider the implications of change for education (as a process of identity formation and linguistic acquisition) and society. The analysis reveals tensions between embedded notions of 'national unity', on the one hand and the political 'fragmentation' of the state, on the other, as new communities, identities and political affiliations continue to emerge and conflate in the postaccord era. We argue such tensions serve to undermine the significance of national identity and contend that a more rigorous and critical debate is required to identify ways in which difference and diversity within 'Nepali' identity and citizenship may be usefully reconstructed through education and peace building.

This paper is structured in three main sections: firstly, we critique the process of educational development in Nepal from an ethnic/ caste perspective. Then, the following section presents an historico-political analysis of education in the process of creating national identity and its relevance to the advent and growth of the 'People's War'. Finally, we discuss the dilemma of preserving, reinventing or deconstructing the notion of 'national unity' in post-conflict political developments, primarily focusing on the possibilities for educational reconstruction in post-conflict Nepal.

Ethnic Diversity and Educational Development in Nepal

The evolving historical landscape of Nepal, reflected through its diverse ethnic and multicultural traditions, was perhaps first recognised by King Prithvi Narayan Shah (1723 – 1775), who annexed between twenty-two and twenty four different principalities and ethnic-based territories. Following the national unification campaign, he proclaimed that '*Nepal char jat chhatis varna ko fulbari ho*' [Nepal is a garden of four castes and thirty-six sub-castes.]. The *Muluki Ain* (National Code) was formally introduced in 1854 to regulate caste relations as a legal system within Nepali society, until the caste system was abolished in 1963 by the *Naya Muluki Ain* (New National Code), which prohibited caste-based discrimination (Shields and Rappleye, 2008b: p.266), although in reality social inequality persisted as upper caste groups continued to monopolise social and political institutions (Lawoti 2005). Today, such diversity is manifested through multiple forms of ethnicity, caste/race, language, religion, society and culture^v. Historically, in terms of 'race', two different groups have dwelled in Nepal: Mongoloid and

Caucasian. Dwelling in the mountainous terrains, Mongoloids are culturally close to Tibetans, whereas Caucasians reside much closer to the people of the Indo-Gangetic plains (Bhattachan and Pyakuryal, 1996: p.18). The high castes living in the hills (e.g. Brahmins, Chhetris and Newars), have connections to royalty and for centuries have enjoyed many state privileges, while the *Dalits* (treated as untouchable), indigenous nationalities known as *Janajatis* (indigenous nationalities, e.g. Bhutia, Thakali, Magars, Limbus, Tharus, Dhimals etc.) and *Madhesis* (ethnic groups dwelling in the Terai/ Madhes) have experienced deprivation and a lack of opportunity (Pandey, 2010; Lawoti, 2005). However, the rupturing of the traditional power relations between various social groups during the armed conflict as well as the increasing tensions between such groups after the CPA have produced a partial redistribution of resources and access to power.

Nepal is home to over one hundred ethnic and more than seventy linguistic communities (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2003). Yet in the presence of such multi-lingual groups and castes, the state has promoted the Nepali language *de facto* as the *lingua franca*: that which represents the prevailing orthodoxy or *doxa* (Bourdieu, 1977). However, the dominant view among ethnic and indigenous nationalities is that this is an act of 'symbolic violence' by the state, under the rule and influence of high caste elite groups. For Bourdieu (1977), this is where particular forms of linguistic competence, realised through a national language, are strategically employed to dominate and suppress difference and diversity, and further obscure indigenous languages. The promulgation of *Rastrabhasha* (national language) has somewhat damagingly promoted a single identity, language and culture, while ensuring the widespread dissemination of orthodox knowledge through a heavily prescribed curriculum. Without exception, all former regimes of Nepal - the Shah Kings (1768 – 1845), the Ranas (1846 – 1950), the *Panchas* (1960 – 1990) and the parliamentary party leaders (1951 – 1959 and 1990 – 2006) — have promoted 'a homogeneous, monolithic and unitary state by sanctioning and promoting only one language (Nepali), one caste group (Hill Brahmin and Chhetri) and one religion (Hinduism)' (Hachhethu et al. 2008: p.4). Educational structures including policies, bureaucracy and practice have historically played a complicit role in this process and still portray an uneven distribution of socioeconomic outcomes, perpetuating 'horizontal inequalities' in terms of caste, gender and ethnicity (Stewart, 2000; Tiwari, 2010).

Educational History: analysis and critique

Nepal's education system has a history of just over six decades. The end of the Rana oligarchy in 1951 and beginning of a more egalitarian regime provided universal access to education, which came to be seen as the right of 'free people' and essential means to gain access to the modern world. The first *Five Year Plan for Education in Nepal* (1956 – 1961) emphasised the propagation of 'national' characteristics in education by adopting a national curriculum at the primary phase and compulsory teaching of the Nepali language in all schools nationwide, while simultaneously barring the teaching and learning of other indigenous languages across state schools. The National Education Planning Commission (NEPC) recommended that Nepal's system be geared towards restoring historically muted 'essential characteristics' – 'national pride, virility and individuality' (Pandey et al., 1956: p.74). Yet in reality these elements were characterised in terms of the dominant cultural and linguistic forms that continued to monopolise state authority.

