

Inclusive Education for Transhumance Groups in Himalayas: Educational Policy Challenge for Nepal

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Educational policies and challenges

The Government of Nepal's education policy documents do not reveal a focus on one set of beliefs or agenda. From modernization and economic growth, to social transformation, social justice, inclusion, equality, social development, human rights, decentralization, investment and returns, are all found in one document. Although the document highlights Education for All (EFA) as its main program, emphasis is still on primary education. The major educational policy challenge before the government of Nepal is incorporating the different agendas of the various development agencies it collaborates with. Using the medical metaphor Harper and Maddox (2008) argue that with multiple development institutions in Nepal, there has been 'multiple diagnosis' and 'multiple prescriptions'. In other words, Nepal has been 'pathologised', a country that needs cure, hence the prescription. The justification is the need for 'change'. In the policy documents Nepal has made space for all the agenda at least in paper. What remains to be seen is how they are being implemented, which is not the scope of this essay.

Nepal is facing major policy challenges in promoting a more inclusive society in all aspects of development including education in the current post conflict peace-building initiatives. Inclusive educational challenges have focused on issues of gender, language, ethnicity and culture. However, issues of groups still practicing transhumance have been overlooked. This essay looks specifically at the challenges of inclusive education for transhumance groups such as the Khumbu Sherpa in Nepal's Himalayas.

The need to think outside the boundary

With the adoption of MDG's Universal Primary Education, primary

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Abstract

Nepal's education policy documents lack a focus as they try to incorporate several issues like modernization and economic growth, to social transformation, social justice, inclusion, equality, social development, human rights etc. This lack of focus has been aggravated by the pathological approach by the international actors through 'multiple diagnoses' and 'multiple prescriptions'. This paper discusses major challenges the educational development stakeholders face in this multi-ethnic and geographically diverse country where the issue of the inclusion is prominent.

education policies have overshadowed all other educational policies in Nepal. Primary education is looked at as the more efficient way of increasing the literacy. The major challenges to primary education in Nepal have been geographical and social distance to school, high dropout rates, socio-economic, cultural and geographic factors preventing enrolment. With this in mind and also to 'eliminate illiteracy', non-formal education was introduced in the country (MoES and NFEC, 2003). With the support of DANIDA, Ministry of Education has started various non-formal education centres in the country to address the needs of the children who do not have access to school. In order to overcome the challenge Universal Primary Education faces, non-formal education was introduced.

Whatever be the focus of the education policy, primary education or non-formal education, the major challenge is the ethnic and geographical diversity of the country. DANIDA and other similar organizations increasingly favor to promote inclusive education and bilingual education. The Three Years Interim Plan also incorporates inclusive education and 'trilingual' educational policy. It particularly tries to accommodate the educational needs of the ethnic minorities. Although Khumbu Sherpa are considered ethnic minority, the fact that they have transhumance lifestyles is not considered in the inclusive education policy. DANIDA has conducted several pilot projects on inclusive education; however the emphasis is on bringing all ethnic and caste group in the catchment area of the school. The fact that certain ethnic groups cannot be brought to school for a certain periods during the year due to the geographical condition and livelihood strategy, is not considered. "Too formal, rigid and structured system of primary schooling, associated with very high direct and opportunity costs, prevent children [sic] attending schools" (ESAT, 2004). Despite the acknowledgement of the government of the 'rigid and structured' schooling, 'opportunity costs' of attending school and innovation in its policies, these programs

are still 'centres', that forces transhumance communities to sedentarise or else miss out on the opportunity. How are Khumbu Sherpas to benefit from schools or such 'centres'? Even if they change their livelihood strategy and try to be sedentary, they are still forced to move because of extreme weather conditions. The weather forces even the schools and 'centres' to close for a certain period of time, preventing the completion of an academic year, thus the need to think outside the boundary of the school or 'centre'. The problem is not just with the school children. What about the teachers? Can they move with the community as it moves through different ecological zones?

