



Bureaucratising Social Justice: The reproduction of social inequality through scholarship programs in Nepal

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This article draws on ethnographic data on the distribution of scholarship programs at two Nepali state-run schools. Anchored in the cross-field of educational anthropology and the anthropology of bureaucracy, this article examines schools not just as sites of learning but as institutions that control and regulate access through bureaucratized mechanisms. We draw attention to scholarship processes as inherently selective and requiring social and cultural capital, thus leading to what we term “the bureaucratization of social justice.” [Nepal, scholarship program, social inequality, social justice]

INTRODUCTION

The role of formal education in the promotion of social justice is a long-standing concern in scholarly and political debates on social inequality (Howard and Maxwell, 2018; Walford, 2013). With the normative conception of education as a key instrument to social and economic progress and global priorities toward universal education reflected in the United Nations’ latest Sustainable Development Goals, state-run education institutions across the world are increasingly mandated to ensure the inclusion of socially and economically marginalized groups. Meanwhile, following a massive global spread of state-funded schooling during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many education systems have undergone expanded processes of privatization in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Walford, 2013). In many low-income countries, this has resulted in bifurcated education systems characterized by both insidious privatization within state-funded education institutions and growing gaps between public and private education, making free education “a myth” (Srivastava and Noronha, 2016). Among the mechanisms through which global organizations, governments, and educational institutions attempt to mitigate economic and social disadvantages, and thus make schooling more accessible for children of marginalized backgrounds, are the various scholarship programs that provide financial assistance to cover education costs (Filmer and Schady, 2008). While such programs aim to counter the immediate exclusionary effects of increased privatization of formal education, they may—despite the discourses of equality in which they are embedded—contribute to the reinforcement of existing inequalities through their distribution processes and related social practices. Moreover, by promoting access to schooling,

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such programs entail promises of social and economic progress for students and their families and thereby nurture the aspirational logic tied to formal education.

Through a focus on the distribution and negotiation of scholarship programs in Nepal, this article explores the contradictory nature of formal schooling within the context of historically entrenched inequalities, national and global demands for social justice, and an increasingly privatized field of education. Financial assistance programs in the form of scholarship schemes were introduced in the 1970s in Nepal to promote access to formal education for vulnerable categories of students (Acharya and Luitel, 2006). Since then, educational institutions have been mandated to provide measures to promote social inclusion in a context of enduring inequalities anchored historically in caste-, class-, and gender-based privileges, in tandem with the introduction of other affirmative action programs (Adhikari and Gellner, 2016; Shah and Shneiderman, 2013). Rooted in a broadly conceptualized framework of social justice, scholarships are distributed on the basis of perceived social and economic needs, but they nevertheless rest upon highly bureaucratic procedures and institutions that become tangible through a “micro-politics” of data collection characterizing educational planning in Nepal more generally (Caddell, 2005). The result is a process that is inherently selective and requires social and cultural capital that many of the targeted students and families do not possess. In many cases, therefore, the most deserving students fail to obtain scholarships, countering the intentions behind the programs and falling short of the ambitious rhetoric of social justice. Moreover, by targeting particular social groups—such as “the poor,” “girls,” “Dalits,” or “*adivasi janajati*” (indigenous nationalities)¹—such programs may contribute to reproducing social categories that have legitimized exclusion for centuries and which the state-run education system plays a key role in combating (Valentin, 2005).

Anchored in the cross-field of educational anthropology and the anthropology of bureaucracy, and based on ethnographic research in Nepal, this article examines the details of the scholarship distribution process—application procedures, home visits, examinations, selection criteria, and documentation requirements—thereby unveiling the ideas and practices that shape the selection of scholarship recipients at different stages of the distribution process. Rather than focus on the effectiveness of such programs, we situate this article in the context of everyday negotiations and analyze how social practices shape students’ access to and engagement with formal education. In addition to offering Nepal as an empirical case, this article contributes to the anthropology of education by going beyond the conceptualization of schools as only institutions of learning and socialization and viewing them also as bureaucratic institutions organized around a regime of action and as “a moral order in which the justification for human actions is based on the rational legitimacy of the ends” (Díaz de Rada, 2007, 207). This approach enables us to illuminate the administrative and regulatory aspects of schools, specifically in relation to scholarship distribution, which functions through strict rules and procedures but is also heavily mediated in practice by school administrators, teachers, and students in their attempt to produce eligible scholarship recipients. Approaching schools as bureaucratic institutions opens up a paradox in the social justice objectives of scholarship programs, where the scholarship recipients are expected to demonstrate the procedural knowledge and skills to prove their socioeconomic disadvantage.

To these ends, we begin with a discussion of how a focus on scholarship programs brings together perspectives from educational anthropology and the anthropology of bureaucracy. In the second section, we discuss the specific nexus of social justice, scholarships, and education in the context of Nepal. In the following two sections, we analyze

empirical data from two ethnographic studies to show, first, how different school actors navigate the bureaucratic processes built into the distribution of scholarships and, second, how such distribution processes reinforce underlying categories of distinction and thereby become catalysts for students' aspirations for social mobility. We conclude by questioning the degree to which schools, by virtue of their contradictory nature, offer an avenue for transformation compatible with the aims of social justice.