The New Education System Plan 1971 (NESP) while ostensibly aiming to meet the social, political and economic needs of the nation (HMG, 1971), largely contributed to the reproduction of prevailing social structures, in which historically privileged castes (and speakers of the 'native' language Nepali) continued to benefit from education. High caste groups - (primarily living in the hills), who constituted some 30.9 percent of the national population in 2001 occupied approximately 75 percent of all elite professional positions, including the judiciary, civil service, education sector and political leadership (Neupane 2000). All schools were then nationalised under the Ministry of Education and a new national curriculum sought to preserve the hegemony of high caste groups (their identity, culture and values), through a process of enculturation (and arguably symbolic violence [Bourdieu, 1986]) in schools across the country. For example, in schools children were made to rehearse the slogans –

Hamro raja hamro desh – pran bhanda pyaro chha; Hamro bhasha hamro bhesh – pran bhanda pyaro chha. (Our king and our nation – we adore them more than our lives; Our language and our culture – we adore them more than our lives.)

The expansion of education during this period was simply a 'psychological adornment' rather than a national strategy to produce citizens capable of contributing to the economy in Nepal (Ragsdale, 1989: p.15). Thus, the education system was developed as a tool both for nationalising interests and reducing diversity in Nepali

society, as well as nurturing a favourable outlook towards the monarchy and ruling elite who monopolised the state (Lawoti, 2007).

While the 'People's Movement 1990' had the effect of curtailing the absolute powers of the monarchy, hope of social and economic transformation was further sidelined by subsequent governments following the interests of privileged groups. The removal of pro-monarchy rhetoric from school textbooks did little to address socio-economic inequality, despite the restoration of a multi-party polity. 'Aid-driven' development was mostly ignorant of horizontal inequalities of caste, gender and ethnicity (Murshed and Gates, 2003), although regarded positively as a strategy for economic growth in which education was envisaged as a means to produce an industrious workforce. As Rapple (2011: p.79) suggests, this 'produces a set of educational development policy prescriptions that celebrate enrolments, efficiency, and links to the labour market while simultaneously sidelining considerations of diverse effects of education on social cohesion'. Yet again, the more recently adopted policy of decentralisation in education has defeated the purpose of inclusion by attracting 'local elite groups who have very limited interests in widening processes of democratic engagement' (Edwards, 2011: p.81).

Analytical framework

In the context of our analysis, we suggest that society is often constrained by ideology (representing the interests of dominant groups) in ways that seek to fix (national) identity, and thereby oppress difference and diversity of particular indigenous marginalised communities. In response, we employ a hermeneutic methodology that allows us to see how historical conflicts are recurring events located in particular ethnic and socio-cultural structures and traditions. These identities can become locked in notions of subjectivity that serve to fix meaning, while glossing over tensions that define our human condition. The value of a hermeneutic approach allows us to focus on issues of structure and agency, to consider both subjective and objective forces operating simultaneously, and so analyse conflict in terms of the historical context within which activists are effectively located.

Bourdieu's work (1977, 1986, 1990) is especially helpful in this regard, for all human and social action is culturally, ethnically and historically situated. This means we are all born into particular social and political settings, with individual and collective dispositions, influenced by prevailing structures and traditions. Action is constituted through a reciprocal (and reflexive) relationship between an individual's beliefs, thoughts and

personal disposition – *habitus*, and relatively enduring social structures, defining a *field* of action, within which the opportunities and limitations of human agency are cast, but not interminably fixed. In our analysis, this relates explicitly to the notion of social hierarchy, in particular social class identity and caste, which serve to define and mediate the uneven terrain of an evolving scenario of post accord transitional politics in Nepal. In turn, *habitus*, ‘which acts as a mediation between structure and practice’ (Bourdieu, 1977: p.487), serves to influence and structure (ideological) beliefs and political action, doing so discrepantly across different castes and within the boundaries of different political and linguistic *fields*. Such *fields* define a terrain within which different and diverse ethnic groups with access to different levels of resources and *capital* (economic, educational, cultural and symbolic) struggle for power and the possibility of freedom.

The analysis, which facilitates a broader scrutiny of education and its role in promoting national unity and identity, draws on interview data (n= 87) from the lead author’s PhD, conducted with a broad range of educational stakeholders including teachers, parents and young people. The primary objective of the research was to analyse Nepal’s educational development from a conflict perspective and then investigate violent experiences of educational stakeholders with the aim of exploring possibilities for educational reconstruction and identifying the role of education in building peace. The participants of the study were selected from across Nepal’s diverse geopolitical regions including Doti, Rolpa, Kapilvastu, Kathmandu, Udaypur and Sankhuwasabha districts from June to October 2008 and included both teachers and parents from government-funded as well as privately managed independent schools. A series of follow up interviews and consultations were subsequently carried out in Janakpur and Kapilvastu in 2009 and 2011 to capture a range of political sentiments emerging more recently. From the findings, we argue that any state-imposed homogenisation project, while superficially appearing to achieve national unity is nevertheless hostile to communities whose social identities remain dormant behind the veil of the state. A key concept in this analysis is the notion of ‘symbolic violence’ (Bourdieu, 1977), which describes how particular forms of linguistic competence developed through a national language (Nepali) can become a persistent force in the reproduction of state-defined knowledge. This coexists alongside the notion of *habitus*, conceived as a fluid and enabling concept, which while recognising the internal legitimacy of different ethnic groups, simultaneously allows such groups to challenge the *doxa* (or prevailing orthodoxy) and thus destabilise the state. In this sense, the *field* of conflict changes over time, resulting in a partial redistribution of

resources and access to important forms of *capital*: social and economic, symbolic and political. We begin by defining the *field* (of 'diversity'), before presenting our analysis.

