

The Mahesh Chandra Regmi Lecture 2019

Nepal and the Wealth of Knowledge

Inequality, Aspiration, Competition
and Belonging

Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka

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Back cover shows Mahesh Chandra Regmi in the audience at the inaugural lecture on 24 April 2003. Photograph by Bikas Rauniar.

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Colleagues, Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I feel deeply honoured to deliver this year's Mahesh Chandra Regmi Lecture.¹ I am following a number of highly renowned scholars, in this lecture series, and I consider myself invited to locate my thoughts in the tradition of the highly impressive and influential scholar, Mahesh Chandra Regmi. I am fortunate enough to have known him rather well. When I was in the process of writing my doctoral thesis – which had a strong historical perspective – in the 1980s, I gathered all my courage and visited him in his Lazimpat office. We smoothly entered into a conversation and I was invited to come back. By my third visit, I was being served tea and we quickly developed a routine that went on for many years. Upon my arrival at his office, I would be asked to sit down, and without further ado, he would start narrating what he was writing at the time. That was a privilege and a great intellectual pleasure. He liked my comments that were sometimes quite critical, maybe inquisitive, and I was learning a lot. Once, he published a document I needed in his Regmi Research Series, and, in a generous gesture, thanked me in his book, *Imperial Gorkha*.

During our conversations, I could not possibly foresee that the topic of knowledge production, circulation and distribution would, many decades later, move centre stage in my academic preoccupation. But three dimensions of my current academic interests – as will become clear in this lecture – were already very much there during our conversations. First, my preoccupation with social inequality –

1 I thank David Gellner, Éva R. Hölzle, Richa Neog and Deepak Thapa for their comments on this text. Of course, I am solely responsible for all limitations of its content.

especially in constellations of societal diversity. More concretely, I was and still am interested in shifting constellations of knowledge in highly unequal societies. How knowledge practices perpetuate exclusions, but also how they mitigate social divides while forging social attachments and solidarities across class, gender, caste and ethnic boundary lines. Second, my interest in societal dynamics: How quickly and thoroughly social orders can change, despite continuities. In these processes, the role of knowledge is crucial in the sense that knowledge fields are perpetually embattled. These struggles become prominent particularly along the lines of knowledge and ignorance as well as when different forms of knowledge compete for legitimacy. I am interested in observing how people (can) navigate within specific realms of knowledge, for instance, acquiring modern education. But I am equally keen to learn how societies (can) change by re-evaluating and revaluing their position in the realm of knowledge (Kölbel 2013) as well as revaluing the knowledge considered crucial for their well-being.

This brings the third element into focus, i.e., the importance of political action for shaping societal process that cannot be thought about as being apart from knowledge—for those in power, but also for those dwelling in and reacting to societal hierarchies, oppression and marginalisation. It was important for me even early on to consciously locate myself within the context of my social existence as a scholar and to ask how I can shape the world around me. As an academic I am an actor involved in the generation and in the transmission of knowledge—which is a great privilege. It is the task of researchers and academic teachers to reflect upon the realm of knowledge in its diversity, on the modalities of its production and circulation. It is crucial to think about the knowledge canons while bearing in mind that the canonisation of knowledge is closely linked to politics, hierarchies, competition and silencing.

It is my pleasure therefore to use the opportunity of giving this public lecture on Nepal and the wealth of knowledge. I opted for the notion of ‘wealth’ because it resonates with Mahesh Chandra Regmi’s preoccupation with economics—while contrasting the

wealth of some sections of Nepali society with the misery of many others. The title of one his books, *Thatched Huts and Stucco Palaces*, can be used as a metaphor to grasp the tensions translating from economy, to knowledge, and to power. Today, I intend to inter-relate wealth, power and knowledge at different scales. I will argue that the different realms of knowledge are thoroughly interconnected through social relations and practices. Whether in the field of modern education, of development, or of environmental protection, different actors with their differing knowledge reservoirs come together, even if in unequal social positions, and try to put their knowledge to use. We need to pay more attention to the co-production of knowledge and give more value to knowledge reservoirs that are not academic and that appear 'non-modern'.

Nepal's place in the contemporary globalising knowledge society is ambivalent. On the one hand, Nepal is absent from most rankings measuring academic excellence at the institutional level. On the other, Nepal 'sends out' large numbers of aspiring students abroad (with some of them returning). Nepal has also sent out quite a number of successful academics – i.e., Nepalis who have succeeded in becoming professors in the USA, UK, Japan, and perhaps elsewhere as well. The country also hosts a number of excellent privately run schools and institutions. Moreover, Nepal is incredibly rich in different forms of knowledge that currently do not count in the global race over prestige, power and wealth. These forms of knowledge either persist in the shadow of 'modern' educational aspirations, or are under threat of suppression or oblivion.

