

Uma Pradhan. 2020. *Simultaneous Identities: Language, Education and the Nepali Nation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Simultaneous Identities: Language, Education and the Nepali Nation is an interdisciplinary study of ethnolinguistic negotiation in the context of Nepali nationhood. To understand the complexity of the task at hand and to explore the intricate connections between language, identity and education, Pradhan examines “everyday language practices and discourses around language” at two schools—JSB in Kathmandu and JKHSS in Kapilvastu—that use mother tongue (p. 2). As part of her research, Pradhan visited these schools between 2013 and 2017, conducted unstructured interviews and observed daily routines inside and outside the classrooms.

The book is divided into seven chapters, in addition to an eloquent introduction and an illuminating conclusion. The reading experience is enriched by Pradhan’s meticulous references to theories related not only to the broader topics of linguistics, pedagogy and social identity but also to the specific ways these ideas have overlapped and influenced Nepal’s recent history of nation-building. To tease apart these influences, Pradhan relies on reports from the Ministry of Education as well as census data to establish how the Nepali state mainstreamed Nepali language—and often suppressed

and neglected minority languages—to legitimize its identity as a nation-state. This is the subject matter of the first chapter, a pertinent background that justifies the conception of the current movement of mother tongue education in Nepal as “an arena of struggle” (p. 9).

Is the goal of mother tongue education simply to save a language (a linguistic agenda)? Is it to empower marginalized groups (a sociopolitical agenda)? Or is it to support emergent learners’ transition from their first languages to the dominant Nepali language and the global English language (a pedagogical agenda)? The second chapter is an investigation of these inquiries. Pradhan provides ethnographic profiles of the two schools to demonstrate how they “navigated the larger political context of exclusivist nationalism and emerging ethnic politics, while utilizing mother tongue in the production of an ‘educated person’” (p.76). The third chapter elucidates the concept of simultaneity by documenting how speakers cross language boundaries, speak different languages in different spaces and the apparently contradictory processes by which people make simultaneous claims to more than one social identity. Pradhan’s elucidation is relevant because it suggests that mother tongue education can provide alternative frameworks to “rethink Nepal as a country with diverse population and diverse languages where each social identity would fall within a broader framework of being a Nepali” (p. 103).

The fourth chapter highlights challenges and victories that come with adapting minority languages into a textbook format. For example, the Tharu language spoken in Dang is different from that which is spoken in eastern Tarai. Similarly, colloquial Nepal Bhasa does not necessarily follow the grammar and syntax rules required in written form. How to address these inconsistencies, especially when it comes to teaching young children? Pradhan’s research shows that both schools “used language standardization as a key strategy to negotiate the position of the mother tongue as the language of education within a state-sanctioned space of multilingual education” (p. 136). The language advocates at JSB and JKHSS worked with multiple partners, including state representatives, to formalize Tharu, Awadhi, Maithili and Nepal Bhasa in a way that could be systematically taught and assessed. And during this “project of intellectualization of local languages,” the practitioners paradoxically conformed to the existing systems of education (p. 135). The fifth chapter deepens and broadens the central thesis by showing how mother tongue education in Nepal is inherently linked

to the parallel projects of “knowledge-making” and “nation building.” While creating textbooks in minority languages, the writers also rewrote parts of the curricula by showcasing “new national heroes” and using new geographies that were more familiar to Tharu and Newar students. Pradhan posits that “the introduction of mother tongue in school curriculum is, therefore, not just an addition of a new language but also a struggle over symbolic resources” (p. 140).

The sixth chapter explores how minority language speakers in the two schools make sense of their education in a world where languages are intrinsically linked to social prestige and social relations. By documenting narratives of students and teachers at JSB and JKHSS, Pradhan demonstrates that although there are tensions, minority language speakers are able to “shift identities and recombine them to meet new circumstances” by appropriating quality indicators like exam results (p. 183). For example, some students at JSB were able to respond to taunts such as “Your school is not good because it teaches in Nepal Bhasa” by excelling in high-stakes secondary school exams and in doing so, gradually changing the perception of the school. The seventh chapter also profiles a few individuals employed by this mother tongue ecosystem in order to showcase the economic aspects of minority languages. Further complexities are revealed as well as further insights and ironies—how one’s fluency in mother tongue can most likely be capitalized only if one also has access to the dominant language and how, in light of these tensions, the two schools responded by maintaining a sort of an ambiguity regarding these different languages in their formal spaces.

Pradhan has explored her central thesis—how the simultaneous positioning of ethnolinguistic identity and national identity “does not hinder but bolsters the notion of Nepali nationhood”—in the context of mother tongue education (p. 2). She has woven seemingly disparate ideas from disparate disciplines to provide new insights that inform linguistics, pedagogy as well as contemporary ethnic-identity based movements in Nepal. Her research is valuable, pregnant with possibilities and potentially exciting for both laymen and policymakers. Although she isn’t the first scholar to explore the interconnections between state, society and schooling, she has laid out a new paradigm in the field of mother tongue education. But the reading experience leaves the reader wanting to know more, particularly regarding the pedagogical aspects of this research.

In the introduction, Pradhan clarifies that her intention is not to evaluate the benefit of mother tongue education. Nonetheless, her research has clear implications for Nepal's educational landscape. In the fifth chapter, she writes that the research "engages in the articulation of new discourses on school education that changes not only the content of the knowledge but also the terms of knowledge construction" (p. 157). This is in the context of rewriting curricula for JKHSS in the mother tongue using local references. In doing so, Pradhan describes JKHSS as an example of successful pedagogical innovation. Yet, this aspect of the research is overshadowed by the focus on social identity. What happens to young learners' self-esteem and emotional well-being when local language is "showcased as a desirable language to be used in school teaching," as opposed to "the earlier education policy that sought to prevent the use of local language in school premises" (p. 95)? Furthermore, what are the connections between young children's self-esteem, their acceptance of their marginalized ethnic identity and their academic performance? Pradhan has focused on the social and economic aspects of her thesis but ignored the more delicate psychological aspects.

The curriculum writers had to follow guidelines laid out by the Curriculum Development Centre. But there was no opportunity for these writers to criticize or adapt the guidelines or even to have a broader discussion related to the larger goals of primary school education in the context of Nepal's diversity. While this particular case can be viewed as an experimental first step, it is still discouraging to those trying to disrupt Nepal's traditional education system with innovative methodologies. Later in the book, Pradhan relies on high-stakes exam results to make a point that JSB students were still performing well and getting quality education. Although she carefully states that she does not want to define what makes quality in education, her stance comes across as avoidance. Because she chose the context of mother tongue education to discuss simultaneous identities, it would have behooved her to engage in the usefulness of examinations and their implications on students' morale. If Pradhan had ventured into this territory—scrutinizing mother tongue education through the lens of truly progressive pedagogical ideas—the research would have been groundbreaking. That's why this study will benefit greatly from a complementary study that focuses solely on the pedagogy of bilingual and multilingual education in Nepal's context.

Pradhan's extensive academic references and informative tables (one of them lists every school that teaches mother tongue in Nepal) fortify her

study. Her elaboration of terms such as translanguaging (the informal use of more than one language according to one's context), assimilation-pluralism paradox (opposite and extreme stances regarding ethnolinguism) and language ideology (the hierarchy of languages) will greatly benefit the ongoing discourse around these ideas in contemporary Nepal. There are various typos in the text, certain ideas seem repetitive and in one instance, an entire paragraph appears twice. But in light of Pradhan's contribution, it is easy to overlook these small errors.

Niranjan Kunwar
Kathmandu