Creating National Identity through Education: an analysis

The emergence of a democratic political system in the 1950s and the subsequent inception of modern education under the Panchayat era were implicitly aimed at restoring traditional powers of the monarchy and the no-party democratic polity. Devotion to the monarchy, a commitment to Nepali as the *lingua franca* and loyalty to the Panchayat political system were promoted as key unifying factors of the nation, constituting significant sociocultural diversity. In Bourdieu's (1977) idiom, this can be expressed in terms of how different and unequal access to *capital*, often correlates with uneven and inequitable relations of power. This suggests that more powerful groups can often gain access to influential social and political networks and thus determine what counts within particular socio-economic and educational *fields*. For example, only if the *field* changes, through conflict aimed at state-sponsored symbolic violence, would hitherto marginalised groups hope to acquire access to new forms of political power and resources (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). As Lawoti (2007: p.23) argues:

The ruling group defined the rights and duties of citizens toward the state by conflating it with its own interests and adopting political institutions that concentrated power within the group. This disjunction between the state and society is the underlying cause for the eruption of many of the contentious activities in present day Nepal.

In educational terms, the project of creating a unified Nepali state was the top priority of the Panchayat system (1960 – 1990), employed to produce a state defined pedagogy. A policy of 'national schooling' was imposed through 'restrictive textbooks and curricula that aimed at reinforcing a one-party system' (Carney and Madsen, 2009: p.175). The process of creating '*Rastiya Itihas*' (National History) led to the imposition of a national curriculum and further enculturation of a 'particular idea of nationhood' (Onta, 1996: p.215), followed by the marginalisation of indigenous culture(s) and language(s). As stated in the NESP, the goals of national education were:

to strengthen devotion to crown, country, national unity and the Panchayat system, to develop uniform traditions in education by bringing together various patterns under a single national policy, to limit the tradition of regional languages, to encourage financial and social mobility, and to fulfil manpower requirements essential for national development. (MoE , 1971: p.1)

This impacted on the learning abilities of children from minority castes/ ethnic communities and non-native Nepali speaking backgrounds (Ragsdale 1989), leading to a situation in which 'most of the school dropouts belonged to these non-Nepali speaking communities' (Yadava, 2007: p.14). Stash and Hannum (2001: p.376) also show that irrespective of socio-economic status, caste is often a determinant of 'both selection into and attrition from primary school'. Educational expansion or competitive access to schools does not necessarily address the issue of inequality in terms of caste/ ethnicity unless there are radical policy interventions allowing for positive discrimination on historically underprivileged groups, to disrupt their cycle of socio-economic and cultural reproduction. Evidence from South Africa also indicates that the medium of instruction other than the child's mother-tongue can sometimes hinder the realisation of academic potential. For example, some black children whose mother tongue is not English are restricted in terms of 'academic skills and intellectual growth' at both high school and university levels (Banda, 2000: p.51), which suggests that 'the quality of education cannot be seen as an issue separate from the language of instruction' (Brock-Utne, 2012: p.773).

Following the restoration of multiparty democracy in 1990 many underprivileged ethnic groups were still excluded by the state, in which the broad spectrum of political parties appeared more concerned with the struggle for power than addressing other issues of poverty and social inequality. Even in 2001, a full decade after multiparty democracy was restored and equal rights affirmed in the new Constitution – (where educational 'development' began to intensify), literacy rates among Brahmins (upper caste), were recorded at some 70 percent compared with only 10 percent among several low caste groups (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2003). Such inequality and social injustice reflects the uncompromising effect of state 'symbolic violence' against lower caste groups and ethnic minorities, the outcome of which has stirred violent conflict.