The tension between Nepal's marginality *and* excellence in the fields of knowledge production and dissemination draws our attention to striking inequalities persisting in the realm of knowledge. This lecture addresses these inequalities while contextualising them within global, national and local interconnections. Nepal is a particularly striking example of the ebbs and flows in knowledge regimes² coming to the fore and eventually being contested. In the

2 According to Campbell and Pedersen (2010), 'Knowledge regimes are sets of actors, organizations and institutions that produce and disseminate policy

process of these contestations, Nepal's position in the world as well as its internal social order have often been re-configured.

In light of these observations, I am interested in how and why the kind of knowledge people consider essential is available to some while many lack access to the knowledge and credentials they are aspiring for. On the other hand, it is crucial to establish why different forms of practical and traditional knowledge tend to be devalued today. Why are these tensions so pronounced? What is at the core of the pronounced inequalities? How did the different forms of knowledge shape Nepali society and how can they be better combined? To what extent are the actors able to define their own futures while navigating within and between different knowledge regimes? What are the most striking present-day exclusions and oppressions in the realm of knowledge? And: Is our understanding of 'valid knowledge' not in need of a revaluation, given the substantial impact of everyday, local and indigenous knowledge on Nepal's well-being? This is a very broad range of questions: I am deliberately using the publicity of this lecture to raise a number of important and interrelated issues while suggesting that we all need to work together to find the answers.

I will start by highlighting the predominance of modern education as a contemporary form of knowledge regime shaping the aspirations of many Nepalis and discuss what kinds of inequalities it reproduces. I will then elaborate on the variety of the forms of knowledge that people of Nepal have created, over centuries. The discussion will lead me beyond the preoccupation with knowledge regimes because relevant spheres of knowledge may be of a non-canonical nature – while canonisation, whether in the realm of scientific, religious or medicinal knowledge, necessarily creates its own regimes. Drawing our attention to the importance of different forms of non-canonical

ideas that affect how policy-making and production regimes are organized and operate in the first place.' I am using the term in a broader sense, however, to highlight the canonised character of knowledge embraced by actors working towards its continuous acknowledgement as valid and legitimate.

knowledge, it will be my aim to urge for a more thorough reflection on the value of knowledge as well as on the *relation* between the diverse forms of knowledge that different marginalised sections of Nepal's population—such as Janajatis, women and Dalits—have at their disposal. This discussion necessarily amounts to a reflection on inequalities and contestations and leads to the question of how to act under the conditions of the stated ambivalences in contemporary Nepal.

Nepal's location within the globalising knowledge society

Let me address the dynamics in Nepal's modern education—that has accelerated over the last seven decades—through the lens of students' mobility. The present-day acceleration of Nepali student flows to international destinations reflects the enhanced aspirations to join the global mainstream, linking the urge for higher education with the quest for a good life that actors may define in individual, communal or national terms. On the other hand, the tremendous educational exodus—whether from rural or remote areas or from Nepal in general—indicates a perceived lack at home of what is needed to achieve educational success (British Council 2011). According to a report from the World Education Services, 'Nepal is an increasingly important sending country for international students. In the United States, the number of Nepali students increased by more than 20 per cent in 2016/17, the highest growth rate among the top 25 sending countries by far. Limited educational and employment opportunities in Nepal are among the factors driving the outflow of Nepali students. Political instability—there have been nine different governments between 2008 and 2016 alone—and devastating earthquakes in 2015 have worsened social conditions in the country' (Dilas, Cui and Trines, 2018).

Lacking educational opportunities, whether at the local or at the national scale, render Nepal's pupils and students extremely mobile: youth needs to commute for secondary education over long distances on an everyday basis; secondary and higher education draw large numbers of rural youth to urban centres within the country, usually

from the peripheries to the national centres. In fact, migration to towns is very largely driven by the need to get a higher quality of education for one's children. Where internal migration is concerned, a genuine concern for quality education is the driver. Meanwhile, in the case of international migration, it may often be migration per se that is the motivation and education is often an excuse, a way to be able to migrate, and the quality of education purchased in the foreign country may in fact be quite low.³ Internationally, Nepali students engage in positional competition: Being a substantial social force in shaping the direction and weight of global international student flows, they tend to reinforce the global hierarchies between countries, cities and their educational institutions. The more specific locations 'send out' students while not receiving in-comers, the less their positional advantage, in national and international terms. Being the centre of attraction (many educational centres of excellence in Kathmandu and abroad come immediately to mind) thrives on pre-existing constellations of power and prestige, and the elevated position translates into even more prestige, power and money. In this vein, Nepali students—in their accelerating numbers—can be seen as co-producers of the national and global inequalities in higher education, by joining student flows and by giving collective decisions even more weight. Those in charge—the relevant ministries, administration and private agencies—have contributed to these dynamics for many decades. Nepali outflow of students (from rural to urban, and Nepal to abroad) as well as the implications of such migration reflect my interest in knowledge constellations in highly unequal societies and how knowledge practices such as this type of migration create exclusions. To what extent they also contribute to mitigating social divides and forging social attachments and solidarities across class, gender, caste and ethnic boundary lines cannot be answered yet.

