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EDUCATION AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN NEPAL: AN ANTHROPOLOGIST'S ASSESSMENT

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To argue that the Nepal census is skewed because it does not count the anthropologist resident in every village may be a slight exaggeration. But it is much less of an exaggeration to say that there is a school in every village in the country, and it is high time all of us -- anthropologists, educators, developers -- faced up to the implications for social change of that fact. In doing exactly that, Sharma, Skinner, Beach, and Holmes have all demonstrated why the topic of this panel is timely and relevant to the past, present, and future of Nepal.

Sharma has usefully drawn our attention to what might be called the political history of education in Nepal. In opening the Shrestaa Paatschula early in the century, Chandra Shamsher was trying to practice an art which the British had long since perfected in India: producing clerks. Their purposes were the same: to preserve the hegemony and political interests of the powerful elites. Whether the stakes were the British Empire or the state of Nepal, which the Ranas regarded as an internal empire of their own, the intention was to produce apolitical subjects loyal to existing regimes.

I would like to briefly corroborate Sharma's scenario by quoting from what amounts to an eye-witness account by a participant-observer of that system. In the autobiography of Tanka Prasad Acharya (Fisher n.d.) which I am presently assembling, he tells of educational opportunities when he was young. (Tanka Prasad and his associates founded the first political party in Nepal in 1936. For his efforts his colleagues were executed -- the four martyrs whose statues stand on the Thundikhel today. As a Brahmin, Tanka Prasad could not be executed, so instead he was merely sentenced to life imprisonment; he is often referred to today as the "living martyr".) He describes how his older brother did not take much interest in learning. "It was not his fault," Tanka Prasad told me.

> The fault lay somewhere in the social system. In those days only a few people sent their children to school. The aristocracy (more appropriately, the oligarchy) and the middle class had the false notion that their children should be taught at home by private tutors. Only those devoid of means to afford the luxury were supposed to send their children to school.
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> On the other hand, to join the government service one did not need to qualify oneself in a higher type of education as is in vogue today. The aristocracy could obtain positions for their members in the government service just by pleasing the Ranas. Their sole concern was to maintain themselves in power by keeping the aristocracy and the middle class satisfied, through the grants of such favors as the above. My father, who also came from the middle class, expected similar favors from the Ranas, so he did not care much whether his children were educated in a proper way or not.
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> The other great reason for neglect in educating one's children arose from the fact that the social system being feudalistic, one relied much on the income of land and interest of loans, and for that a little capacity for so much as reading and writing notes, a little arithmetic and a capacity for attending to correspondence was regarded as sufficient. There was no such thing as learning for learning's sake.

He goes on to describe how he first learned to read from his mother.

She had learned the whole Ramayana by heart. She used to recite it to me in a melodic way, and since the translation was in the simple Nepali of Bhanubhakta, I could understand it even when I was small. I also wanted to read the Ramayana, just like my mother, so I asked her to teach me how to read. She taught me the entire Nepalese alphabet, and in 15 or 16 days I was able to recite a few verses from the Ramayana. At that time I was five years old.

In Kathmandu my sister's husband, Ram Nath Sharma, also taught me. When I read about the French Revolution in Hindi, then I thought that I should learn English better. He had been a student at Banaras Hindu University and knew English well. So I went to him, and he taught me, particularly about two things: one was English, and the other was the Indian independence movement, which he was personally interested in.

As I read, I came to realize the might of the British Empire. They were the masters of India and had some command over Nepal, too. They could dismiss even Kings, as they did in Afghanistan at that time. I felt bitterly about that. That was why I became more interested in world politics and began to study more and more. I used to study mainly revolutionary books by Voltaire, Rousseau, Marx, Thomas Paine, Napoleon, and others.

We smuggled all these books from India, since these types of books were banned in Nepal. We smuggled things via the Chandagiri Pass above Thankot.

Later, Dharma Bhakta, one of the four martyrs, requested permission from the Ranas to start a school for the children in his neighborhood, just to the south of New Road and Basantapur. They were given permission, provided there was no school uniform for the children and no name for the school. They used to take the parents of the children aside and very quietly try to convince them of the need for reform, to advance their cause.

If Tanka Prasad's experience of education was more or less haphazard and accidental, imagine that of his wife. In her life-history, which I am also compiling, she describes how she was taught a few things by her grandfather and father at home. "I had a great wish to learn," she said, "and I learned how to read and write Nepali before I was married."

When I first got married, I was just a kid, not interested in much besides playing. But later I developed a strong desire to study. After marriage, I begged Mr. Acharya to teach me English. I used to obstinately persist on learning. Once in a while he would write down a few things in English for me to learn. He would give me my homework in the morning, and I would be ready with it, all done, by evening. For 19 or 20 days he did this, and then he didn't want to do it any more. He taught me the English alphabet. I learned the ABC's from him, so the little bit of English I know is because of him. I wish he would have taught me more.