While Maoists have long demanded that ‘the right to education in the mother tongue up to higher levels should be guaranteed’ (Maoist Statements and Documents, 2003), some initiatives have been taken by the Ministry of Education and donor agencies to develop materials in indigenous languages as part of the Basic Primary Education Programme II (1999). These included ‘the development of primers, textbooks, teacher guides, and curriculum materials in the languages of Limbu, Maithili, Bhojpuri, Awadhi, and Newari among others’ (Shields and Rappleye, 2008a, p.99). However, while such activity is undoubtedly positive it is nevertheless inadequate to address broader issues of ethnic discrimination, as well as the many and various multiple linguistic barriers to teaching and learning of children from predominantly non-Nepali speaking backgrounds. As an articulate Madhesi youth suggests:

Most Madhesi people would like to take up jobs in the technical fields such as engineering, medicine, technicians and so forth. If they ever became teachers, it would be Maths or Science teachers as these subjects would require a minimum use of Nepali language. Succeeding in civil service for Madhesis is extremely challenging due to the language limitation. They would always fail due to the poor grammar in Nepali writing. (Madhesi male youth from Eastern Terai)

The hint of resignation in this interview points to a notion of ‘invisible violence’ (Bourdieu, 1977), in which the self-subordination of Madhesi people reflects not only a form of tacit compliance in relation to the *doxa*, but also perhaps a discernible sense of agreement. However, for us, the latter constitutes a form of ‘misrecognition’, whereby indigenous groups are constrained both by prevailing political orthodoxy (social structures) and the limitations of their agency and self-regulation, with the effect of reproducing the social order. As Gramsci (1971, p.244) might say, this is where the ‘ruling class not only maintains its dominance but manages to win consent from those over whom it rules’. Thus, the educational intervention to create a universally recognised Nepali identity can be interpreted as part of an elaborate apparatus of coercion: a state sponsored initiative to establish Nepali as the *lingua franca* and thereby secure compliance through a form of deception and/or widespread ‘misrecognition’. However, post-war political debates have emerged in favour of emphasising the linguistic and cultural restoration of ethnic and indigenous communities through bilingual educational policies in federal states. To oppose a history of linguistic coercion and enculturation foisted upon them, ethnic minorities and indigenous

nationalities have actively sought for the revival of their own native languages in the post-war political transition.

A youth peace activist in Janakpur reported:

There has been a movement for the revival of Maithili language in Janakpur. All FM stations in Mithila now broadcast programmes in both Nepali and Maithili. People in Janakpur do not want Hindi (often argued by Madhesi leaders as being the *lingua franca* in the Terai/ Madhes), yet another foreign language to dominate our native Maithili, nor will they accept the continuing dominance of Nepali language either. (A Madhesi male youth in Janakpur)

Further examples of exclusion include the appropriation of civil service examinations and teacher selection exams which are presented in Nepali, and which, of course, inevitably disadvantage non-Nepali speaking Nepalese citizens, who are left with no alternative but to opt for their non-native language as a means of achieving upward social mobility. As Shrestha (2007, p.201) notes 'the ruling minority has been imposing its language, religion and culture upon all other Nepalese groups on the pretext of 'national unity' or 'Nepali nationalism'. As such, the policy to adopt Nepali as the only official language, across all spheres of life, has come at the cost of cleansing particular ethnic groups of their indigenous languages and often precious cultural identities. The practice of state-imposed cultural assimilation is illuminated through the following extract, which highlights the exclusion of Madhesi people who have been systematically disenfranchised by the state:

Talking about other weaknesses, education has not been an easy access to all. There has been an opportunity to gain education for higher class [generally hill based high caste elites such as *Brahmins* and *Chhetris* and high caste *Madhesis*], whereas the low class [generally neglected groups such as *Dalits*, indigenous nationalities and low caste *Madhesis*] has been deprived of this opportunity. (Brahmin male teacher from a public school in Dang)

The Relevance of Ethnic Identity in the 'People's War'

The post-1990 period, both democratic and riven with conflict, became a time for 'ethnic building' as opposed to 'nation building' (Gellner, 2007). Enhanced democratic freedom during the 1990s allowed ethnic and diverse cultural groups to participate in multi-party politics and also reflect on their ascribed social and political status,

linking particular conditions with ethnic and caste-based identities. This period thus saw the establishment of ethnic-based parties such as *Nepal Sadbhawana Party* and *Nepal Janajati Party*, who started to challenge the oppression and long standing monopoly of a single language, culture and policy of state-defined nationalism, shaped by the ruling Bahuns and Chhetris. The increasing migration of people from the hills to the Terai, and their political power and control over land, became a critical issue within the realm of Terai based regional politics. New found political freedom created an opportunity to examine 'inter-ethnic relations' more critically: relations which were hitherto 'stratified' and thus 'fragmented' (Cohen, 1978). Fundamentally, the 'People's War' relied on such tensions to be developed as a way to incite action and further mobilise 'liberation'. Sudheer Sharma, a renowned journalist in Nepal notes that:

The Maoists systematically used ethnic groups that were largely ignored by the ruling elites by offering them a share of governance in areas they controlled during the insurgency. In exchange, the ethnic groups provided the rebels with manpower to fight government forces. (2007, para 3)

This concurs with Gramsci's (1971) notion of articulation, in which the dominant Maoists were able tactically to concede a share of power and governance (to subordinate ethnic groups) in order to preserve their own hegemony. The Maoist 'revolutionary liberation fronts' such as *Tharuwan Mukti Morch*, *Madhesi Mukti Morcha*, *Newa Mukti Morcha* and *Limbuwan Mukti Morcha* are supported by different ethnic groups and are thus represented by people from different ethnic regions and across the social strata:

If you view the Nepalese context it is not that all who went into conflict are ignorant people. Many intellectual and conscious people have also plunged into conflict. Due to the reason that there are social, political and cultural oppressions prevailing in our society, even the educated people have taken part in the conflict with an objective to end this, or to liberate people from these oppressions or to gain freedom. (Private school Principal from Kathmandu)

While it was noted elsewhere that the Maoist rebellion was largely envisioned and proclaimed by the educated elite (eg. Brahmins and Chhetris) (Pherali, 2011), the majority of Maoist activists and *People's Liberation Army*

are represented by young people from 'indigenous nationalities', down-trodden castes and unjustly marginalised ethnic groups (Lawoti, 2005). As a male school principal, of indigenous nationality – (from Rolpa the district in which the Maoist rebellion began) - critically questions:

... why did the 'People's War' start from Rolpa? This question emerges logically. Firstly, the dominant population of this region is Magar [indigenous nationality]. Historically, the Magars have been always oppressed by the Brahmin-oriented state structure of this country. This caste is deprived of having opportunities to progress and have always remained under-privileged. The people from this caste are socially, politically and educationally deprived. They are very naïve and easily persuaded by other people. If someone asked them to jump off the hill – they would do so. Such is the caste-structure and nature of the ethnic Magars of this region. The second cause is related to education. Out of five districts in the Rapti Zone, Rolpa has been the least well performing in terms of educational development. The literacy rate of this district is very low. (School principal from the Rolpa district)

This reinforces the point that for a long time regions inhabited by indigenous populations have been chronically neglected both educationally and developmentally. More significantly, they were also simultaneously controlled, indoctrinated and all but homogenised through the 'triumvirate' of Nepalese culture (language [Nepali], religion [Hinduism] and monarchy), where 'national culture was both elaborated in, and propagated through print, radio and visual media as well as educational resource materials' (Onta, 1996: p.214). While such resources and improved access to primary education can be regarded as a positive step towards developing basic levels of literacy across all sections of Nepali society, many learning materials tended to focus on creating a loyal and obedient citizenry, as well as preserving the hegemony of 'one nation' through the concept of state-defined politics.

Moreover, ethnic divisions and hierarchies displayed through public images in textbooks have promoted an 'evolutionary understanding of social stages': moving from deprived rural lifestyles to more affluent and advanced urban cultures. Centrally produced school textbooks serve to propagate cultural homogeneity linguistically, through a process of 'indoctrination', values and cultural signifiers sponsored by the dominant regime. Pigg

(1992) argues that such schoolbooks not only 'propagate' and 'legitimate' a theory of social stratification, but implicitly ascribe values that locate the Nepali language and culture at the heart of education through socialisation. The idea of *bikas* (development) and its representation in the formal curriculum – (by envisioning a move from rural life to urban 'modernity', agriculture to office work and situations of poverty to more sanitized urban settings) - creates an aspirational pressure, not only in terms of social and economic mobility but by affirming a perceived 'high life' to which everyone should sensibly aspire. The promise of social mobility thus inculcates loyalty to a system that claims to care deeply about its people and at the same time negates entirely any critical debate about social inequality, stratification, deprivation and social exclusion, which are seen as culturally predetermined and hence almost inevitable (Bista, 1991). Even following the Panchayat system, no serious efforts were made to correct the biasing and exclusionary nature of education – (except for removing references in school textbooks to the previous regime) - in the process of creating a single national identity.

Post-conflict Identity Crisis

The post-accord political transition saw an explosion in demand for more equitable social and political representation from various castes, ethnic and political groups. As Pandey (2010: p.40) argues, 'the sudden onslaught of the Maoist rebellion in 1996 contributed directly to a series of upheavals leading many Nepalese to redefine the structures of common difference and to a fracturing of national identity'. The twenty-one day *Madhes* uprising in January – February 2007 radicalised the agenda to establish new ethnic and regional autonomy, forcing the transitional government to concede to the demand of federalism and ethnic-based representation in the elections of the Constituent Assembly (CA). This agreement enabled the United Democratic Madhesi Front to win eighty-two seats in the CA, thereby emerging as the third largest party with a crucial role in the formation of coalition governments during the transition. Their political dominance lies along the Terai, southern plains of Nepal, populated by *Madhesi* (though some ethnic groups within this category refuse to be labelled as Madhesi) and *Tharu* ethnic groups who primarily speak *Maithali*, *Bhojpuri*, *Awadhi*, *Tharu* and *Hindi* as their mother tongue. However, *Hindi*, the national language of India, is the *lingua franca* in this region and has been demanded by the Front to be considered as the official national language of Terai. This issue has become contentious and occasionally triggers violence on the grounds of imposed nationalism^{vi}.