Nowadays, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology seeks to reverse this trend, at least at the national level. According

3 I thank David Gellner for alerting me to this tension.

to the Ministry, a lot of effort is being put into establishing and strengthening public schools all over the country. As a consequence, schooling is becoming more inclusive in Nepal. And, yet, inequalities persist in terms of imaginaries, aspirations and flows. The realm of modern education is ever more privatised, catering to people's expectations and means. Neoliberal opportunities and pressures mould the educational sector in very significant ways – as they shape the social orientations and actions of singular actors. Among the many tensions we observe in Nepal are the partly contrary trends instigated by the public vis-à-vis the private forces (see Subedi et al 2013). The spread of public educational institutions and their inclusiveness are to a certain degree countered by the developments of and within the private sector. That this divide is not entirely clear-cut will become evident later on in this lecture. Through governmental measures, Nepal is undergoing a striking expansion of its educational field. The measures undertaken by educational actors at different institutional levels all around the country are facilitated by families and individuals all striving towards taking part in the educational race.

Contemporary Nepal faces new historical opportunities, by widening the access to modern education—while remaining full of closures. But let me briefly sketch Nepal's educational history first, so that the contemporary trends in higher education can better be embedded in Nepal's social transformations. It should become apparent, among other things, that the mentioned positional competition in the educational field needs to be traced outside the realm of modern education as well. Education is not something that individuals decide for and go through individually. Rather, educational chances and possibilities are the outcomes of societal distribution of resources at hand and of social relations. They are embedded within the social structure and they result from individual and collective struggles within social fields. Entire families are engaged in aspiring towards better futures and making educational choices that depend upon the means at disposal. These choices also hinge upon the values and norms embraced by society in a given historical momentum.

Nepal's so-called unification starting in mid-18th century took place under the shadow of what was an early wave of modernisation. It was a response to the globalising forces of colonialism (especially to the spread of the East India Company within the South Asian continent), resulting and profiting from the technological innovation of the military machine, and enabling the process of consolidation of the Gorkhali state. The consolidation required modern means such as counting, measuring and integrating. Mahesh Chandra Regmi provided crucial insights into the process of the central government's role in turning different kinds of landed property into state-managed *raikar* lands. This change involved quantification, allowing for a more efficient revenue collection, and for bringing together more and more data on the population dwelling even in the most remote parts of Nepal. These measures, requiring new forms of knowledge, made it possible to establish the first Civil Code (*Muluki Ain*) in 1854 and bring large portions of the population under Hindu rule. Indeed, the conception of the *Muluki Ain* was at the same time a 'traditional' as it was a 'modern' act. In any case, it was an act of collecting and creating knowledge about the population, requiring inquiries and vision. To forbid the population the tradition of *sororate* (Höfer 1979), to forbid the killing of the cow (Michaels 1997), or to outlaw the *masta* cults in Far West Nepal⁴ required being informed on these practices. The modernising state machinery throughout Shah and Rana rule increasingly included knowledgeable staff and enabled its training. From the mid-19th century, schools were created in Nepal largely following British patterns. Rather than developing a policy of schooling, the Ranas engaged in non-schooling. With the exception of the Darbar High School, all the other schools founded in the late Rana period were set up through private local initiatives. It goes without saying that these catered to the élites, especially those located in the capital. The comparatively late introduction of modern learning institutions, let alone of universities (the first, Tribhuvan University, was established 1959) in Nepal is an expression of

4 Own data.

Nepal's rulers' endorsement of knowledge regimes helping them to forge international ties (Bista et al, forthcoming), especially with those in power in rapidly modernising Western Europe. Their new knowledge base could also be used to reproduce social distance vis-à-vis the subjects and eventually discipline the masses by teaching them their duties (Ibid).

The current governmental efforts towards strengthening community and public education all over the country at the primary, secondary and the tertiary levels are yet further attempts at bringing 'quality education to the people'. This means, on the one hand, that educational disparities will be at least to some degree mitigated. But, on the other, it also means even more influence and pressure on the life worlds when it comes to the legitimacy and salience of concepts buttressing aspirations and shaping biographies. The availability of modern communication infrastructures has rendered the contents of modern education less alien than was the case some decades ago when children in remote areas were confronted with contents of schoolbooks reflecting urban 'certainties' (Ragsdale 1990) such as the outlook of streets with cars, access to medical services, or consumerist patterns. In the meantime, 'modern messages' may be all over the place, but to what extent are disparities challenged? What do the urban dwellers in the centres know about the life and struggles in rural parts of their own country? These are questions surrounding my interest in the interplay of continuity and change in Nepal.

