

Usha D. Acharya. 2002. *Primary Education in Nepal: Policy, Problems and Prospects*. Kathmandu: Ekta Books.

Radhaber D. Khati. 2003. *Education in Dilemma: A Nepalese Perspective*. Kathmandu: Udaya Books.

Education has been one of the most privileged social sectors in Nepal in recent times, consuming more than 11 percent of the total annual budget, much of it financed by donors. However, there has been a relative dearth of books written in English about education in Nepal. Gopinath

Sharma (2050 v.s.) has done a commendable job in writing a descriptive history of education in Nepal in the Nepali language, but even here, one finds a lack of analytical and thought-provocative books. Thus, the two books that I am going to review below could not have been published at a more opportune time. The first book is *Primary Education in Nepal: Policy, Problems and Prospects* (hereafter called *Primary Education*) by Usha D. Acharya. Save the Children-UK supported the publication of this book through the Kathmandu-based publisher Ekta Books. The second book is *Education in Dilemma: A Nepalese Perspective* (hereafter called *Dilemma*) written by Radhaber D. Khatri, chief of research division at the Tribhuvan University, and published by Udaya Books.

I am going to divide this review into two broad sections. In the first part I will describe the contents of each book. In the second I will do a critical comparative analysis of both.

Primary Education consists of six chapters. As suggested by the title, the book deals mainly with the current state of primary education in Nepal, the problems it faces, and prospects for change. The book begins with a description of the development and evolution of education in Nepal and the present state of primary education. Adequately supplemented by facts and figures, the first chapter also highlights the national and international commitments made by the state for universal primary education.

In chapter two the author seeks to contextualize the meaning of education to Nepal. Defining education as both a process (teaching-learning) and an outcome (knowledge, skills, personality development) the author states that despite the rhetoric, passing examinations has become the sole end of education and loftier ideals having been thrown into oblivion. Using case studies and examples, Acharya shows how the current form of schooling—which weans the children away from the traditional ways of life—has little relevance for improving lives, especially in rural agricultural communities. She argues that educational planning is unrealistic and not based on the social, cultural, physical or geographical conditions and needs of the country. Likewise, education, according to her, has created a “culture of competition and conflict” (p.37) because of an inadequate focus on character and personality development. She thus calls for a new approach to education. Drawing on examples from the work of the Society for Integrated Development of Himalayas (SIDH) and the MV Foundation in certain parts of India, Acharya describes her new approach as one based on “the will to do real

work by the state machinery, the teachers' loving concern for the children and their real development, and the support of those around these children" (pp.40-41).

In chapter three Acharya carries out an analysis of Nepal's system of education. She proceeds with the argument that Nepal's problems with primary education must be understood in relation to its geographical (rugged, mountainous terrain coupled with a highly dispersed population, poor transportation and communication infrastructure) and cultural (caste/ethnicity, multi lingualism, caste/ethnic and gender discrimination) context. Centralized policy making and planning, administration and monitoring, and supervision of education are seen as other problems. Describing the bureaucratic culture as one characterized by a lack of efficiency and initiative, and a poor sense of responsibility in service delivery, the author quotes from studies carried out in the public health sector of Nepal by Jean-Marion Aitken ("negotiated order" based on "value in use" and "implicit theory") and Judith Justice (Patron-client relationship) to describe the working of the educational bureaucracy. Acharya ends the chapters with a treatment of donors' involvement, stating that in recent years "assistance for education has become a marriage of convenience between the ruling elite and donors' representatives in Kathmandu, actually hindering the expansion of, and popular participation in, education" (p. 55). She accuses donors of assuming the pivotal role in educational policy changes without adequately comprehending local values, contexts, and needs. She also says that there are conflicting agendas among the donors and that there is a lack of coordination among the donors themselves as well as between the different government bodies and the donors.

In the next chapter Acharya focuses her attention on the biggest and most ambitious educational program of Nepal to date—the Basic and Primary Education Project (BPEP). She gives detailed attention to each of the three objectives of BPEP (to increase access and equity, improve quality, and enhance management efficiency of primary education) concluding that BPEP has a long way to go in meeting these goals. She sees a highly centralized planning and implementation structure, lack of involvement and commitment of political parties in long-term policy making, frequent changing of policies and programs, and substantial influence of donors in policy and program design as some of the problems that have contributed to this apparent lack of success of BPEP.

