

Tejendra Pherali. 2022. *Conflict, Education and Peace in Nepal: Rebuilding Education for Peace and Development*. London: Bloomsbury.

Despite Nepal being a country with diverse communities and geographies, a highly centralized and exclusionary state ruled by hill high-caste males perpetuated discrimination on the basis of caste, class, ethnicity, gender, religion and region. Key political, economic and educational institutions were concentrated in the capital Kathmandu. To address the grievances of oppressed groups, in 1996 the Maoists launched their “People’s War,” and schools became an ideological and literal battleground for both the rebels and the state’s army.

In the vast literature on the Maoist movement, there has not been a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between education and the armed conflict. This is what Tejendra Pherali aims to do in *Conflict, Education and Peace in Nepal: Rebuilding Education for Peace and Development*. The main argument of the book is that education, apart from often being a target for violence during conflicts, can be both complicit in creating the conditions for violence and have an important role in redressing the socio-economic injustices that underpin conflict. Pherali summarizes these ideas in what he calls a *Victim-Perpetrator-Liberator-Peacebuilder (VPLP)* framework. Throughout the book, he draws on the theoretical and empirical literature on the complex relationship between education and violence and applies his framework to the analysis of education in Nepal before, during and after the “People’s War.”

The book’s thesis is made clear in its Introduction. Throughout its history, “education in Nepal played a complicit role in conflict, primarily benefiting the traditionally privileged social groups in Nepali society and hence perpetrating the existing structural inequalities which were the major causes of the rebellion” (p. 16). During the war, schools became a target of violence, from both the Maoists and the state’s security forces; this had an enduring impact on both students and teachers. In the post-war period, however, education should aim at addressing both the effects and the root causes of conflict.

Chapter Two reviews the different strands of the literature on the relationship between conflict, education and peacebuilding. Chapter Three applies these theoretical tools to analyze Nepal’s education system, with a focus on its role as “*Perpetrator*.” Pherali convincingly argues that the education system reinforced social injustices, failing to nurture the academic potential of children from Dalit, Madheshi and indigenous communities. He observes that the education system was developed as a tool to engineer a homogeneous Nepali society, centered on the unifying role of the monarchy and the cultural values of the ruling Khas-Arya, Nepali-speaking, Hindu elite. Together with the national media, formal education contributed to the propagation of a hegemony that legitimized social divisions along cultural lines. Moreover, neoliberal policies and the proliferation of private education starting from the 1990s have created a dual system that contributes to reproducing society’s socio-economic structures, as the higher learning outcomes associated with attendance of private schools are reserved only

to those children whose families can pay for it, predominantly from a high socio-economic background. Therefore, the education system, both public and private, contributed to reinforcing the horizontal and vertical inequalities that were a major factor behind the “People’s War.”

Chapters Four and Five are devoted to analyzing the impact of conflict—mainly the “People’s War” but also the violence during the 2007 Madheshi movement—on teachers and students respectively. These chapters present the bulk of the evidence from Pherali’s fieldwork, conducted in 2008 in eight schools, both public and private, across six districts—Sankhuwasabha, Udayapur, Kathmandu, Kapilvastu, Rolpa and Doti. While a few pages in Chapter Four consider teachers’ views on the failures of Nepal’s education system, most of the evidence from teachers’ interviews relates to the impact of violence perpetrated by either the Maoists or the security forces, showing education as a “*Victim*” of violence. The chapter gives a harrowing account of the climate of fear that characterized teachers’ lives and work in those years, and of the difficult position in which teachers and headteachers found themselves trying to keep their schools operating among the conflicting demands of the two belligerents. Chapter Five is based on narrative research, an innovative methodology in which students from grade 10 and 12 were asked to write about their experience of the conflict at school and in their communities. These stories provide vivid evidence of the impact of violence, and of the fear and trauma it caused, on schoolchildren.