Modern education became the domain of those disposing of—in Pierre Bourdieu's terms—economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital (the latter especially important in the context of the caste hierarchy), and significantly buttressed the societal status quo. The recent rapid expansion of education as well as the modernisation of Nepal's knowledge and technology, not surprisingly, has been closely linked to the modernist ethos of 'development'—the dominant conceptual framework in Nepal evolving since the 1950s. The developmental knowledge regime has thrived on several big narratives. First, 'Nepal needs to reach where the others have

arrived already'. 'To make up leeway', 'to catch up', 'to make up for' continue to be key terms in technology, in scientific research as well as in education. To give one example: Nepal strives towards being recognised as a 'knowledge region'. It seeks to boost its technological development and scholarship. The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology formulates the important vision of transforming Nepal to an informed and knowledge-based society by 2020 through a massive expansion of Information Communication Technology across the country (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology 2018). The main context in this process is to take part in the One Belt One Road initiative. The discourse is strongly oriented through comparisons with countries considered 'more advanced'. Second, 'Nepal needs to mobilise forces to put societal dynamics in motion' – a process for which certain kinds of experts are needed. (We must not forget that 'expert knowledge' is usually thought 'out of touch' with 'ordinary people'. Indeed, it has much more legitimacy vis-à-vis everyday knowledge. This is particularly pertinent in agricultural techniques as well as in the field of environmental measures.) Third, the primacy of specific forms of knowledge has been invoked, forms that are technical, rational and future-oriented.

The dynamics of Nepal's striving towards becoming a 'knowledge region' are an expression of the spread of a 'world culture' (Krücken 2005, on the basis of J.W. Meyer's writings) influenced by neoliberal dictates that have continued to be the dominant discourse over the last decades. The corpus of knowledge, the modes of its communication, and the organisation of knowledge largely and increasingly follow and uphold global patterns. These continue to be dominated by western knowledge canons as well as western forms of organisation in science and technology (Krücken 2005: 10). A number of research and education institutions in Nepal (see below) engage in the global race for prestige, power and wealth, succumbing to global audit cultures and comparisons while participating in 'mutual observations' (Altbach 2005).

All this is mirrored in the contemporary educational system. Knowledge fields are geared at enabling societal progress,

generating among other things 'human capital' deriving from 'men' ... and increasingly also 'women' 'power'. Such an important educational field as 'nursing' has turned into an export sector (see Sijapati et al 2017). Nepal produces more and more engineers and environmentalists. It is striking that sociology is seen in Nepal as an expert-oriented field—unlike in the Western countries where the professional picture of sociology is rather unclear. Graduating in sociology in Nepal almost inevitably leads into the sector of development aid and given the still-substantial amount of international funding, it yields high salaries and a lot of social prestige. Notwithstanding these rapidly expanding fields of knowledge, policy-makers and scholars have identified wide areas where high quality educational opportunities are lacking. This is increasingly compensated by international educational migration that is partly beneficial to Nepal, but that by and large occurs at high costs borne by the country and by families. A large proportion of those migrating from Nepal for educational purposes use private funds, have been educated in Nepal, and are likely to remain abroad after they complete their education. This puts substantial burden on the society—individually and collectively. This 'brain drain' is at the core of preoccupations in Nepal—as it is in many other countries.

The inequalities of Nepal's educational and professional system are obvious. The force and persistence of these inequalities are not surprising when one takes a closer look at the country's complex historical legacies through which spatial, social and economic discrepancies converge and reinforce each other. National disparities are spatially distributed due to the fact that the first educational institutions were established in Kathmandu and only slowly spread to centrally located towns before reaching the peripheries. There were only a few exceptions such as the high-quality gymnasium established by the-then ruler, Jaya Prithvi Bahadur Singh, in the remote region of Bajhang. Simultaneously, elites—i.e., affluent and well-connected men of high-caste background—seized access to modern education. Until today, in most highly esteemed educational

institutions, especially in the tertiary sector, the teaching/academic staff consists of high-caste men. It took a long time before women, members of ethnic groups as well members of the so-called low castes were able to attend schools, not to speak of universities. Also, the learning institutions are not barrier-free. When it comes to religious difference, the state privileged Hindu learning institutions above those established by other faith communities. Moreover, important languages such as Newari, Tibetan, or those spoken in the Tarai, were till very recently forbidden in education institutions and in other public domains. Elite secondary schools do little to (better) acquaint their pupils with languages other than Nepali (see, for example, Thapa 2019). One could even argue that elite secondary schools de-culturate children by teaching through English and therefore cut pupils off from their cultural heritage. Even though primary and secondary education are supposed to be free in Nepal, buying books and clothes, and freeing the family's workforce for education can be cumbersome for rural households.