At that time there were so few educated people. When my uncle and another two friends who had studied English arrived back in Thankot from Banaras Hindu University, Chandra Shamsher sent some people to welcome them back with honors and presented them with and expensive shawl (doshala). When I was married, my second uncle could not be there because he was taking his I.A. exams in India. When my third uncle was 28, he died of TB, but later on my grandfather decided he had died not because of disease, but because he had studied English, so after that nobody else in the family was allowed to study English.

My grandmother was against the idea of my learning to read and write. She was illiterate herself, and she though I might run off and elope with someone if I were educated. She even got angry at my uncles' wives for reading such books as the Ramayana and the Mahabharat. But my grandfather argued that in order to take care of a house a woman should know at least a little bit of mathematics, and he taught me simple arithmetic. Since he was quite encouraging I had more scope than most girls my age. But I never had a chance for a formal education.

When I was little nobody would send us girls to school. They used to say that you shouldn't send a daughter to school. For one thing there were no schools just for girls, and people were reluctant to send their girls to school with boys -- they might run away with some boy and bring disgrace on the family. So it was easier not to send them to school than to take this risk.

Nevertheless, I have read a lot, little by little. By my own effort I started reading Hindi books. I read anything that comes in sight. I have read the Mahabharat, the Ramayana, the Bhagvat Purana. I have read the autobiography of Gandhi, Nehru, Rajendra Prasad, and Hindi or Nepali translations of the great authors, such as Tolstoy, Gorky, Shakespeare, plus whatever philosophy and literature I happen to come across.

I haven't read more about other countries and other subjects because most of the time those books are in English, and I can't read English. But whatever I can find written in Hindi or in Nepali, I read. History or whatever else it may be, I read.

Circumstances have made me capable of this much. But, yes, I always had a wish to study. I really wanted to study, but I never got the chance. So, the one thing I would do if I lived my life again would be to go to school, to get a proper education.

One of her favorite books in later years was a Hindi book called Great Women of the World, which contained short biographies running the gamut of female personality and accomplishment, from various Indian heroines and Madam Sun-Yat-Sen to Helen Keller, Pearl Buck, Madame Curie, and Eleanor Roosevelt.

Thus, the examples of agnostic striving by Tanka Prasad and his wife make clear that the Ranas' best efforts to stifle education were in vain.

Skinner has shown us that even when it is official government policy to promote education, especially elementary education in village schools, there are still many impediments to it. But she also shows that, at the end of the 20th century as much as at its beginning, students have a way of continuing their studies despite family and social obstacles. Skinner is correct to point out the active, creative role students take against pressures to drop out. But the list of motivations to stay in school -- fear of failure, or ambition to rise to a higher occupation or to a higher level within established hierarchies (whether gender or caste-related) -- is incomplete. That is, I think a genuine love of learning for its own sake can and occasionally does develop.

At least I found this to be the case not only among the Brahmanical Acharyas, but also among Sherpas from northeast Nepal. In a capsule life-history Ang Rita relates his sense of exhilaration in the first grade:

[Our teacher] introduced the Nepali alphabet to us by asking us to draw a Sherpa house pillar, which is shaped like an English T. Then he asked us to draw around this pillar, thus completing the first letter of the Nepali alphabet. This letter is pronounced "ka," and, coincidentally, the Sherpa word for the house pillar is pronounced almost the same, "kā", Those who could draw that ka felt very proud and excited.

Day after day became more and more exciting as we kept learning. In a year's time I was able to read and write basic Nepali and had some knowledge of mathematics and English... At that time I was very impressed with the English spoken by a Khumjung Sherpa who had served for about ten years in the Indian army. He sounded very fluent, but later I realized that his English was very broken and full of mistakes, whereas the English I was learning was correct. Later, when I realized that I wanted to become a medical doctor, I got more interested in science. I proudly used to read my lessons very loudly at home so that my parents would be happy to see my progress...

My parents envisaged that everything would be learned in two years' time. So during these two years my studies proceeded quite smoothly, without much interference from domestic tasks, though I used to volunteer in the mornings and evenings to help with all the seasonal tasks of the house, such as carrying manure to the fields, collecting fodder for livestock, collecting firewood, etc.

But when my schooling was prolonged beyond what my parents had envisaged, I encountered completely different attitudes from my parents. They became quite harsh about my continuing in school and put increased pressure on me to become more involved in housework rather than encouraging me to go on with schooling. Sometimes this made me feel disappointed, but I tried to persevere without getting too disheartened from this kind of

problem. I used to work very hard in the morning and evenings to compensate for the loss of time while I was in school. In this way I continued for the third, fourth, and fifth grades.