BRINGING TOGETHER EDUCATIONAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF BUREAUCRACY THROUGH A FOCUS ON SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAMS

This article engages two distinct subfields of anthropology: educational anthropology and the anthropology of bureaucracy. By bringing together these two research fields, we open an understanding of schools not just as sites of learning and socialization but also as institutions that control and regulate access through bureaucratized mechanisms. Informed by these two bodies of literature, we emphasize how scholarship programs, despite their emphasis on transformational goals such as social justice, tend to reproduce many of the fundamental inequalities in a given society (Druzca, 2019; Hickey, 2014). Studies of encounters with education-related bureaucracies among refugees highlight how policies intended to be inclusive are appropriated in practice and how, for example, school administrators, as "street-level bureaucrats," often attain a decisive role in negotiating access to educational programs (Chopra, 2020; Rodriguez-Gomez, 2019). Likewise, as we will show below, the bureaucratic practices of selecting students for scholarship programs through documentary evidence, categorization of students into social groups, and the eventual distribution of scholarship funds demonstrate how the potentially transformative spaces of education are shaped and limited by administrative practices, which on the one hand are highly regulated by rules and procedures and on the other hand rely on professionals embedded in school bureaucracies (Díaz de Rada, 2007).

First, we address long-standing scholarly debates on the tensions between a perspective on formal education as a vehicle for social change (Drèze and Sen, 2013) and its role in social and cultural reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron, [1977] 1990; Collins, 2009). Based on fundamentally modern ideas of the instrumental role of schooling in stimulating economic growth, eradicating social inequalities, and spreading democracy, the former perspective has strongly underpinned development thinking and discourse through the present day (Valentin, 2011). As pointed out by Arshima Dost and Peggy Froerer (2021), such discourses on the transformative potentials of formal education have found their way into scholarly thinking through, among others, the lens of "aspiration," referring to the hopes, desires, and dreams nurtured by the promises of schooling (111). This perspective recognizes both the structural conditions that continue to make schooling inaccessible for some and the potentials for social change that follow when young people have to turn broken promises into viable alternative futures (Dost and Froerer, 2021). Therefore, we draw from a rich body of studies in educational anthropology that see schools as transformative spaces in which relations between people across different classes, genders, castes, and ethnicities are shaped and reshaped, even if schooling does not lead to straightforward social mobility (Froerer and Portish, 2012; Levinson and Holland, 1996; Matthew and Lukose, 2020; Stambach, 2000).

In the context of Nepal, a number of ethnographic studies have shed light on formal education as a key site for both reproducing *and* challenging inequality from the

perspective of, among others, caste (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2023; Skinner and Holland, 1996), class (Valentin, 2005; Wallenius, 2023), gender (Ahearn, 2001; Becker, 2021), and ethnicity and language (Pradhan, 2020; Weinberg, 2021). These studies reveal not just the differential reach of education but also the promises of social and economic progress ascribed to formal education in a context of historically institutionalized caste-based inequalities, a nation-building project tied to an all-pervading development ideology² (Fujikura, 2013; Valentin and Pradhan, 2023), and an expanding class-based consumer culture (Liechty, 2003). From the government's side, financial assistance programs targeting "needy" students have emerged as deliberate political attempts to address inequality in society at large, whereas for individual students and families they represent a pathway to a potential school education. Thus, a focus on scholarships in Nepal opens up an avenue for exploring processes of inclusion and exclusion from a multiplicity of perspectives within the highly promising, contested terrain of education.

Second, by focusing on scholarship programs as concrete tools through which the state seeks to eradicate social inequality, we tease out the tension between schools as spaces for sociocultural transformation and schools as bureaucratic institutions. The logic of bureaucracy builds on a specific rationality that "consists of conceiving of human organisations to be a set of abstract kinds of knowledge, functions and procedures" (Díaz de Rada, 2007, 210) and which imposes an "ideological assumption that applies the same standard of normalisation" to all (Díaz de Rada, 2007, 214). From an anthropological perspective, however, bureaucracies are multilayered, heterogeneous fields of social practice governed by a host of informal rules and practical norms of noncompliant behavior (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan, 2021, 9). Acknowledging that documents constitute the infrastructure of bureaucracies, it is critical to analyze the role these are attributed in fostering transparency (Bierschenk and Oliver de Sardan 2021, 14) and how processes of documentation and related categorizations shape people's experiences with institutional procedures (Bear and Mathur, 2015). In the context of affirmative action programs, scholars have shown that the top-down nature of bureaucratic programs encourages people to identify with the "categories" set out by the programs themselves (Adhikari and Gellner, 2016; Shneiderman, 2013). Ethnographic studies on bureaucracy in South Asia have cautioned readers that since benefits are distributed on the basis of membership in a particular marginalized group, these programs tend to have unintended impacts such as the creation of a "culture of marginality" (Shneiderman, 2013) and the "formation of new inequalities" (Hingham and Shah, 2013). On the other hand, affirmative action programs in Nepal are considered crucial components of combating social inequality and therefore necessary to the continued quest for social justice (Drucza, 2019; Sunam and Shrestha, 2021). Given these considerations, we draw two distinct insights from the anthropology of bureaucracy. We pay attention, first, to how bureaucratic and documentary practices underpin these programs (Bear and Mathur, 2015) and, second, to the implication of social categories in how people interact with affirmative action programs (Hingham and Shah, 2013; Shneiderman, 2013).