A major political change in the postaccord democratisation of Nepal has been the unsettling of high-caste groups, leading to improved ethno-regional and caste-based representation in the CA. However, such change is intertwined with the issue of national identitythe antecedents of which are problematic and often regarded untrustworthy among proponents of national integration. Accordingly, the historical formation of Nepali identity has become recently noticeably fragmented to the point where the struggle to establish distinct national identities has gained some considerable momentum. The demand of *Ek Madhes Ek Pradesh* [the entire Southern plains as one federal *Madhes* state], by the United Democratic Madhesi Front, who have redefined the identity of people living in the Terai as distinct from those who 'live outside of it', has served to exacerbate 'ethnic division and violence at the grassroots level' (Miklian, 2008: p.2). Indeed, recent incidents of expulsion of *Pahadiya people* (from the hills) from the *Madhes* may be interpreted as a bad omen for more radical identity-based ethnic violence. For example, a *Madhesi* youth activist holding a prestigious post in a Terai-based political party argues that while the state has tried to intercede with indigenous factions and identities, it has made no real attempt to integrate the people of Terai, who were left to live and survive in a colonised state within their own nation:

The notion of Nepali identity was promoted in line with the *Pahade* ethnic groups. The *Madhesi* people were treated as second-class citizens and their languages and culture were oppressed by the state.

Pahade people ridiculed the people who preferred to wear *Madhesi* cultural dress in the capital. (A male *Madhesi* youth from Eastern Terai)

While this perception might hold some truth it does not justify the political misconception that Terai/ *Madhes* is a homogenous territory in terms of language, culture and identity. The dominance of the four key indigenous languages in Terai including Maithili, Bhojpuri, Abadhi and Tharu and their distinctive cultural identities may not be represented in one linguistic or cultural identity whatever it might be. Education is related to an individual's culture and identity and must therefore be provided in the mother tongue, as 'language is a medium but not knowledge' (Interview with a lecturer in Janakpur). A different academic in Janakpur disagrees with the totalizing construction of *Madhesi* identity to encapsulate the nuances and diversity of the Terai:

We are not *Madhesi*. We are Maithili. Mithila does not exist in the political map but it does in people's mindset living here. We are proud of being Maithili rather than Nepali. Our language, culture, art etc. were suppressed historically, which we would like to regain through federalism and believe that this would strengthen Nepali nationality. (Maithili speaking lecturer in Janakpur)

Elsewhere, a youth activist affirmed:

I am Madhesi first and then a Nepali. (A male youth in Kapilvastu)

This type of sentiment, in which ethnic identity is put before national identity, is not uncommon among those who represent marginalised groups. Similar insights on redefining the process of Nepali identity have been reported by Hachhethu et al. (2008: pp. 93-94) suggesting that ethnic identity and national identity are not incompatible: people can be 'proud of both'. The notion of pluralistic nationalism, creating a space for indigenous and ethnic identities to flourish has been viewed suspiciously in relation to national integration and has therefore become an issue of major contention among political parties, the outcome of which has been the dissolution of the CA in May 2012. The challenges for uniting the country 'socioculturally and emotionally' to prevent disintegration (Lawoti, 2005: p.159) and the debate on determining the modality of federalism are further compounded by the lack of mutual trust among the political parties, along with an emerging regionalisation of politics which threatens disintegration:

Federalism on the basis of identities such as ethnicity or language would be a peril rather than promise in a developing a country like Nepal. It may result not only in caste based politics like in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, but more so invite historical accidents if one or the other federal unit decides to secede from the reset of the country (Pandey, 2010: p.51).

This controversial debate continues within academia, the structures of international development agencies working in Nepal and also among the political parties that represent the dissolved CA. However, the political schooling of the Maoists and *Madhes Movement* escalated the ideology of regional divisions and ethnic identities, which in turn stirred the ethnic sentiments of young people active in the war, and in those who were part of the ethnic movement in Terai.

Educational policies have rarely dealt with the issue of identity formation after the multiparty democracy was reinstated. In the current SSRP, the government plans to provide multilingual education in 7,500 schools by 2015 (MoE 2009, 26), which may be regarded as an initiative to address the needs of the children from non-Nepali speaking ethnic and indigenous nationalities, and an effort to nurture their linguistic identity. The ideological

Maoist rebellion and *Madhes Movement* have fundamentally altered the social fabric of Nepali society, while formal education and curricula have remained largely the same. Educational debates within and outside the classroom have been slow to redefine the character of national identity in the new socio-political context. Thus, in contrast to the historical notion of Nepali identity, several fragmented cultures and identities along regional and ethnic lines seem to have emerged, posing a threat to national unity and identity and further invoking crisis within post-war Nepali society.

Implications for Reconstruction

State directed leadership and control of the project to unify national identity is unsettled as violent conflict continues to penetrate and weaken the instruments of government, resulting in a rejection and redefinition of social and cultural practices in the postaccord era of transitional politics. While the risk of attack on education continues amidst serious violent conflict (UNESCO, 2010), the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in post-conflict nations (e.g. Timor-Lest, Peru and Sierra Leone) are persisting with recommendations for the reconstruction and reform of national education (Paulson, 2007). This creates an opportunity for post-conflict governments to implement representative measures in light of the testimony from victims and perpetrators of violence, while also correcting education's role in fuelling violent conflict (Davies, 2005; Bush and Saltarelli, 2000). In Nepal's case, it is difficult to address the impact of violence on educational stakeholders, especially teachers and young people who rarely have their testimony heard. The victims of violence, including orphans, widows, families of those 'lost' or disappeared and many war survivors, are still awaiting justice. The continuation of the state apparatus - military, parliamentary democracy and bureaucracy - makes the task of any 'revolutionary' change a mission at large, and especially so with the imminent risk of an unwelcome return to violence. The unpredictable transition of Nepal's political future makes the task of envisioning a new education system increasingly onerous and the process of educational reconstruction extremely remote.