Inclusion of Khumbu Sherpas

Inclusive education is a broad area which is not simply 'accommodating' those who have been deprived of education. According to Barton (1997), "Inclusive education is about responding to diversity; it is about listening to unfamiliar voices, being open, empowering all members and about celebrating 'difference' in dignified ways. From this perspective, the goal is not to leave anyone out of school. Inclusive experience is about learning to live with one another. This raises the question of what schools are for." The failure of policy documents to address the seasonally migrating lifestyle of Khumbu Sherpas and their educational needs is an indication that the education has not been adequately inclusive, i.e. inability to celebrate cultural/ geographical differences and responding to the country's diversity. Let us look at an excerpt of Khumbu Sherpa's geographically induced livelihood strategy (source: Rhoades & Thompson, 1975):

Although the case presented above is dated 1975, the scenario hasn't changed much. Despite the presence of symbols of modernity and development that have entered the region, for example, roads, airplanes, electricity, modern schools, tourist industry, etcetera, the life of much of the locals is the same. We say this based on Shreshna's interaction not with Khumbu Sherpas but with Mustang Sherpas during their

Case Study of the Transhumance Group of Khumbu, Nepal

The pattern of Sherpa subsistence, mirroring the Alpine system, follows closely the swing of the seasons and is directly tied to the rugged terrain and harsh climate. The soil in Khumbu is frozen for half the year, and Sherpa families must depend totally on a short cultivating period from mid-April to early October (Furer-Haimendorf 1964:7). The agricultural season begins in spring when the herdsmen move yaks and cattle to the privately owned meadows located just above the main village as the first step of the summer-long migration which terminates on the communally owned high alpine pasture. As they ascend, the Sherpas reside in herdsmen's settlements comparable to the staggered Swiss Meyen. While residing in the summer quarters, the herdsmen cultivate potato plots for their own consumption and cut hay for early spring and fall use.

As the herds follow the retreating snows, a similar movement is occurring at a lower altitude where the women, children, and hired labor start working the earliest thawed potato fields in settlements located below the main village. As climatic conditions allow, they move to the main village where potatoes are planted, buckwheat is sown, and vegetable gardens are cultivated. In fall, following a similar ladder sequence, these crops will be harvested at intervals, starting with potatoes at the lower altitudes in August and at the main village in September, and grain is collected and threshed in early October just prior to the return of the herds. The agricultural season ends with the arrival of winter, when the animals are returned to the lower levels, where they are better protected from the icy winds, for stabling (Furer-Haimendorf 1964:6).

temporary winter camp in Pokhara (January 2006). In a community that is constantly on a move because of the weather induced livelihood strategy, and where the children migrate with their family, having such a centre or even a school in the area is of little value. If they were residential centres or schools, would the parents be able to leave their young ones for months? In his study of nomads of Oman, Chatty (2006) experiences the reluctance on the parents to part with their children for months, fearing cultural drift and lack of trust towards the teacher. Though the residential school was successful in terms of recruiting students, it has overlooked the perspective of nomad's children. A normal family with ten to twelve children would select one child to go to school while the rest stayed with the tribe. When those who enrolled graduated, they joined police force or oil industries, and only rarely came back to the nomadic life-style. The Khumbu transhumance might face similar experience with their residential schools, if the families could afford them, and if they were willing to leave their children behind. Referring to residential schools for children of nomads in several other countries, Chatty (2006) says, "Either the schools ultimately failed, or the students became totally alienated from their

parents, culture and eventually left nomadic life (p. 221)." The issue then becomes schools as a 'means to buy passage elsewhere' (Corbertt, 1958). One can always argue that there is an alternative source of income to the family with one member working in the urban centre. But the issue here is the education of each and every member of the family, not just one, and also respecting their way of life.

If we look at the data from MoES and NFEC (2003), the percentage of illiterate population in Solukhumbhu region (which includes Khumbu) is 27.7 percent which falls under area with medium illiterate percentage. It would be interesting to know the illiterate population of Khumbu separately. Solu is a tourist hotspot and has received attention from both government and donors alike. Coming back to Khumbu, what the Sherpa children need is a mobile school that travels with the community up and down the mountains, a school that teaches not just literacy but also what normal schools have to offer (curricular and co-curricular) and also issues relevant to the community's lifestyle and environment. They learn to question what they see around them and what is more, they will always have teachers and their elders to answer

their queries. They learn to plant and harvest with their community members, play in their rivers, snow, mud, animals, plants and understand the importance and joys of experiential learning. Their parents will see their children grow up in front of their eyes and see them appreciate their land and what it has to offer. What could be more enjoyable for the students than to learn as they travel with the entire mountain range as their laboratory and playground? “Nothing can be gained by trying to get more children to school unless those schools can be improved to the point of usefulness; and one essential mechanism for doing this is to involve children, parents, teachers, communities, and government officials in processes which will shift schooling in a more responsive direction” (Kratli and Dyer, 2006). What better way to involve the ‘children, parents, teachers, communities, and government officials’ for Khumbu transhumance than the non-formal way of education I have just described? The government may be concerned about a simple logistics, that is, who would be willing to live in the community as a teacher? The answer is, one wouldn’t know until one has tried. But unless this is done, education will not be inclusive of the Khumbu transhumance children.

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