While Nepali families increasingly share aspirations for higher education, their chances of success are extremely unevenly distributed. The effort for academic excellence is paired with numerous exclusions. Money and cultural capital that need to be acquired from very early on as well as social and symbolic capitals determine where one can study and even what subject. Elite families dispose of the necessary funds, information and networks to send their children for the best secondary education that will prepare them for continuing at universities and even opting for the best universities abroad. In the quest for catching up, more and more Nepali families with modest backgrounds send their children to study at private institutions that promise success. The growing private education industry in Nepal cater to substantial numbers of students and absorb substantial amounts of capital, yet does not necessarily offer quality education. Consequently, some sections of society see their significant educational investments producing little success. We still lack decent research on the extent to which and how educational strategies put burdens on families, especially those

compelled to sell land and go into debt when sending their children off for higher education. We also know little about the familial tensions when their children do not return home—from abroad or from the urban centres—after completing their studies and after having entered the work force. We know little about the tensions when they return. We also know little of emotional pressures in the case of educational failures. ‘Providing the best schooling that they can afford is a key concern for parents across the country, be it the Kathmandu middle class or rural farmers who see their children’s future dependent on engagement with a wage economy. The close connection in popular discourse of ideas of education, development, and mobility reinforce such concerns’ (Pigg 1992; see also Caddell 2005). We can certainly infer that modern education, while full of promise, exerts pressures and tensions on individuals, on collectives, and on the entire society.

The global competition within which a growing number of Nepalis engage is still shaped by colonial constellations that persist and are reproduced in new forms (Shahjahan and Morgan 2016). The resulting highly unequal geopolitics of knowledge are particularly visible in the realm of higher education (Ibid; Altbach 2005). But also at the primary and the secondary levels, the processes of knowledge production and circulation take place under conditions of the persistent spread of world culture that confers legitimacy on specific forms of knowledge and social organisation, thus largely evolving within the framework of the postcolonial order. That modern education and neoliberal notions of excellence and success are currently so widespread in Nepal is a clear indicator of the country’s global integration and outlook. Educational efforts take place within a global race, linking the social actors’ visions of the good life to their (and their families’) educational success. The value of educational credentials still largely follows western patterns.

Elevating modern education (in the sense of value stress and aspirational direction) is currently happening at the cost of devaluing or even silencing other forms of knowledge. It is certainly not an exaggeration that the contemporary global educational race has

overshadowed the myriad of other forms of knowledge, in Nepal and elsewhere. This is the context within which I wish to further discuss the educational inequalities and the possibilities of mitigating those.

Beyond postcoloniality: Nepal's rich knowledge reservoirs

Ironically, wealth is linked to forms of knowledge that are delegitimised and silenced. Nepal was never colonised and yet colonial forces significantly shaped and still shape the country (Des Chene 2007; Kunz and Thapa 2018). These dynamics are today reinforced by neoliberal forces, i.e., the growing role of capitalist logics such as profiteering, and the corporatisation of higher education, along with an increase of competition driven by quantifications and credentialism. For this reason, I suggest discussing the current knowledge situation in Nepal in the postcolonial framework while seeking to look beyond the postcolonial lens. Recent scholarship actively carried forward postcolonial examination of Eurocentrism and western hegemony in knowledge production as well as its dominating effects and resulting disparities in knowledge distribution, legitimacy, relevance, and the 'silencing' of marginalised forms of knowledge (Alatas 2006; Alatas and Sinha 2017), advocating the inclusion of non-western and non-white forebears of the social science canon. However, most publications concentrated on the practices of exponents of knowledge within the colonial powers while, to a great extent, channelling attention away from processes of knowledge production and circulation within the dominated regions. The emancipatory potential of alternative knowledge production did not receive sufficient attention. We still know little about the creative effects of debate on notions of 'alternatives' – ranging from 'utopia' and 'avant-garde' to 'backlash', 'nativism' and 'localism'.

This reflection on knowledge production, circulation and distribution in Nepal, and within and between epistemic communities, is informed by my quest to grasp and do justice to the magnitude of knowledge production, the synergies and clashes between communities of knowledge as well as the im/

possibilities of translation between different realms of knowledge. This consideration is driven by the recognition of the importance that actors themselves attribute to knowledge production and dissemination as well as to the use of knowledge for different reasons and purposes. At the same time, it is propelled by the imperative to understand the reflexivity of actors in Nepal and beyond as they consciously shape their worlds. But it should also bring about and stimulate academic (self-)reflexivity in the expansion of knowledge about societies and cultures in Nepal. Among the 'burning issues' to be explored are the relations between knowing and ignorance (see Kirsch and Dilley 2015: 6, on the general crisis of confidence in contemporary societies about what knowledge is), the dynamics in knowledge hierarchies as well as learning and local knowledge. By 'local knowledge', I mean situated knowledge bound to localities and everyday experiences. This entails factual knowledge, practical skills, capabilities as well as cultural certainties.