Chapter 5 addresses the critical issue of why so many children are still excluded from education—despite the rhetoric of 'education for all'

(EFA). Acharya identifies discrimination and marginalization as the key factors. She also describes the various provisions made by the state (including laws, scholarships and incentives, and free textbooks) as well as their shortcomings. Then she goes on to describe the plight of squatter children and children with disabilities, the two groups whose inclusion is essential if Nepal is to realize EFA goals. She states that while the state has been slow or even reluctant to recognize the status of squatter families, in the case of children with disabilities, even though the state has certain provisions for their education, these efforts are more a “charitable response than a sustainable response” (p.86). Moreover, there is a lack of political and budgetary commitment: it is not a priority area for the government. Acharya argues that children from both groups need to be put at the center of the education process by the family, the society, and the state. She argues that the problem lies in the system and not in the children and thus calls for systemic reforms.

In the final chapter—entitled “What is needed?”—Acharya calls for action on three fronts. First, effectively mobilize available resources (from the government, donors, I/NGOs, communities and families) based on self-reliance and clear governmental priorities and strategies (including making clear the roles of donors and I/NGOs). Second, tackle management inefficiency. She calls for a national debate on how to free the educational sector from politics. She also calls for a proper system of reward and punishment in teacher management, and decentralization to tackle the highly inefficient centralized bureaucracy. And third, promote participation of communities, families, and most importantly, school children in their education.

Khatri's *Dilemma* is divided into 8 chapters each with a number of sections and subsections. The book deals mostly with higher education although the author often makes reference to formal school education and non-formal education. Khatri begins with a description of the development of higher education, particularly since the first democratic revolution of 1951. The author states that public participation after 1951 was impressive in the establishment and spread of institutions of higher education in the country. He also states that higher education at Tribhuvan University (which has become synonymous with higher education in Nepal), modeled on Patna University which was not a very competitive university even by Indian standards, was beset with problems of poor quality, student's agitation and strikes, and irregular classes from the very beginning.

In the second chapter, entitled "Management and Expansion," Khati begins with a description of the present state and future prospects of non-formal education for adults in Nepal. He acknowledges that distance education may be the only effective and cost-effective way of teaching the huge backlog of illiterate adults in Nepal. In addition, in his opinion, distance education for employees may also help solve the problem of fake credentials. In higher education he argues for a newer, non-conventional, alternative, dynamic, and needs-specific approach by adopting measures such as new ways of giving and recording information, rolling enrollments, continuous assessment, regular counseling and guidance, pre- and post-learning accreditation, mix and match modulation, flexible system of providing resources, and assessment of work-based learning (p.35). Stating that there is a mismatch between education and employment, Khati sees part of the problem as lying in the working style of the authorities responsible for planning, policy-making, and policy-implementation, characterized by an utter lack of seriousness and accountability at all levels. He calls for a change in approach to higher education to match the needs and demands of a changing world economic order and globalization.

In chapter three Khati portrays education as not only a change agent but also something that enables one to observe and appreciate change. He states, "the change brought about by invasion, revolution and other abrupt circumstances do not leave a very lasting impact on people as education does. ... [Education] changes people from inside" (p.55). He then goes on to analyze factors, including ethnic sub-culture and family, which influence school attendance and achievement, including some factors that affect girls' education. Stating that the status-centered education currently being imparted to Nepali children is neither universal nor progressive enough to suit the needs and demands of the nation, he calls, on the one hand, for a "whole student" and "student centered" approach, and, on the other, for an alternative, distance education.

In chapter four Khati rightly claims that the need of the hour is not just to provide opportunities for education, but also to ensure the quality of education provided. Taking quality of education as akin to quality of consumer products, he states that low quality would mean low quality materials used, inefficient manpower involved, and a low quality management system employed to produce it (p.79). The author thus calls for a system of accreditation in higher education. Highlighting the benefits of accreditation (pp.82-84), he outlines steps that Tribhuvan University could take to accredit institutions under its ambit, including

steps that could be taken to make universities in Nepal at par with those in the SAARC region as already agreed in principle.

Chapters five and six deal mainly with the increasing influence of external political parties in university planning, decision-making, and management. Khati stresses that the influence of politics in the university affairs is very significant mainly because: an overwhelming proportion of the university's budget is derived from government grants, the government appoints senior academic and administrative staff of the university, and the university's administrative structure is highly centralized.