Drawing on insights from these two fields of research—educational anthropology and the anthropology of bureaucracy—we explore the underlying narratives and assumptions that frame scholarship programs and the processes by which scholarships are obtained. As a contribution to nexus between these fields, we propose the notion of "bureaucratization of social justice" as a way to conceptualize practices that promote social justice within educational institutions. Although schools intend to enact processes of social justice through institutional practices requiring, for example, impartiality and transparency,

paradoxically bureaucracies tend to cater to and reflect the interests of dominant groups. By exploring the tensions between formal education as a process of cultural reproduction and social justice as a means for transformation, we aim to highlight the complex dynamics of schools as bureaucratic institutions. In doing so, we seek to draw out the broader implications for understanding the meanings and aspirations attached to education by scholarship recipients within a framework of social justice, in this case in the context of Nepal.

EDUCATION, SOCIAL JUSTICE, AND SCHOLARSHIPS IN NEPAL

Scholars have pointed to the tension between the possibility of social justice through education and the broader context of structural inequality within which education is distributed, thereby conceptualizing education as a “contradictory resource” (Howard and Maxwell, 2018; Levinson and Holland, 1996). While the prospect of promoting social justice through formal education sounds promising discursively, how these promises are translated into practice is often riddled with challenges, such as ensuring the access and well-being of marginalized groups. Therefore, it is critical to acknowledge social justice as a goal *and* a process (Fraser, 2008; Howard and Maxwell, 2018), the aim of which is to establish both an ethical case for intervening and procedures for securing “fairness” (Hickey, 2014, 1–2). Programs that aim to achieve social justice in education through financial assistance to disadvantaged students are particularly significant due to the normative conception of education as a central tenet of economic and social development.

In Nepal, the massive expansion of formal education since the mid-twentieth century through a nation-wide, state-funded schooling system is itself a reflection of the strong idea of education as something the state should ensure for its citizens collectively. Paradoxically, while this notion persists in the public and at the policy level, education is increasingly conceptualized as a private commodity to be purchased and traded by individual buyers and sellers (Bhatta, 2014). In Nepal, the massive expansion of private schooling since the 1980s and 1990s has created an increasingly competitive educational market offering a wide variety of schools at different price levels (Joshi, 2019). As tuition rates restrict access for many, the exclusive nature of private schooling has led to renewed debates over educational equality in Nepal (Bhatta and Pherali, 2017). As a response, the government has sought to regulate the private educational market through laws requiring scholarships for underprivileged groups as well as utilizing scholarships in public schools to try to address historical sociocultural inequalities (DoE, 2017).

Social inequality in education, including the unequitable distribution of school education to marginalized groups, has long been a concern in Nepal (Bennett et al., 2006; Neupane, 2000). To address these disparities, Nepal’s 1990 Constitution introduced provisions for the advancement of “those who belong to economically, socially or educationally backward” groups (GoN, 1990). The idea of ensuring educational equality through financial provision was then further elaborated in the Scholarship Rule of 2003 and Scholarship Guideline of 2013, which mandated that at least 10 percent of the student population in all private schools be provided scholarships. This rule applies to any school that takes monthly tuition fees from students, regardless of whether the school is registered as “community” or “institutional.” This provision also orders that schools develop a scholarship selection committee consisting of the school supervisor, a representative of the District Education Office, parents, and the principal. The

committee is responsible for monitoring the scholarship process and reporting to local educational bodies. These scholarships should provide support toward monthly tuition fees and other additional costs, as applicable (Joshi, 2019; Subedi, Suvedi, and Shrestha, 2012). Accordingly, following a decade-long civil war (1996–2006) and the subsequent 2006 Maoist peace agreement, regulations specify that 10 percent of students be provided with scholarships, with 2 percent of scholarships going to families that were victims of the “people’s revolution” (Joshi, 2019). Building on these provisions, the 2007 Constitution declared that special allowance be made for the “protection, empowerment and advancement” of marginalized groups (GoN, 2007). The 2015 Constitution, in its section on fundamental rights, even includes an explicit “right to social justice,” which states in Article 42.2 that marginalized groups will have the right to get special opportunities and benefits in education, health, housing, employment, food, and social security (GoN, 2015). In accordance with these constitutional declarations, the Government of Nepal has mandated state-run schools provide cash stipends to students from marginalized communities (DoE, 2017).

While the implementation of the various scholarship schemes has contributed to an overall increase in the number of school-attending children, government-based evaluations of the programs have also pointed to numerous challenges (DoE, 2011, 2018). These relate to, among others, problems of identifying and reaching the neediest students, insufficient amounts of money tied to specific scholarships, lack of clear communication between schools and parents, and social stigmatization associated with particular types of quotas, especially those of Dalits.³ To address these challenges, Nepal’s government recommends “more high value scholarships for poor and marginalized students” (MoE, 2016, 50); however, the path for securing such scholarships remains less clear. Because these governmental studies investigate the efficiency of scholarship programs and offer policy-based prescriptions, they tend to overlook dynamics surrounding how scholarship provisions are translated into everyday practices within schools. By drawing attention to the processual dimensions of scholarship programs and the social justice framework in which they are embedded, we aim to bring an ethnographic perspective to bear on both the possibilities and the pitfalls ascribed to such programs by student recipients and prospective applicants.

METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

This article draws on ethnographic data collected at two Nepali state-run schools as part of two independent research projects conducted, respectively, by Uma Pradhan and Todd John Wallenius. This empirical material is complemented by Karen Valentin’s long-standing ethnographic engagements in education in Nepal and expertise in the field of educational anthropology. Pradhan’s fieldwork at Sunaulo School was conducted between August 2016 and April 2017, between January and May 2018, and in a follow-up in 2019. This research draws on participant observation during the scholarship process, in which Pradhan helped organize the application papers for the school and conducted informal interviews with students enrolled in grades 11 and 12. This participant observation is combined with data collected both on the school premises and among residents in the surrounding areas on their experiences and involvements with the school. Wallenius’s fieldwork at Shikar Boarding School was conducted between October 2019 and March 2020. During this period, Wallenius adopted the position of a participant observer, facilitating weekly English classes with a group of fourth-grade students admitted through the school’s scholarship program. This material was supplemented by interviews with

faculty members and administrators, observations at campus events, and informal chats with students.

Although these studies were conducted in two ethnographic sites and in different time periods, the authors were struck by the similar scholarship bureaucracies that the students navigated in both schools. Since the two field studies were not designed for the purpose of comparative analysis, the ethnographic data were first organized around the common theme of the scholarship distribution process retrospectively and then the key processes were systematically mapped out. In several subsequent meetings between the three authors, these processes were thematically analyzed to draw out patterns and dynamics around scholarship distribution in the two schools. As the ethnographic accounts reveal, both schools, because they are state-run, rely on a range of financial sources, including that of scholarships, in a blurred domain of public and private financing of education (Pradhan and Valentin, 2020), but they differ significantly with regard to their history, profile, student population, and position in the educational hierarchy of Nepal as well as in the specific details and amounts of scholarships distributed. Because the two field studies were not designed within an explicitly comparative framework, the data does not allow us to make any systematic comparison on how variables such as class, caste, and gender factor into scholarship distribution.

Rather, by comparing processes of scholarship distribution, the analysis of ethnographic accounts across these sites point toward two distinct claims that we make. First, selection-based scholarship programs such as those discussed here take place in a context of intensified privatization of public education, where students are required to pay substantial fees to receive school education. This produces new demands for financial assistance programs and thereby works counter to the underlying claims for social justice. Second, categories of selection are neither static nor neutral but are constantly shaped and reshaped by schools' bureaucratic procedures. Scholarships are not just allocated from "above" but rather reflect social practices that take place through negotiations between students, parents, teachers, and administrators. More often than not, the onus to prove the "need" is placed on students and families, who must carefully construct and claim their financial lack, educational merit, and social marginalization convincingly to become eligible for scholarship programs.

THE SETTING: DIFFERENT SCHOOLS, SAME APPROACH?

The two schools examined in this article—Sunaulo School and Shikar Boarding School—are positioned quite differently in the educational hierarchy of Nepal. Sunaulo School is a government school 30 kilometers from the capital city of Kathmandu. While the school is one of the oldest in the locality and is very well respected, it is a government school and not as sought-after as the nearby private schools. In 2019, the government selected the school to be developed as a "model school," offering both financial and technical support to improve the quality of education. Shikar Boarding School, on the other hand, was founded in the 1960s and has long stood atop Nepal's educational hierarchy. Originally a government school, in the early 1970s it became a model school under the New Education Plan, and then in early 1980s it reluctantly became a private boarding school after the government withdrew funding. In the mid-1980s, the school's legal standing was renegotiated to that of a regional school under government jurisdiction, yet it was still not technically considered a government school. Uncertainty over the school's status during Nepal's transition to multiparty democracy in 1990 led to the adoption of

a tripartite funding structure akin to other community schools in Nepal. At the time of fieldwork, the school was transitioning from a regional to a national school as part of Nepal's federal restructuring, a process that has since been completed.

Both Sunaulo School and Shikar Boarding School draw on multiple sources of finance for their operation—grants from the Nepal government, fee-paying students, individual donations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and international donors. Sunaulo School receives state funding to cover costs for state-appointed teachers' salaries, examination costs, some administrative costs, and textbooks. The school also receives a lump sum to cover a variety of miscellaneous expenditures, as well as donations from different national and international NGOs, local businesspeople, and alumni. Shikar Boarding School operates a large annual budget comprised mostly of funds coming from Nepal's government, with significant additional support from international NGOs, private donors, and the school's alumni organization. The boarding school also manages a trust with millions of rupees of savings, utilizing the interest to support the school's operations and scholarship program. In addition to these funding sources, students in both schools pay various tuition fees. In Sunaulo School, the school fee was nominal for grade 1 to grade 10, ranging from NPR 500 to 3000 per annum. However, the students in grades 11 and 12 were required to pay annual tuition fees ranging from NPR 2500 to 20,000, depending on the student's choice of education, management, civil engineering, or science—the school's four areas of specialization. Shikar Boarding School had higher school fees, with students paying between NPR 20,000 to 30,000 admission fees and a NPR 10,000 "advance." Students were additionally charged NPR 3000 to 4000 per month for tuition fees and NPR 10,000 to 12,000 for boarding fees, including dormitory and dining services. Finally, students were required to pay between NPR 15,000 and 22,000 for additional examination, computer, lab, library, internet, and materials fees, as well as a fee of NPR 165 for the scholarship fund.