Given the great diversity, the historical depth and wealth of knowledge traditions, it is crucial to reflect on 'how bodies of knowledge are produced in persons and populations in the context of the social relations' (Barth 2002: 1), generally, and in Nepal. This observation prompts me to pose certain questions: What are the forms of knowledge considered to be relevant for being Nepali? What are the tacit ways of knowing and knowledge transmission that are carried out in everyday human actions? How do Nepali actors seek to actively influence their society and culture, taking into account conscious and reflexive dealings with knowledge? In addressing these questions I will limit my attention to 'indigenous knowledge', the emergence of women's voices, and the mobilisation of Dalits.

While scholarship had already paid a lot of attention to Nepal's diversity before the First Jana Andolan, Nepal's shift to democracy from 1990 onwards turned into a decisive moment for bringing societal diversity to public attention. This process was significantly strengthened by the Maoist movement. Somewhat paradoxically, the realm of development aid reinforced this drive.

Such slogans as ‘thinking globally—acting locally’ or ‘small is beautiful’ highlighted the attention development actors drew to local and cultural specificities. Such phrases appeared as values and as means to be built upon for society to develop. The discourse of social inclusion that followed the public recognition of diversity did not necessarily discuss the notion of knowledge, but in one important field, ‘knowledge’ emerged as a key issue—and this was ‘indigenous knowledge’. This debate drew public attention to forms of knowledge that had been silenced and oppressed over long periods of Nepali history while having immediate importance for dwelling in a more equitable world and in more sustainable ways. Their emergence went along with the struggles for empowerment carried out especially by ethnic actors.

Enquiries into local knowledge systems are significantly older than postcolonial examinations, yet the latter have greatly enhanced the visibility and topicality of what is currently understood as *indigenous knowledge*. This focus has significantly expanded our understanding of the variation in canons of knowledge and the forms in which their production and circulation are organised. This reveals the wealth of human diversity and the relevance of ‘materials for reflection and premises of action’ (Barth *ibid*), also indicating the empowering effects of ‘being in the know’. At the same time, the concept of ‘indigenous knowledge’ has faced substantial critiques—i.e., addressing the reification of the ‘indigenous’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; de Kloet and Chow 2014)—critiques which must be taken seriously when engaging in enquiries into ‘local alternatives’. Critical positions question especially the binary opposition often made between the ‘indigenous’ and the ‘alien’, demanding that we move beyond any simplifying dichotomies. They advocate for a situating of ‘indigenous knowledge’ in order to grasp its dynamic nature. For instance, Karlsson and Subba (2006) assert that people who live in and by the forest acquire skills and perceptions of the environment, adapting to conditions that differ from those of people living under other circumstances. Indigenous (ethnic and non-ethnic) ‘enskilment’ is thus an ongoing process of learning through active

engagement with one's surroundings: as life circumstances change, so do skills and ways of perception. Here, we must also understand the interconnections that affect the production and circulation of indigenous knowledge (Raina 2016).

The search for alternative forms of knowledge draws upon existing and established forms of 'indigenous knowledge'. These forms are conceived as dynamic resources providing the basis and orientation in the here and now. The reflexivity of alternative positions entails both the question of how to live in Nepal within specific locations and the question of what it means to be 'Nepali'. 'Local Nepali forms of knowledge' are therefore understood in a double sense; deriving from particular locations *and* as actors' positionings within a Nepali frame of reference. 'Indigeneity' is not something given. Instead, I assume that examinations interlinking specific corpuses of knowledge, forms, and sites of their production and circulation seen as 'indigenous', 'local' or 'Nepali' can be highly informative as to how social actors all over the country perceive and envisage their past, present and future.

Dor Bahadur Bista's widely received and very hotly debated book, *Fatalism and Development*, can be seen as having brought about a sea change in revaluing knowledge at the national scale and in attempting a 'normative inversion' of the hierarchic societal order. Bista argued that in order for Nepal to develop, it was necessary to abandon and challenge the fatalist and dominant attitudes of high-caste Hindus while acknowledging the communitarian and egalitarian forms practised by ethnic groups paired with their indigenous knowledge especially put to use in agricultural practices and in environmental protection.⁵ Since that time, a large body of documents, often driven by development applied research, has emerged, documenting these very diverse knowledge forms. These preoccupations were followed and are still followed by new domains of knowledge coming to the fore. By 'coming to the fore' I mean the extent to which public attention had ignored the existence

5 One can argue that he certainly did fall into the essentialist trap, but one could argue that this was a necessary and strategic essentialism.

of different forms of knowledge before taking notice and the extent to which the bearers of these knowledge forms have been excluded or denigrated (Campbell 2014). Dynamics of sustainability are not confined to the knowledge of ethnic groups, of course, but it was the thorough preoccupation with Nepal's indigeneity over the last two decades that alerted us to the necessity of understanding the relations and dynamic processes between different sections of the population and their knowledge at hand (see Pohl et al 2010; Green 2014). This significantly buttressed the insights into the plurality of environmental knowledge, values and experiences and it helped to gain an idea of the entailed complexity, dynamics, incomplete knowledge, and contested values (see Demeritt et al 2011).

