

Karen Valentin and Uma Pradhan, eds. 2023. *Anthropological Perspectives on Education in Nepal*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (OUP).

A part of OUP's series on "Education and Society in South Asia" curated by Meenakshi Thapan, *Anthropological Perspectives on Education in Nepal* compiles eleven ethnographic papers centering on various aspects of education in Nepal. The first chapter is a sort of a treatise by the book's two editors, Karen Valentine and Uma Pradhan, where they emphasize the need to broaden the conception of the term "education," especially in light of the ways educational achievements, aspirations and access are intricately tied to a society's (and by extension, a nation's) political and cultural histories. They elaborate their stance by referring to studies from recent decades that build an unequivocal case of the Nepali state's history of systematic exclusion and oppression of various caste groups; as well as studies that trace the impacts of development aid and NGOs in the absence of a stable government working for public services. In doing so, they "shed light on the multiple ways in which processes of education, broadly defined, intersect with socio-political ideas, institutions, and identities" (p. 2).

In Nepal's case, since formal education played a crucial role in nation-building during the Panchayat era (1960–1990), this collection of anthropological studies of educational processes appears as a counterpoint to dominant narratives regarding diversity, development and democracy that influence various sectors to this day. These ethnographies also complicate and problematize mainstream views of education, revealing Nepal's complex and compelling educational landscape; and making visible multiple ways citizens navigate their educational pathways. In addition, since this volume

might be the first English-language academic contribution to the field of educational anthropology of Nepal, anyone interested in these issues ought to be grateful to the editors.

The rest of this relevant book is divided into three sections. The first, focusing on inequalities and social differentiation, consists of four papers that portray how citizens are influenced by neoliberal market forces and “how elite private schools in Kathmandu are providing new spaces for class performance and social mobility” (p. 32). These papers illustrate how young Nepalis, influenced by capitalist, global forces, are re-negotiating the values assigned to education. Some are burdened by aspirations inherited from their parents; others view education as a “positional good.” Together, these papers hint at new standards and criteria for what it means to succeed or fail when it comes to being educated in new Nepal.

The second section focuses on mobilities by highlighting challenges that come up when young children from the high Himalayas migrate to boarding schools in the low-lying towns and cities; when “modern education” is provided alongside a religious curricula inside a Buddhist monastery; and a chapter that compares the trajectories of three families in a squatter settlement over a period of twenty-five years. This section has a particularly poignant immediacy. The centering of young people’s responses and drawings is a departure from traditional ethnographic methodologies, indicating the value of documenting emotions and expressions as another way to gather knowledge. This section also helps the reader to grapple with recent transitions by providing historical perspectives and theoretical frameworks. How has Nepali society been resisting and responding to massive forces—globalization, the Internet, the rise of identity politics ushered by the civil war and the subsequent political transformations in Nepal? And how have these forces dramatically expanded the scale and scope of mobilities (for the sake of education) for regular Nepalis?

The three papers in the final section focus on educational sites and how different stakeholders have been contesting the location of education. By bringing in voices of Dalit academics, describing the construction of a government school in post-earthquake Nepal, and the complex negotiations while implementing the Dhimal language as part of a “local subject,” researchers have illuminated hidden power dynamics and elusive interpretations, all of which contribute to knowledge production and illustrate

dramatically different stakes in education based on one's geographic location and the relationship of one's lineage to the Nepali state.

Due to Nepal's long history of an autocratic government that denied education to almost the entire population and its very short experience of modernity (just over 70 years), we are still in the process of learning our past and making sense of it while actively constructing infrastructure as well as ideologies. To that end, this volume attempts to fill gaps not just regarding our understanding of the education sector but our general consciousness as we grapple with federalism and human rights. This point is relevant due to the massive conflation between education and development in Nepal. By exploring issues of power and politics in education, these ethnographies help the readers to question whether Western-based education is in fact a social good and to acknowledge a plurality of educational practices.

But Nepal has 125 distinct ethnic groups speaking 123 different mother tongues. While Miranda Weinberg's paper, the final chapter in this volume, sheds light on the connection of a language to a place (Dhimal language in Jhapa and Morang Districts), the dynamic might be quite different with another local language in another district. For example, Uma Pradhan's excellent book, *Simultaneous Identities: Language, Education and the Nepali Nation* (2020)—which I had also reviewed for this journal—examines ethnolinguistic negotiation in Kapilvastu (with the Tharu language) and Kathmandu (with Nepal Bhasa). If Pradhan had analyzed her findings alongside Weinberg's, we might have received fresh insights; the omission is a missed opportunity. That's why the editors' first stated aim—to consolidate sporadic studies into a coherent field—is far from accomplished in this edited volume. This collection is merely a beginning and we are grateful for the visionary work of the editors and contributors. We need several volumes like this one that tackle various other languages, local dynamics, realities and histories related to education in Nepal.

One can't hold the two editors responsible for this lack. But one could gently demand how these papers came together and why certain sites were chosen as opposed to others. There is no explanation of a selection process or a rationale explaining the inclusion of these specific papers. This is perhaps the biggest criticism of this book, primarily because it leaves the reader wondering about other issues that might be hampering educational processes in other Nepali districts. And despite ample self-consciousness demonstrated by these West-based ethnographers regarding their identities and issues

of power while conducting fieldwork, the age-old problem persists: Who are these articles for? Who do they ultimately benefit? How many Nepali government officials, policy-makers and local activists actually read these before attending high-level meetings?

Another thematic area that stands out due to its omission is the role of technology and the digital space as they relate to educational anthropology of Nepal. As AI and ChatGPT proliferate, and distance learning and working expand amid reports of social media worsening young people's mental health, a lot of research is needed to inform and guide parents and school leaders. Despite these issues and a few surprising typos, *Anthropological Perspectives on Education in Nepal* is essential reading.

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