Shikar Boarding School's long-standing scholarship program was established to provide education of "international quality" to students from marginalized class and ethnic backgrounds. Admission and scholarships were initially provided only to boys; however, in the post-1990 period the school was opened to girls as well. To obtain a scholarship, prospective students appear for admission at one of eight exam centers set up temporarily across Nepal each year. Around 180 students receive scholarships of varying sizes annually, about 20 to 25 percent of the school's population, with 20 to 25 students entering the school on scholarships in the fourth grade, the school's entry-level class. The scholarship exam date is published in newspapers and on the radio and is open to all students of "underprivileged," "marginalized," "backward," or "low-caste" backgrounds, as well as students from "remote areas." The exam is conducted in two subjects—Nepali and mathematics—and administered by teachers from the school who travel to the exam location. In contrast, Sunaulo School provides scholarships to select students from the existing student body, around 10 to 15 percent of the student population. The scholarship selection takes place within the first month of the school year and students receive a pro-rata fee refund if selected. Scholarships ranged from 25 to 100 percent of the monthly tuition fees, i.e., NPR 2500 to 10,000 per annum, to ensure that the program is able to reach the neediest and most deserving students. The design of the scholarship program promotes some self-selection—only those students who have completed their school leaving examination from government schools (with an exception for students enrolled in technical courses) are eligible to apply for the scholarship.

While the specific context and position of the two schools within Nepal's education landscape differs significantly, both schools engage in processes that point to tensions embedded within the normative idea of assisting socially and economically disadvantaged groups through scholarships. Our intention is not to compare specific variables within the two schools' scholarship programs but rather to understand the broader discursive and social contexts in which scholarship programs operate. As Marit Melhuus (2002) argues, a proper conceptualization and theorizing of "context" is a meaningful way to make comparisons across time and place. Here, we use comparison as a tool to uncover processes taking place across two different scholarship programs in Nepal to make sense of similarity as well as plurality. Bringing both student and teacher experiences of the scholarship programs to the fore ethnographically enables us to capture the bureaucratic dynamics of social justice processes as they are enacted in Nepal.

SCHOOLS AS BUREAUCRATIC INSTITUTIONS: NEGOTIATING THE SCHOLARSHIP PROCESS

With the broader concern of a potential "misuse" of public funds and a related need to establish a trustworthy system that can ensure transparency and accountability, both Sunaulo School and Shikar Boarding School's scholarship relied on rules, procedures, and documents to identify the *genuine* students. Guided by the rationality that the genuine students can be identified and accounted for through an "extreme reduction of the subject" (Díaz de Rada, 2007, 209), both schools conducted extensive screening to ensure that scholarships were provided to the neediest students, that is, those who were able to demonstrate the procedural knowledge and fit the categories to prove eligible.

In both schools, the number of scholarship applications exceeded the number that they could afford to support. For example, Sunaulo School had around 200 students in grade 11, who could apply for approximately 25 scholarships (Pradhan fieldnotes, April 2018). For both schools, teachers, in collaboration with a scholarship officer, were the primary persons responsible for ensuring that scholarship funds were distributed to candidates. This responsibility meant that teachers and scholarship officers relied on documents, exams, and personalized assessments to verify that students were eligible for scholarships. For Shikar Boarding School, students' eligibility was assessed chiefly through an annual scholarship exam. During the exam, teachers would interview the student's parents and make an initial field report on the students' "family background," which in Nepal generally refers to a person's ethnic and socioeconomic status. Exams were then returned to the boarding school, marked anonymously, and ranked into a merit list. Students placed on the list were visited in a follow-up trip by the teacher at their home—without informing the family ahead of time—to check the "real" condition of the student and their family. On the trip, teachers would also visit the student's school and speak with community members about the student and their family. This information was then used to cross-check the family's own accounts of their finances and socioeconomic status. After comparing stories from the various sources, the teacher submitted a final report to the scholarship officer, certifying whether the student's case was genuine. Finally, the scholarship officer, along with a committee, decided who would be given a scholarship and at what percentage level of the school's costs. Overall, Shikar Boarding School's scholarship program reflected a blended approach of "meritocratic inclusion" (Sunam and Shrestha, 2021) by considering both elements of merit and socioeconomic marginalization in the allocation of financial resources.

In Sunaulo School, the processes of applying for a scholarship took place in a separate application after students were accepted to the school. Students were required to submit a range of documents—recommendation letters from the Village Development Committee (VDC) or municipality (*bipannata ko sifaris*), education certificates, and documents affirming the nature of their marginalization. To secure the required documents, students needed to complete a number of additional bureaucratic processes and pay a variety of fees (Pradhan fieldnotes, January 2018). This bureaucratization of social assistance had significant implications for both applicants and the scholarship distribution infrastructure. For applicants, this pressure to document their “neediness” translated into understanding the state as a rigid entity with too many bureaucratic hoops to jump through. “I have to go back to get the letter of recommendation from my college. The letter from the District Development office from the year 2009, it is too old. I will need to go and get that as well,” explained a student as she was heading out of the office without submitting her application letter (Interview with Pradhan, April 2018). To get all the papers ready, applicants usually traveled back and forth between the scholarship office and their homes. Another student said:

I needed to change my name in *Ga Bi Sa ko sifarish*—the recommendation letter from the VDC. I made a trip to my village, for applying for it. It is about half a day’s bus travel from here. It took me about two days to get both the papers sorted. (Interview with Pradhan, April 2018)

Furthermore, this authorship of eligibility came at a financial cost, often entailing hidden fees. As one student explained, “We had to apply for the recommendation letter from the municipal office. In the VDC, it costs Rs 50 [50 rupees]. But in the municipality, it is Rs 240” (Interview with Pradhan, April 2018). The total costs to submit the scholarship application ranged from NPR 100 to NPR 850 and required students to visit several different government offices. Thus, students needed access to existing capital, as well as time and perseverance, to meet the eligibility requirements. Nevertheless, the potential outcome of financial assistance meant that students were ready to spend the money.

