

Pramod Bhatta, ed. 2011. *Uccaśikṣāmā Sahabhāgitā: Asamānatākā Sāmājik Āyām*. Kathmandu: Martin Chautari.

“Participation” has been a major buzzword in Nepali public discourse in recent years. It has been widely used by political parties, social organizations, civil rights activists and media outlets. The concept has also drawn significant attention in the field of education. *Uccaśikṣāmā Sahabhāgitā: Asamānatakā*

Sāmājīk Āyām (Participation in Higher Education: Social Dimensions of Inequality) is a book that tries to present the status of participation in higher education in Nepal by analyzing its different social dimensions.

The book contains ten chapters preceded by an introductory piece by the editor Pramod Bhatta. The first five chapters are arranged under the theme “Social groups and educational inequities.” They explore the inequalities of participation in education by looking at various social groups. The second section titled “Some possibilities towards educational equality” also contains five chapters that discuss various ways to improve marginalized communities’ access to and participation in education. Overall, the book analyzes how social structures prevalent in different gender and ethnic groups in Nepal have influenced their access to higher education. As stated in the title of the volume, “participation” is the key construct described in all the chapters.

In the introductory chapter titled “Different dimensions of social inequalities in higher education in Nepal,” Bhatta statistically presents the disparity in access and participation of marginalized groups in higher education and argues that “without ensuring participation in education, participation in other sectors cannot even be imagined” (p. 2). This discourse has begun to sound like a cliché in recent years, as the People’s Movement II held in 2006 popularized discussions of participation. Presenting faculty-wise data on the number of students in Tribhuvan University, the chapter statistically analyzes the inter-social group and intra-social group inequalities prevalent in higher education in Nepal. The introduction is concise and covers the key themes included in the book. However, readers might find the concept of the “formula-based grants” program proposed by the author to address the issue of diversity in higher education rather technical and obscure as it lacks further elaboration.

Out of the ten chapters in the volume, three are related to the status of women in higher education. The chapter titled “Participation of women in technical higher education” by Mankumari Thada Magar, analyzes different social, cultural and economic causes that create a barrier to women’s access to technical higher education. It would have been interesting if the author had included the voices of those women who wanted to pursue technical education but could not make it. Sheela Adhikari’s article analyzes the impact of the practice of keeping Tharu girls as bonded laborers on their participation in education. The experiences of the *ex-kamlaris* reported in the

chapter provide a gloomy picture of the exploitation of young girls by rich families costing them life opportunities they could have gained otherwise. In “Dalit women in higher education,” Sharada Risal examines the factors that play a role in supporting Dalit women’s access to education. The discussion of internal factors related to the family and external factors related to the society and state provides a detailed account of the struggle Dalit women have to engage in for education. All three chapters are rich in content and help readers understand the layers of social injustices women have been facing in Nepali society.

Three other chapters discuss participation of specific ethnic groups in higher education. Sudeep Singh Nakarmi, in his chapter titled “Educational inequalities within the Newar community and the discourse of inclusion,” reports that some Newar sub-groups have lower participation than the overall Newar community which is considered to have a higher level of access to education and employment. Nakarmi discusses the causes behind the huge difference in the social, economic and political access and participation within the sub-groups of the Newar community and reminds us to have a more nuanced understanding of the disparities within communities. Similarly, Yam Bahadur Pun discusses the educational status of the Chhantyal community in Myagdi district and argues that the changes in the type of work done by the community members influence their participation in education as people have different needs as their occupations change. Pun’s chapter provides a good example of the relevance of education related to local needs. Another chapter by Prem Darai titled “Darai: Urbanization, displacement and education” explains the consequences of the state-led displacement of Darai community living in Tanahun district on their economic, social and educational status. All three chapters provide case studies specific to communities and are insightful. They show how different communities have been marginalized for various reasons. However, these chapters present specific cases related to individual social groups with unique contexts and cannot be used to make generalizations about the status of higher education in other social groups in Nepal.

Two chapters in the book discuss issues related to financial aspects of education. In “Role of remittance for education in Tharu community,” Pabitra Mahato explains how remittance has helped people from the Tharu community to invest in the education of their family members, providing them financial resources they lacked in the past. However, the chapter heavily

promotes the dominant ideology and discourse that private schools provide better education than public ones. This is evident when the author presents the transfer of Tharu children from the public to private schools as an indicator of success and upward mobility. Similarly, Surendra Kumar Limbu's chapter "Higher education and scholarship" reports on how the issue of participation of marginalized groups is addressed by three different institutions (namely, National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities, University Grants Commission and Student Financial Assistance Program) while providing scholarship to students. Limbu has come up with a set of suggestions for the improvement of existing mechanisms used to distribute scholarships. He further raises the issue that a blanket approach of providing scholarships according to the ethnic groups might not always be beneficial to the sub-category of deeply downtrodden people who need it the most. This issue is still relevant after a decade as some people are arguing that the state should ensure participation based on economic status rather than ethnic affiliation.

There are two chapters related to the theme of politics in the book. In his chapter on "Higher education in federal structure: Discussion on participation," Jhakendra Gharti Magar highlights how disparities in higher education in the proposed federal structure were discussed in the political discourses during the process of drafting the latest constitution in Nepal. Gharti Magar exposes the negligence of political parties on matters relating to education. Some sections of the chapter might seem irrelevant now as the country has already been federated. However, they still provide an interesting reference to the discussions that took place at an important juncture in Nepali history. It is frustrating to see that most of the issues raised by the author in this chapter have not been addressed even though four years have elapsed since the promulgation of the new constitution in 2015. In his chapter "Efforts made by student unions for diversity," Ramesh Rai argues that student unions in Nepal have not been able to embrace diversity and participation in their own organizations despite advocating for the rights of minorities for a long time. The author criticizes student unions for using diversity as a slogan to win elections while not working in the right direction to address the issue seriously.

The book has analyzed the status of participation mainly based on ethnic and gender groups and doesn't cover other dimensions of inequality. Inclusion of the role of language, economic status, geographical remoteness and other aspects of social inequality would have made the scope of the

book wider. Similarly, not all chapters are related to higher education, as indicated by the title of the book. For example, the final chapter focuses on the impact of remittance on school level education of Tharus. In addition, all the studies reported in this volume were conducted about a decade ago and some of them have lost their relevance with new developments in the field. Nevertheless, it must be said that the book covers a wide range of content, queries and methodology. Its language is easy to follow and academically appropriate. It is a useful addition to the current scholarship on participatory approach to education.

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