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Pratyoush Onta (eds), *School Education in Nepal:
History and politics of governance and reforms*

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REFERENCES

Lokranjan Parajuli, Devendra Uprety and Pratyoush Onta (eds), *School Education in Nepal: History and politics of governance and reforms*, Kathmandu: Martin Chautari (Chautari Book Series 105), 2021, x+402 pp, ISBN: 978-9937-594-26-4

- 1 School education in Nepal has a very short history. Despite this, the policies and regulations relevant to this sector have undergone major transformations, notably the creation of various types of schools throughout the country and, more broadly, in terms of raising educational aspirations and attempts to remedy educational inequalities. The pervasive disillusionment among unemployed educated young Nepalis and the current reality of mass exodus of men and women who venture overseas for work are not unrelated to the history and politics of school education in Nepal.
- 2 Edited by three experienced researchers and editors affiliated with Martin Chautari in Kathmandu and published by Martin Chautari, this book sets out to offer an analysis of how the different political regimes have instrumentalised education to their own political ends. In addressing this question, the chapters in the volume provide evidence and analysis for exposing the politics behind the various policy initiatives and reforms put forward by the different regimes since the Rana dynasty, to educate the Nepali public. The volume is made up of 10 chapters, other than the introduction, and is organised according to Nepal's chronological political history: 'The early years

(pre-1960)', 'Panchayat period (1960–1990)', 'Democratic period (1990–2015)' and 'Federal transition years (post-2015)'.

- 3 In chapter one, Lokranjan Parajuli offers a political account of a major shift during the late Rana period, from controlling the general public's access to education to crafting their minds. Jeremy Rappley's essay in chapter two offers an astute historical account of how, in the 1950s, the United States development assistance policy shaped Nepal's educational policies and institutional system. What stands out in Rappley's essay are the granular details of the politics of expertise and contestation. In chapter three, Lokranjan Parajuli offers an analysis of panchayat-era policies on education with a particular focus on the National Education System Plan (NESP) which is often known by its popular name New Education Plan or *naya shiksha*. In the concluding section of this chapter, Parajuli makes a thoughtful and provocative analysis of what he calls 'the defective "manpower producing machine" that kept on reproducing social inequality but also exacerbated it by creating situations whereby students from relatively poor disadvantaged communities were either denied access to education or, if they did have access, they could not move up to the next level. It therefore comes as no surprise that the social composition of Nepali public life even today reflects these dynamics; it is the preserve of those who are resourceful – caste and class wise' (p149). The key message here is that we should not assume unreservedly that school education has positive value but that it is a much more ambiguous category.
- 4 In chapter four 'Ambivalence denied' by Pratyoush Onta, which previously appeared in the journal *Contributions to Nepalese Studies* (1996) and has been widely discussed in the Nepal scholarship, particularly in the context of Nepali nationalism, shows how textbooks during the Panchayat era were essential instruments for crafting minds. The following two chapters focus on community participation in school education in Nepal in the broader context of neoliberal policies. Carney and Bista's chapter (five) shows how community management of schools emerged as a critical development mantra. Tejendra Pherali's chapter (six) shows how the push for community participation in the field of school education has created new fractures. Besides, there is a new research agenda on the specificity of social and political consequences of this push for community participation. Pramod Bhatta's chapter (seven) offers rich empirical evidence and analysis of people's desire for private schooling in Nepal. Devendra Uprety, in chapter eight, engages with the topic of the teacher's union and their nexus with political parties in Nepal, which has been widely discussed in Nepal's public debates, although this has not been systematically researched. Chapter nine by Labisha Uprety focuses on the consequences of local power dynamics in the context of Nepal's transition to federal-state education policies and programmes. The final chapter by Pradhan and Valentin focuses on the blurred boundaries between public and private education in Nepal, although it is not entirely clear why this chapter is included under the section 'Federal transition years' because this issue is not specific to the federal transition years and largely predates it.
- 5 This volume helps us to view school education in Nepal as a political category. School education is political not just because different political regimes instrumentalised and manipulated it for their own benefit, as the overall framing in the introduction of this volume suggests, but also because school education has had unequal outcomes and may sustain and reproduce social inequalities based on caste, class, ethnicity, religion and region, among others. Thus, an obvious new line of research would be to examine more

broadly the political and social consequences of Nepal's education policies on future young generations.

- 6 In recent decades, the desire of young Nepalis from all gender and caste and ethnic groups to pursue a school education has never been greater. While this practice has historically been a key concern among high-caste men in re-affirming their dominance in high-level educational achievements, leading them to high positions in the political sphere and in government jobs, there has been a phenomenal increase in the investment in school education on the part of women and men from historically disadvantaged caste and ethnic backgrounds. What has been the experience of young men and women from these backgrounds who have school qualifications? Do they feel that their qualifications are valued and recognised, particularly in the context of the post-conflict restructuring of the Nepali state, or that they leave them with unfulfilled aspirations and social immobility? Is it possible to imagine that young Nepali men and women from different caste and ethnic backgrounds are entering into a new kind of relationship with the state due to the large-scale prioritisation of and investment in education by the state, international organisations and households, often thanks to remittances as well as to the expansion of the job market in private and NGO sectors? Likewise, given the largely visible exodus of young Nepalis, most of whom have completed a school education, we need to ask the question: how has this education system worked to facilitate an unequal and often exploitative transnational system of labour migration where both men and women imagine a future as low-skilled migrant labourers in the economies of far-flung countries such as India, the Gulf and South East Asia?
- 7 As the editors point out, there are no essays in this volume that deal with school education during Nepal's People's War. Though a rather digressive point, some discussion on madrasa¹ education and Nepal's state policy would have been very useful. Overall, this volume is a very useful background read about school education in Nepal for those interested in furthering their research and scholarship on the social, political and economic consequences of school education in Nepal.

NOTES

1. Madrasas are Muslim religious schools. A report in The Kathmandu Post, dated 27 October 2019, states that there are about 4,000 madrasas operating in Nepal (<https://kathmandupost.com/province-no-1/2019/10/27/a-madrassa-blends-traditional-education-with-modern-to-keep-up-with-the-changing-times>, last accessed 20 November 2023).

AUTHORS

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Jeevan R. Sharma is professor of South Asia and International Development at the University of Edinburgh. He is the author of *Political Economy of Social Change and Development in Nepal* (Bloomsbury, 2021) and *Crossing the Border to India: Youth, migration and masculinities in Nepal* (Temple University Press, 2018). His work has focused on labour migration in the context of social, economic and political transformations in Nepal, the Himalayas and the South Asian region, especially the culture of migration; border crossing; gendered, classed and racialised mobility of labour; ill treatment; access to justice and citizenship in South Asia. He is the co-editor of *HIMALAYA* and associate editor of *South Asia: Journal of South Asian studies*.