In both schools, the ability to fulfill the various bureaucratic processes played a deciding role in determining which students would ultimately become eligible for a scholarship. For students at Sunaulo School, the bureaucratic hurdles that required securing documents for scholarship eligibility proved difficult to surmount. One student explained:

The teachers had asked all the students to bring the recommendation letter, it was compulsory. But I was not able to bring it, as my village is quite far and I work in a hotel after school. I did not submitted my application for that reason. (Interview with Pradhan, May 2018)

Thus, despite the intention of both schools to provide scholarships to students from marginalized backgrounds, the very bureaucratic processes for ensuring this legitimacy seemed to produce results to the contrary. Similarly, for students seeking a scholarship at Shikar Boarding School, the burden of travel to one of the exam centers proved to be difficult for some prospective applicants. For example, in describing their experience administering the scholarship exam in Gulmi, a hilly district in the Lumbini Province, one teacher explained that the road was washed out due to two days of rain. As a result, many students were unable to reach the exam center or arrived too late to take the exam. The teacher explained that the school had a hard time finding “genuine” cases for the

scholarship program because these kinds of students tended not to show up for the entrance exam (Wallenius fieldnotes, December 2019). Therefore, the students able to travel to the exam centers, and hence become eligible for a scholarship, came from families that were able to afford transportation and other associated costs.

While scholarship programs in Nepal are understood as specific responses to inequalities in education, teachers and administrators at both schools were well aware that financial support also opened up space for what was at times interpreted as “misuse” of the distribution of funds to the “wrong” kinds of students. To guard against accusations of this sort, the scholarship officer at Shikar Boarding School stated emphatically, “My major objective is transparency. I want to do an annual review of scholarships to make sure all cases are genuine” (Interview with Wallenius, November 2019). Caught somewhat off guard by the scholarship officer’s insistence on this point early in the interview, Wallenius came to realize that concern for awarding scholarship to “genuine” students permeated the operation of the scholarship program. As a result, after the exam results were tabulated—and hence the meritocratic portion of the process complete—the central task in awarding scholarships was ascertaining whether a student’s case for a scholarship was “real.” To investigate the matter, complex measures were undertaken, such as having teachers travel long distances to arrive unannounced at students’ homes and interviewing unsuspecting community members about the student’s family background. This process seemed to be informed to some degree by the school’s ongoing relationship with an international NGO, which put additional pressure on the school to document its use of the scholarship funds.⁴ According to the school’s scholarship officer, “Western donors are very organized and they ask to see all the details about their donations, including the student beneficiary himself” (Interview with Wallenius, November 2019).

These negotiations seemed to produce results that ran counter to the aims of social justice within which scholarship programs in Nepal are embedded. For example, in the group of fourth-grade scholarship students that Wallenius worked with, only 5 out of 16 students were girls. When Wallenius asked a faculty member why there were so many more boys than girls in the scholarship program, the teacher explained, “The whole world is male dominated, so therefore more boys than girls get the chance to study” (Interview with Wallenius, December 2019). The teacher then reasoned that many girls were likely not allowed to travel alone to the scholarship exam centers and parents might be hesitant to send the girls away to live at a boarding school. Therefore, in the case of gender disparity, while providing opportunities to a limited among of girls, the scholarship program seemed to reproduce norms in Nepal that have historically favored male education. Furthermore, in Wallenius’s group of scholarship students, a significant number of students had high-caste last names indicating a privileged social status, despite the program’s stated aims of providing opportunities for students from marginalized backgrounds. Likewise, while the students came from different geographical locations, only one student was from the Terai, Nepal’s lowland plains, a region that has historically been marginalized by elites from Nepal’s hilly regions. Thus, the majority of students entering the school on a scholarship appeared to be high-caste Hill males—hardly a move toward social justice. In discussing these observations with Wallenius, a teacher involved with the scholarship program reflected on the school’s difficulty in finding “genuine” cases for the scholarship program, revealing quite honestly that some of the scholarship students were not actually poor. The teacher explained, “There are two genuine cases of students who received [a] scholarship because their parents are mentally ill and live in a cave,” but most of

the “genuine” students were not able to attend the entrance exams to secure eligibility (Interview with Wallenius, December 2019).