Unlike Northern Ireland, which has historically reproduced a divided society and segregated education system, (Gallagher, 2005), Nepal's educational infrastructure has consistently pandered to selective elite groups and ignored the plight of diverse ethnic and indigenous nationalities (Lawoti, 2008; Lawoti and Guneratne, 2010), in both public and private sectors. On average, some 91 percent of all leadership positions in professional bodies

are occupied by high caste groups (Brahmin, Chhetri and Newar constituting 37 percent of the total population). In contrast, the *Dalit* (approximately 7 percent of population), indigenous nationalities (approximately 22 percent excluding indigenous nationalities dwelling in Terai) and Madhesi (approximately 32 percent including Madhesi *Dalit* and Terai indigenous nationalities) have only 0.3, 7 and 11 percent representation respectively in twelve influential sectors, including the executive branch, parliament, judiciary, public administration, security forces, politics and academe (Neupane, 2000). Young people representing socio-politically excluded communities lack 'social capital' (Bourdieu, 1984) and often experience barriers to social mobility. A young graduate representing a Tharu ethnic group lamented how, despite obtaining relevant qualifications, he would find it impossible to penetrate the prevailing system of patronage:

I hold a degree in education and have obtained a teaching license and I am probably the only graduate from my community but it has become impossible to find a job at school. It is so frustrating as I have wasted my time by going to university. Even with a decent university degree, I have had to do the same manual work as others who dropped out of school. Had I been from a privileged social or ethnic background, I would have secured a teaching job so easily. As I do not have political connections and influential social network, I am always ignored by the system. (A Tharu male from Kapilvastu)

This shows that patronage works against the opportunity of social mobility for historically disadvantaged ethnic groups. Hence, for these groups, educational attainment, at least in perception, does not always offer a meaningful reward. In such a context, as Gramsci (1971: p.43) argues 'if our aim is to produce a new stratum of intellectuals ... from a social group which has not traditionally developed the appropriate attitudes, then we have unprecedented difficulties to overcome'.

Accordingly, while the post-conflict scenario in Nepal appears ripe to determine an appropriate model of federalism – (allowing ethnic and indigenous populations to regain their cultural and national identities and further enhance the role of education in the process of achieving long-term peace and social cohesion), such radical political change is less than straightforward, especially in a context of extensive social exclusion. The tense geopolitical situation in Nepal, with a legacy of caste-based, ethnic discrimination, threatens the process of determining a new politics for social change and thus any hope of a reshaped and revitalised social and political

infrastructure. Educational reconstruction is largely dependent on the nature of political change in determining a vision for a new Nepali society. Teachers in Kathmandu revealed that:

Free basic education should be provided by federal states in 'New Nepal' and the curriculum and medium of instruction must be decided in a way that it reflects the economic needs of the federal state.

(Focus group discussion with teachers in a public school in Kathmandu)

In our view, educational reforms must be geared towards maintaining national unity, while also judiciously promoting a context for sustainable peace, community cohesion and social justice.

Conclusion

All that has been done to produce a single 'national identity', through a unified culture, single language and integrated system of politics has, in Nepal's cases, clearly not worked. Despite rapid expansion over the past decades and increased access to education throughout the country, Nepal's system has failed to address persistent horizontal inequalities and thus nurture social cohesion. The legacy of recent conflict has also demonstrated that political belief in the value of national identity as a form of cultural assimilation is nothing but a flawed concept. In seeking to impose indiscriminate regime change in the context of an increasingly heterogeneous empirical reality, such centralised policy does little to enhance the prospect of social and political stability. The coexistence of different ethnic identities alongside a unified concept of Nepali identity is not without opposition, for this paradoxical scenario highlights the extent of the crisis of identity in the postaccord era. It further poses critical questions around Nepal's state restructuring project: What does a single ethnic identity serve to produce? How would the ethnic make-up of individual federal governments ensure inclusion and begin to address widespread poverty? How is the process of national integration to be addressed and national unity promoted? Finally, how is the idea of national identity and integration embedded within formal education?

These questions have complex and potentially controversial answers. Recognition of ethnic identity can revitalise the self-esteem of ethnically marginalised groups and further encourage proactivity within federal states.

However, it needs to be realised that ethnic liberation is only a means and not the ultimate goal. So while improved freedom can pave the way for more inclusive democracy and equitable economic growth, it remains

the case that politicians and ordinary people have a major challenge to avoid potential intra-state, as well as inter-state conflicts on matters of ethnic and cultural identity. In this situation, rather than being nostalgic (some might say obstinate) about traditional notions of national identity, new political realities need to be embraced to reconstruct and redefine the national identity in the emerging cosmopolitan landscape. As we are reminded in terms of citizenship theory, education and practice (Osler and Starkey, 2005), matters of identity and citizenship constitute more than a legal status. They are form of social practice and so confer a sense of belonging that is respectful of difference and diversity, as well as a more equitable distribution of power and resources. Indeed, these are likely to be the key determinants of national integration rather than traditional notions, symbols and signifiers of 'brave Nepali', 'land of Buddha', 'country with Mount Everest' or Nepal's 'natural beauty'.