Chapter Six returns to the issue of education perpetuating horizontal inequalities and re-examines it in the context of the increased awareness of ethnic identities in the post-war period. Chapter Seven then discusses the prospect for education as “*Peacebuilder*” in post-conflict Nepal. Arguing that, in post-conflict societies, “education has the enormous task of laying out foundations of national reconciliation” (p. 168), Pherali identifies the policy reforms that would be necessary. Education in Nepal cannot promote peace without curriculum reforms that improve inclusion, teacher recruitment and professional development, and educational policies that address the grievances of historically excluded communities. This includes a right to education in mother tongue, which would improve children’s learning outcomes, as requested by the Maoists in their forty-point demand and recognized in the 2015 Constitution. But deeper structural reforms are also necessary to change teachers’ psychology, rooted in the still pervasive assimilationist cultural hegemony, to fully recognize cultural diversity and

to promote a participatory approach to education decision-making. Pherali, however, recognizes that these reforms are challenging to implement in the context of the current political economy of education in Nepal, in which school management is monopolized by social elites for their own political and economic benefit, and where patronage systems are pervasive. However, he believes that the local autonomy guaranteed by the 2015 Constitution provides “an enormous opportunity to redress educational disparities across ethnic, caste, gender, regional and religious communities” (p. 58), and the book concludes with some practical lessons for policymakers.

In this ambitious and innovative analysis of the complex relationship between education and conflict in Nepal, it is perhaps unavoidable that some aspects are left out or are not given the space that they might deserve. In the Introduction, Pherali observes that, during the conflict, schools also became “political spaces that were used to promote critical education, providing intellectual strength to the violent rebellion” (p. 16). This links to the “*Liberator*” element of his *VPLP* framework. It is unfortunate, therefore, that this aspect receives little attention in the rest of the book.

Pherali recognizes that political education campaigns, by the Maoists during the “People’s War” and by Madheshi organizations during the Madheshi movement, “provided the movement participants with knowledge and tools to critique and overcome injustices in education and society through resistance” (p. 146). However, the book is silent about how this happened in practice and how this political education interacted with the schools’ formal education. It could have been interesting, for example, to see evidence on how teachers and students reacted to the cultural programs that the Maoists often organized within the schools, to what extent the message that the Maoists were trying to spread through those events was appealing to them and to what extent they simply saw it as a violent imposition. The fact that Pherali’s fieldwork only involved children who were still in school, therefore not capturing the perspectives of those who had decided to join the Maoists, is a further limitation, which the author himself acknowledges. Even the changes that the Maoists imposed to the schools’ curricula in the areas under their control are only briefly mentioned in the book. Given that Pherali recognizes the role of the education system in perpetuating structural inequalities, it could have been useful to analyze the extent to which the changes introduced by the Maoists addressed these issues, in addition to promoting their ideology.

Most significantly, what does not emerge from Pherali's account of education during the "People's War" is that, in many areas, the Maoists were a *de facto* government—they even made it explicit by establishing their *Jana Sarkār* (People's Government)—with its own educational policies. An assessment of the Maoists' priorities in the field of education, of how these were implemented in practice and of what impact they had on teachers and students would have allowed for a more exhaustive analysis of the impact of the conflict on education.

When considering the prospects for educational reforms in the new federal system, Pherali rightly stresses the role that should be played by provincial authorities. In fact, it is unrealistic to expect that individual local governments could make effective use of the powers that the Constitution gives them over the school curriculum. The coordinating role of provincial governments is therefore crucial. As Pherali suggests, this requires the establishment of provincial education commissions to elaborate educational strategies aligned with the cultural and economic needs of each province.

However, while the book includes very reasonable policy recommendations to make the education system more inclusive, it does not engage with practical strategies that would allow the achievement of these objectives in the context of a sub-national politics characterized, as Pherali recognizes, by elite capture and pervasive patronage systems. Further work will be needed to identify strategies to incentivise a more equitable distribution of resources, addressing the existence of peripheries within peripheries—areas within the provinces where people from disadvantaged communities concentrate and that have been largely neglected by the provincial and local governments.

Nevertheless, the book is a remarkable study of the multi-faceted relationship between education and conflict in Nepal; the innovative *VPLP* framework that Pherali devises for the analysis of the multiple roles of education in conflict also has wider applicability. Finally, the book is a call for action to undertake the reforms necessary to turn Nepal's educational system from a tool to perpetuate inequalities into an instrument for inclusion and social justice. It is to be hoped that policymakers will embrace this project.

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