Similarly, Pradhan’s material shows that even though the scholarship was, in principle, open to all students in need, in practice only a limited number of students were able to access it. As the scholarship numbers were limited in number, the Sunaulo School scholarship committee relied on identifying “genuine” cases by relying on the documents. Consequently, only those students who had the resources, time, and ability to collect recommendation letters, make a scholarship application, and pay the initial enrollment fee until the announcement of the scholarship results were able to benefit from the scholarship. According to the Sunaulo School records, 20 out of 44 students who received the scholarships belonged to high-caste groups (Pradhan fieldnotes, May 2018). Thus, the need to ensure that a student was “genuine” in terms of a disadvantaged socioeconomic background as well as “qualified” in terms of academic merit resulted in a paradoxical situation whereby students and families negotiated their eligibility through the production of different documents. In both schools, the documents and information that applicants submitted not only served as “facts” of their social need but were used by officials as the “evidence” of their actions. If any untoward scrutiny were to take place, this data could endorse the officials’ transparency and accountability. As a result, the meritocratic elements of the programs seemed to imply that relatively privileged families became the ones more likely to receive scholarships, rather than the “needy” students the schools were ostensibly seeking to find.

SCHOLARSHIPS AND THE ASPIRATIONAL LOGIC OF FORMAL EDUCATION

The students’ close engagement with scholarship bureaucracy and ability to prove that they are genuine students play into an aspirational discourse that strongly links possibilities for socioeconomic mobility to formal education. By prescribing requirements for remaining eligible after receiving a scholarship, scholarship programs engage students in both the possibilities and pitfalls of various aspirational logics linked to education. This rhetoric taps into students’ hopes, dreams, and desires for a better future through the idea of schooling as a transformative space for individual and social change (Becker, 2021; Kölbel, 2013; Liechty, 2003; Valentin, 2005). While the dramatic expansion of formal schooling in Nepal since the mid-twentieth century has facilitated substantial sociocultural change and new opportunities for individuals, the very transformative potential presented by schooling has also elicited an emerging set of anxieties for students fearful of the potential pitfalls, setbacks, and failures of the formal educational process.

For example, students at Sunaulo School shared with Pradhan that their scholarship was conditional on satisfactory performance throughout their time in the school. There were two main conditions. First was an attendance criterion—the requirement to remain a student and attend school regularly during the period of scholarship. Second was an attainment criterion—the need to perform satisfactorily in the exams. Both criteria sought to assure a student’s commitment to their education as an individual receiving additional financial support. However, by seeking to ensure academic merit, these measures caused great anxiety amongst the students through the need to continually demonstrate their academic ability. As one student explained, “This year onwards, the school fee has increased. I am worried about losing my scholarship. If I fail in even one subject (*back lagyo bhane*), the school has said that I will not be able to continue the support” (Interview with Pradhan, April 2018). In this capacity, the

double-edged discourses surrounding scholarship programs, discourses of both promise and peril, created a moral space in which students became “educated” individuals capable of navigating the school’s bureaucratic hurdles. Reflecting long-standing discourses in the anthropology of education (Levinson and Holland, 1996), the socio-cultural construction of the “educated” person through formal schooling processes seemed to shape the aspirations of scholarship recipients around ideas of morality, mobility, and status.

At Shikar Boarding School, the link between education, aspiration, and morality was evident in discussions with students about their motivations for pursuing the scholarship program. In an activity with fourth-grade scholarship recipients, Wallenius asked students why they had originally chosen to apply for the scholarship program. Their comments connected the scholarship program to the idea of becoming a “good person,” which was understood as being attained through formal education. For example, one fourth-grade student wrote, “I go for the scholarship because I am poor and want to be a good person,” and another student wrote, “I want to be a great person, a successful boy in my life” (Wallenius fieldnotes, February 2020). By connecting formal education, and the financial scholarship necessary to obtain it, not only to desires for economic mobility and success but also to moral ideas of becoming a “good” or “great” person, the students’ comments reflected an aspirational logic at work within educational institutions in Nepal. As anthropologists of education have long argued, the cultural production of the “educated” person through formal educational processes in Nepal is not value neutral but rather reflects the ideals of the dominant cultural paradigm (Skinner and Holland, 1996). Furthermore, as students are grafted into the formal educational process, new inequalities are stimulated through the creation of “uneducated” others—those deemed as lacking the progress, knowledge, and social status acquired through formal education (Snellinger, 2016). Thus, the students’ rationale for pursuing scholarships can be understood as a part of the broader cultural production of education in Nepal, a process that is ultimately inclusive of those who succeed in assimilating to its cultural demands and exclusive of those who fall outside of its socially constructed bounds.

In this vein, scholarship programs in Nepal can be understood as reinforcing the underlying categories of distinction that separate groups of people from each other. For example, in another exercise with the fourth-grade class, Wallenius asked students to compare their past, before receiving the scholarship, with their anticipated future. Student responses reflected a linear movement from “bad” to “good,” with the scholarship playing the crucial difference in securing aspirations for a better future. One student wrote, “In the past, I was not educated. In the future, I will be educated” (Wallenius fieldnotes, February 2020), reflecting the idea that the scholarship program provided not just the means for pursuing an academic experience but the opportunity to become “educated,” a category of personhood differentiated from “uneducated” others. Furthermore, students understood the scholarship program as opening the doors to social and economic mobility, which would enable them to make categorical leaps up the social class ladder. For example, one student wrote, “In past, I was poor. In future, I will be rich,” whereas another student wrote, “In the past we were small, in the future we are big” (Wallenius fieldnotes, February 2020). Through the idea of becoming a *thulo manche* (a “big” person), which in Nepal reflects a scale of social evaluation (Weinberg, 2021), students seemed to juxtapose those with education and wealth against those who are “small.” By tapping into these aspirational dynamics for economic and social ascendancy, scholarship programs reproduce broader cultural inequalities through social stratification, even as they provide possibilities for individual mobility.