I noticed that every year some of my friends, either in my class or from younger ones, had to drop out because of circumstances similar to those I was struggling with. Most cases of dropping out were caused by long periods of absence from classes due to parental pressure to look after harvesting or livestock in summer settlements at higher elevations, several days' walk from home. These responsibilities required longer periods of involvement, and when you cannot then catch up on the lost lessons, you get frustrated and finally feel impelled to drop altogether.

Ananda Kuti [a Buddhist boarding school in Kathmandu] brought many changes in my life: change in the mode of living, from a village to a town, from a thatch-roof school to a modern school building, from a kerosene lamp to electric lights, from a calm and quiet place to a busy, noisy place. I continued to study hard, but I also took time to read newspapers and magazines, visit the school library, and play games, particularly volleyball, football, and badminton. I also took part in scouting and excursions organized by the school. All this acquainted me with the world on a broader scale. I did not have the feeling that everything was so complex, as I had felt at Amp Pipal, [a Christian boarding school near Gorkha], because by this time the development of my language skills had removed that feeling

I enrolled in class nine at Ananda Kuti in 1968 and finished my School Leaving Certification examination in 1969 at the top of the list of 19,000 students from all over Nepal who took the S.L.C. that year. This success elated Sir Edmund and all my Sherpa fellows (Fisher 1990).

As was the case in the examples cited by Skinner, Ang Rita had to push hard to be allowed to continue his education beyond the elementary level. Even after he had scored the highest marks in the country on the S.L.C. of his year, and won a scholarship to continue his studies, his mother discouraged him. His parents' view was basically that eduction is a good thing, but enough is enough.

Consistent with the general findings of this panel, I found that certainly one of the most important effects of the Sherpa schools has been that of political enculturation. One characteristic of the Sherpa case which differentiates it from those considered by Skinner, Beach, and Holmes, is the existence of traditional "schools" -- i.e., Buddhist monasteries, where students acquire literacy in an unrelated language (Tibetan) and learn subjects of a traditional monastic curriculum. At the same time that an intact cultural code is not passed on, as Skinner has put it, some traditions are maintained, or even strengthened and intensified. Thus in the Sherpa case, although they take pride in their country and in their knowledge of its national language, there is also a sense that anyone who uses too much Nepali in a strictly Sherpa context is putting on airs. Similarly, despite the political enculturation of the schools, and the B.A.s and M.A.s Sherpas have subsequently earned, Sherpa ethnic identity and loyalty to their own religion has not diminished. Rather, it has even increased, leading to a "Sherpaization" that runs counter to the kind of Sanskritization going on generally in the Hindu kingdom.

Beach's paper points out the extremely interesting ways in which mathematics has always been in use, even among illiterate villagers. He thereby usefully reminds us that modern education is not introduced into a cognitive vacuum. His discussion of the school children teaching the elders reminds me of Margaret Mead's discussion some years ago of what she called Pre-Figurative cultures -- cultures in which the pace of social change is so rapid that the traditional order, in which children learn from their elders is reversed, as young people have to instruct older people in the ways of the world (Mead 1970). It's the kind of thing I experience when I have to ask my kids how to work the computer when I get stuck.

Technology gets way out front in Holmes' arguments for the use of radio instruction in Nepal. One aspect of his presentation which I would like to know more about is why radio instruction failed in earlier decades in Nepal. I myself remember, as a Peace Corps Volunteer in 1962, talking to officials at Radio Nepal about the possibility of teaching English over the radio. I was quite excited about the prospect, but like many other possibilities that excited me in those days, nothing ultimately came of it. This and subsequent experiences in Nepal tend to make me nervous when I hear about interactive radio instruction. I can't help wondering: is it the Nepalese technological equivalent of Star Wars, or just an oral/aural version of Sesame Street? Can solar-powered VCRs and video cassettes be far behind? Such

proposals may be cutting edge, but they make me nostalgic for the one-to-one student faculty ratio Sharma describes for Tri-Chandra College in 1918.

The most fundamental question that Holmes' intriguing proposal raises is: will it work? If it will, we are tempted to ask further questions, such as Marshall McCluhan's: is the medium the message? If it is, then there is a whole series of Brave New World issues concerning manipulation that must be confronted, if public empowerment is to be achieved.

As we see from the events of recent months and days in Nepal [this paper was delivered on April 7, 1990], in which the main actors have been those who are the most educated, the consequences of education are not always what educators, development agencies, and central government planners intend or expect. That fact is implicit in all that Sharma, Skinner, Beach, and Holmes have written above. Education under the Ranas and Shahs has produced much more than apolitical subjects unconditionally loyal to existing regimes. Furthermore, we can expect similar results from whatever educational system is devised in the future, because education is always, in the long run, destabilizing. We need not deny Keynes' aphorism that in the long run we will all be dead to conclude from all these thoughtful presentations that whatever it is cognitively, education in Nepal -- at the end of the 20th century as much as at its beginning -- is always a social and political phenomenon.

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