It is fascinating to discover the multiplicity of voices finding their ways of expression in both the private realms and in Nepal's contested public spheres. Along with ethnic actors, female voices and narrations are particularly noticeable. Whether in the frameworks of development projects, in journalism or in the different fields of artistic production, women seek to uncover the possibilities of being and becoming a girl or a woman in contemporary Nepal (Thapa 2011). As Kunz and Thapa (2018) highlight, manifold narrations provide an account of the diverse ways in which Nepali girls and women from various social backgrounds navigate complex social structures such as gender, caste, religion, marital status and ethnicity and how these have shaped their subjectivities. The authors also narrate how these women resist, subvert and move beyond social norms to create their own alternative ways of knowing and being in the world as they 'move into modernity'.

The feminist critique put forward by Kunz, Thapa and their colleagues draws a close connection between the global colonial order that significantly affected Nepal even if the country was not directly colonised (Des Chene 2007). They convincingly argue that 'there is not one single gender regime but many' (2018: 401). Along with the Hindu nationalism that significantly shaped Nepal's societal order over the last two centuries, the developmental constellations have provided ground for modern external institutions to

postulate knowledge on 'Nepali women' while representing them as poor, helpless and needy (Ibid). Precisely this narrative trope rendering women as 'without voice' and as social figures requiring 'action upon' reveals the problem of voicelessness along with the problems deriving from being silenced. Knowledge production and dissemination turns into a key device in subject formation. Knowledge formation as such but also the self-representations of those 'in the know' have empowering effects. The quest to find expression for characterising one's social location and for voicing the aspirations towards becoming usually builds upon practical knowledge reservoirs. Such knowledge reservoirs are non-canonical and remain outside the realm of appreciated knowledge.

From the point of view of actors, the narratives voicing female subjectivities contribute 'to challenge established "truths", to complexify dichotomies and problematise pre-established categories' (Kunz and Thapa 2018: 402). They also reveal how women can reconcile and live through conflicting identities, especially when they question their societal roles. Our knowledge of Nepali women's very diverse experiences and their knowledge reservoirs helps to grasp a significantly fuller picture of Nepali society and to learn more about its problems and preoccupations. Kathryn March provides a case in point when discussing Tamang gendered subjectivities in a migrating world (2018). While migrating, both men and women need to reconfigure their resources, knowledge being an important part of them. Yet, as she argues in different situations of migration (remaining at home, moving to urban centres along with husbands, and/or migrating internationally for work), women experience great challenges to self-worth, even more so than their male counterparts.

Analogous to migratory constellations, the realm of education in Nepal can also be seen as largely shaped by male subjectivities and their claims to what counts as 'valid knowledge'. Although education in Nepal is increasingly opening up to women as it is to other sections of marginalised population groups, when it comes to studying at prestigious departments and in the patterns of mobility

male students are clearly privileged.⁶ The power of definition in shaping the educational field by policy-makers, administrators and teachers is almost entirely with men, and this predominance intersects with class, caste and ethnic background. But the picture becomes much fuller when we embed the realm of education in societal constellations. After all, educational decisions are taken by households and the costs are borne by them. What is the share of women in educational strategies? To what extent is educational success enabled by mothers, sisters or female servants? In what ways is 'modern knowledge' acquired at schools confronted with everyday gendered knowledge that is mobilised in order to enable educational success? How are the different knowledge forms entangled? Do they stand in concurrence? Are those family members lacking modern education de-legitimised on the basis of their educational status vis-à-vis those experiencing educational mobility with the financial help of those doing menial tasks? How far does this relate to gendered dynamics?

Another important group currently publicly emerging as bearers of knowledge production are Dalits. Their situation is particularly disadvantaged as Dalits were classified within the Hindu caste hierarchy—and hence located within the social order—as those not belonging to the world of knowledge. Ten years ago, I spoke to a Dalit activist regarding how little we know about Dalit culture. He looked at me and stated simply: 'We Dalits don't have a culture.' A few years later, he corrected his position, but at the moment of speaking he revealed how deeply internalised has been the idea that Dalits lack something the other sections of society enjoyed in abundance (Mathema 2007). Following suit of the Indian Dalits, who have already brought out a very significant oeuvre by a large number of scholars, intellectuals and artists, Nepali Dalits embarked upon publicly voicing their knowledge and opinions relatively late.