The discursive emphasis on scholarships in Nepal is taking place amid an increasingly privatized educational landscape marked by students' aspirations for social and geographical mobility. Studies on private education in Nepal highlight that many private educators perceive scholarships as an efficient way to address education inequality (Joshi, 2019; Subedi, Suvedi, and Shrestha, 2014). For example, Priyadarshani Joshi (2019, 65) quotes a private school principal who claims that if the "government were to provide only 50 percent of the amount of money that they are providing to public schools to us they would not need to open (new) public schools at all." From this perspective, income-based scholarships are considered a more efficient way of addressing education inequality compared to the group-based educational stipend program that provides lump-sum amounts annually to marginalized community students in state-run schools. However, the deeper structural point we wish to make is that scholarship programs, whether class- or caste-based, will always entail some form of continued social inequality because of the contradictory nature of formal education. For example, in the past several years, Shikar Boarding School has had a number of students receive scholarships to Harvard University in the United States. Wallenius met one of these students at a campus event, who explained that he had been admitted to the boarding school with a full scholarship beginning in the fourth grade. After graduating, he attended a two-year program in the United Kingdom on a scholarship before being admitted to the Ivy League university. While the scholarship program enabled this student to move from rural Nepal to Harvard, a substantial swing in global social-class metrics, we question the degree to which the mobility experienced by this individual has fundamentally changed the nature of educational inequalities in Nepal in the direction of social justice. Despite the social and geographical mobility offered to select individuals, the aspirational possibilities stimulated through scholarship programs nevertheless contribute to the broader reproduction of social inequalities through institutionalized processes that create particular kinds of "educated" persons.

CONCLUSION

This article has explored scholarship programs in Nepal as a social practice, paying specific attention to how various school actors construct criteria of need and merit. The increasing concern over the potential "misuse" of public funds, along with the pressures to reach to the "neediest" individuals, has animated a multilayered mechanism that identifies and categorizes students in Nepal in different ways. As a result, the two scholarship programs analyzed here seemed to perpetuate, rather than significantly challenge, caste, class, and gender hierarchies in education. Thus, we have argued that despite the emphasis on social justice and equality, financial assistance programs in Nepal, which result from existing inequalities and the gradual commercialization of education, are leading to what we term a "bureaucratization of social justice." Therefore, while the prospect of promoting social justice through education sounds promising discursively, in practice the contradictory nature of formal schooling privileges those most capable of navigating bureaucratic practices and institutions through the use of existing economic and cultural capital. As a result, even as select individuals may experience dramatic social, economic, or physical mobility through scholarship programs, the underlying production of sustained and new forms of social inequality remains largely unchanged.

At their core, scholarship programs are built on the assumption that underprivileged students need to acquire the knowledge and cultural capital valued by the larger society. This deficit approach to education positions marginalized students as already "backward"

in relation to the dominant cultural norm, thereby shaping the subsequent meanings and aspirations attached to education by scholarship recipients. By linking discourses of schooling, morality, and socioeconomic standing, scholarship programs are tied to a rhetoric that implies the necessity, indeed the superiority, of the formally educated in Nepal. Thus, given the sociocultural construction of what it means to be “educated,” scholarship programs operating under a social justice framework often unintentionally reaffirm the operating principles of the dominant cultural paradigm. As a result, formal educational processes meant to promote social inclusion and transformation, while succeeding in individual cases, tend to promote new forms of exclusion simultaneously. Even as educational institutions are reoriented toward inclusivity and social justice, the fundamental problem remains: the cultural capital that counts will continue to reflect the values and practices of a society’s dominant groups.

The literature of the anthropology of bureaucracy and educational anthropology informing this article has enabled us to unpack the foundational ideas that frame scholarship programs in Nepal. Despite the long-standing tradition in educational anthropology of approaching schools as institutions of learning with the primary aim of socializing children and producing future citizens, this approach tends to neglect the fact that schools may also function as bureaucratic institutions. Paying attention to the bureaucratic aspects of schools allows us to make visible the restrictive ways in which schools—like any other public institution—function, and paying attention to the bureaucratic aspects thereby allows us to unpack how these rules and procedures may deepen existing inequalities. By introducing legitimate ways of accessing educational services, schools also socialize students to engage with school bureaucracies and identify with the categories through which services are distributed. The links between the anthropology of bureaucracy and other subdisciplines, such as the anthropology of public services, organizations, and development are already well established (Bierschenk and Oliver de Sardan, 2021). As public institutions, schools provide an important lens through which to look at bureaucratic processes and how such processes affect the lives of students.

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Endnotes

1. The term *adivasi janajati* (indigenous nationalities) refers to non-Hindu ethnic groups in Nepal with distinct religious, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds (see Onta, 2006; Toffin, 2009 for detailed discussions).
2. *Bikas* (development) has operated as a central framing paradigm for Nepal’s national project for decades, producing myriad unintended social and economic consequences (see Pigg, 1993).
3. Considered “untouchable” in the Hindu caste system, Dalits have long faced considerable social stigmatization in Nepal (Guneratne, 2010).
4. The international NGO provided funds for some of the school’s scholarships, entailing an additional measure of accountability for the school to provide assurance that the funds were used properly. However, the international NGO did not appear to be involved in the actual management of the scholarship program. Procedures that interfaced with students seem to have been run entirely by the school.

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