Hence, the main issue here is not the state's dismissal of indigenous identities in a bid to homogenise national characteristics, rather it is the systematic exclusion of various groups and their participation in crucial meaningful activities involving politics, bureaucracy and the institutions of national security on the basis of caste, gender and ethnicity. The two episodes of distinctive responses to the hawkers in Kathmandu as portrayed at the beginning of this paper are not merely derogatory and divisive but perhaps further symbolic of the hierarchical socio-political realities of the two distinct ethnic cultures. Hence, the present crisis of identity is not limited simply to the quest for victory over prevailing Pahade hegemony. It is more a struggle for an inclusive democracy and just society, one that provides more equitable opportunities for diverse ethnicities, castes, gender relations and indigenous nationalities. The very concept of national identity is hence defined within the realm and parameters of social justice and not in the web of political myth-making, the volatility and vagaries of which can often overlook fundamental problems in people's lives. This *is* the reality of peace building, citizenship and contemporary educational reform in Nepal

Yet the scale of the task is considerable as regional politics are fast becoming skewed towards concerns of unification and a one-nation state. It is almost certain that Nepal will adopt a form of federalism, such that federal states will assume limited responsibility for educational reconstruction, in the debate about language, 'national history' and exclusion of marginalised groups in education and society. It is important to recognise also that evidence from international contexts concerning the presumed benefits of multilingual education cannot be

viewed a panacea, for 'tensions and contradictions in translating official multilingual policy into actual classroom linguistic practice' (Hornberger and Vaish, 2009: p.309) can and do often occur. In the present context of globalisation where the English medium predominates, the prospect of nurturing indigenous ethnic identities through the mother-tongue has become a much less attractive proposition for parents (Banda, 2000).

Nevertheless, it is important to escape the hegemonic grip of any foreign language, whether it be English or Nepali, in order to seek to enable the effective learning of all children regardless of background. Drawing on her extensive research in Africa, Brock-Utne (2012: p.787) concludes that:

Our greatest challenge as educators working in Africa is ... the common belief among many lay people that the best way to learn a foreign language is to have the language as a medium of instruction. This is not true, not in a situation where you hardly ever hear the language outside of formal schooling.

This issue is of primary importance and requires extensive debate before politicians, policy-makers and practitioners begin embarking upon restructuring the education system in Nepal. While only radical change can address such issues as those detailed throughout this paper, the scale of educational reform would inevitably pose substantial technical challenges, including managing the transformation of teacher education programmes, improving the autonomy of federal states and undertaking the task of extensive curricular reforms. In actuality, this is likely to happen only through the political will for positive social transformation and hence the resolution to develop conflict-sensitive educational reforms. Although decade-long armed conflict has had a devastating impact on teachers, parents and children in Nepal (Pherali, 2011), it has also offered enormous opportunities, especially for meaningful reconstruction of the education system, relating to local needs and as a means to prepare young people with abilities to deal with complex social, political and cultural issues, both nationally and globally, in a conflict-sensitive manner. Most importantly, though, the emerging new education system has provided ample opportunity to incorporate notions of inclusion and diversity (plural national and ethnic identities) within the concept of a 'new Nepal'. These are the real aspirations generated by the recent 'People's War' and its subsequent movements during the peace building process; whether they will be realised remains to be seen.

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ⁱ A hawker is a person of hilly or mountainous origin

ⁱⁱ This is a traditional Nepali measurement system, in which measurements are made in quantity and not in weight – 7 *mana* = 1 *pathee*

ⁱⁱⁱ A hawker of Southern Plains origin

^{iv} The term symbolic violence is coined by Bourdieu to describe how particular forms of linguistic competence, in this case the process of learning Nepali, can become a signifier of domination over those for whom there appears no alternative choice. The dominant language is thus acquired as a form of misrecognition, a gentle violence that is unwittingly chosen as much as it is enforced.

^v We are fully aware of the tensions inherent to the concept of 'race' and its interchangeable status with ethnicity. For example, Miles (1993) and Mason (2006), have argued independently that 'race' can be regarded as a naturalising concept, which is socially, culturally and politically corrosive, as in the case of high and low 'caste' in Nepal. For this reason, though we cannot avoid using both terms at

different times, in part because of the historical antecedents of Nepal as a caste-based society, we prefer the term ethnicity as a more accurate representation of cultural difference and diversity existing between indigenous communities.

^{vi} Vice President Parmanand Jha who represents Madhesis took the oath of the office and secrecy in Hindi language on 23 July 2008. This incident sparked civil protest followed by a legal battle in the Supreme Court that declared Jha's oath null and void, subsequently suspending him from the post. He was reinstated after he took the oath of the office second time on 7 February 2010 in Nepali and Maithali, his mother tongue.