In chapter seven Khati looks at the issue of student politics in the university, especially their role in agitation, unrest, and violence. Stating that they often start for frivolous reasons (such as reduction in fees, admission to undeserving candidates, cancellation of examiners' action in examinations, difficult questions in examinations, etc.) he warns that even greater resources will have been wasted if they are not checked quickly. In his opinion, this can be prevented by providing effective guidance to students both in their studies and in general behavior which, in turn, is possible if admissions in higher education can be limited to deserving candidates only without any intervention from the student unions. By citing the case of the University of Oregon in the United States, he states that universities there are able to keep politics out of their premises primarily by maintaining a lifelong relationship with the students and vice versa, encouraging learning beyond classrooms and in the communities, and most importantly by maintaining a strict code of conduct for students that prohibits them to use university space for political purposes.

Khati uses chapter 8 to highlight the greatest educational dilemma of all: education in Nepal is contributing to the social reproduction of inequalities rather than mitigating them. Other dilemmas include: politicians and bureaucrats, rather than educationists, planning and implementing educational policies and practices; the gap between policy formulation and implementation; brain-drain at local level from rural to urban areas; and disproportionate enrollments in the general and non-technical disciplines. At the same time, with increasing political activity in schools and colleges, they are becoming more vulnerable to political wrangling. Khati complains that educational institutions have become the training and recruiting grounds for political parties. A national agreement among all contesting parties is essential to protect educational institutions from political wrestling but, unfortunately, the author sees no chance of this happening in the near future.

Primary Education is a short and relatively straightforward book with a well-defined scope and purpose (to analyze specific aspects of primary education in Nepal and also look into the gap between policy and implementation). On the other hand, *Dilemma* is a less clear and coherent read. Its scope is wider (educational policy, processes of decision making, the influence of politics on decision making in education, student politics, education for girls, rural education, poverty) and its aim less well defined (to bring some pressing educational issues to light and to initiate discussions). A comprehensive editing of the language and content of *Dilemma* would have not only made its reading less bland but also would have decreased its thickness and reduced its price! There is much repetition of content within a chapter and between two or more. In some places, the same paragraphs are repeated under different headings (e.g., sections titled “an extended politics” on p.100 and “centralization vs decentralization” on p.108) and elsewhere some words in the paragraphs are slightly changed (for instance the second paragraph in p.99 and the first two paragraphs in p.110). Moreover, there is a lack of coherence from one chapter to the next, and even within chapters. *Primary Education* appears much better from this standpoint. Its writing and publication exhibits professionalism, a quality that *Dilemma* lacks.

Both books raise important issues and problems in the education sector. For instance, both authors treat the issue of a highly centralized educational administration, the problem resulting from poor quality and lack of relevance of schooling to the needs of communities and nation. Khati gives more attention to political interference in higher education while Acharya is also more critical of state responses to problems of primary education in Nepal. These are some of the most pressing issues in education today and both authors deserve credit for addressing them. However, both authors tend to be more descriptive than analytical in treating these issues. Some of these issues have been in public debate and discussions for quite some time now and it would have been better if the authors had been able to provide additional insights that they deserved.

This would have been entirely possible since both of the writers are writing from a point of comparative advantage. For instance, Acharya has knowledge of the working of I/NGOs in Nepal that she could have added to the book. There are a number of I/NGOs that are active in the field of education, some of them specifically in the area of school improvement. This could have given new insights into how I/NGOs can work with the government. She could have analyzed the current problems I/NGOs face in coordinating their efforts with the government from their perspective

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thus contributing to the richness of discussion that she tries to initiate in the concluding chapter. Likewise Khati, being the chief of the research division of the country's foremost center of learning, could have been more specific about what he has written, especially on the influence of political parties on university decision making, including his version of the way out of the muddle. Everyone knows that politics is influencing education but what we do not know adequately is its genesis and more concrete description of how this collusion between educational institutions and politicians occurs. Similarly, while Khati introduces the concept of accreditation, he focuses only on the state university rather than advocating a broader accreditation board that could deal with the growing number of universities in recent times. More concrete input would have been welcome, including an analysis of the problems and opposition that are currently being encountered in the implementation of such a novel scheme for Nepal.

As a member of an institution that is so highly politicized and utterly failing in its goals, Khati could have more usefully concluded his book by critically analyzing the steps needed from different arenas and actors for rescuing higher education from this muddle.

References

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