6 We should not forget, though, that in nurse migration there is a reversal of gender roles, with the woman going first, and then having her family follow and join her later, once her employment status is established (see Adhikari 2018).

The recent boost in Dalit knowledge production in Nepal has been very significant, with the Samata Foundation and Jimbaran being important vessels for knowledge formation and dissemination.

Dalit intellectuals formulate anew a problem fiercely debated in Nepal—that has not lost its salience yet—that is, the question whether outsiders should be allowed to conduct research on them and what are the complexities when doing so. Can research on Dalits be conducted by non-Dalits? Can people from outside understand the layers of Dalit oppression and humiliation? What difference does having the Dalit experience make? Indian Dalits have already made the strong point regarding the importance of speaking for oneself. They formulated their irritation, by addressing the problem of their enduring intellectual colonisation and theoretical exploitation. They spoke about the necessity to silence Dalit intellectual positions by intellectuals from ‘outside’ (the Dalit-Bahujan perspective). This is a very crucial and complex discussion, also indicating that knowledge needs to be protected. Even more so, specific forms of knowledge require spaces where those sharing the same experience will be able to make sense of it, protected from those ready with concepts and tools to analyse, and to appropriate meanings. The famous question posed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Can the subaltern speak?’, keeps resonating among those striving to acquire and to maintain their power of expression.

The complexity of Dalit knowledge brings the theme of the interrelation between different forms of knowledge into salience. For many centuries, Dalits were putting their knowledge into practice under the dominance of external knowledge regimes. For those dwelling in those regimes, whether consciously or not, it may be crucial to establish how they have contributed to the oppression of Dalits and to the ignorance of their knowledge. In contemporary contexts, it is important to reflect how those involved in the production and dissemination of canonical knowledge, for instance, academic teachers, reinforce or challenge societal hierarchies. Given that only a very small number (maybe only one dozen) of Dalits—who constitute almost one fifth of Nepali society—make

up the permanent academic staff (of more than 8000) at Nepali universities, Dalits students are exposed to teachers who largely ignore the magnitude of differentials in endowments between their own peer group and students from minority or from non-academic backgrounds (including also women, and students from ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities, from poor families, especially remote areas, and many others). Ideas of 'academic normality' may bear hard upon those lacking English language skills, those unfamiliar with rhetorical battles as well as those short of time, constantly in need to earn money (Mathema 2007). It is also important to reflect on how knowledge of oppressed groups may help us in expanding our common knowledge base. Is the topic 'Dalit cultures of protest' only important for Dalits? Or, can we all benefit by acquiring insights into different perspectives and aspirations?

For those voicing their experience the very fact of formulating, finding a vessel for expression and, being heard, can have empowering effects. Another effect is often canonisation, so that specific 'unheard' histories are likely to turn into new dynamic knowledge regimes – as is the case with feminist, indigenous or Dalit-Bahujan studies. Those 'outside' have been cautioned time and again against appropriation or even intellectual colonisation of knowledge repertoires created by those who have struggled hard to find their voice and make it heard. Yet, we are all aware of the highly entangled nature of knowledge production and dissemination. Knowledge is a dynamic formation that thrives upon contestations, relationality and multi-perspectivity. Those knowledge producers dwelling in the privileged locations of knowledge creation must become aware of the persisting asymmetries, strive towards enabling the formerly unheard voices, and, most importantly, listen.

Nepal is very rich in knowledge. Scholars, activists and artists have documented huge reservoirs of religious, ethnic, medical, agricultural and environmental knowledge, also in the intersections of the different knowledge reservoirs and/or regimes. Also, the 'migration knowledge' has recently become an important field of inquiry (Ghimire and Maharjan 2014; March 2018; Adhikari and

Gellner 2018). Making sense of the political momentum (Thapa 2019) requires specific kinds of practical knowledge and also the realisation that this knowledge is valid. Throughout Nepali history the rulers strove to keep large sections of the population ignorant and to make them *feel ignorant*. The present-day postcolonial constellations buttressed by neoliberal orientations and domination reinforce this line of differentiation. Individual and national success are seen in dependence to the availability of modern knowledge. Yet, Nepal's society thrives upon very different forms of knowledge that need to be acknowledged, made use of, and put in relation to one another.

Acting in the complex world of knowledge

Having acknowledged the wealth of Nepal's knowledge, we need to turn to the crucial question how to act in the complex world of knowledge, that is, in a stratified world where knowledge is closely interlinked with prestige and power. I was trying so far to highlight past and present inequalities in the realm of knowledge and also to show that the different realms are usually thought to be apart from one another. Indeed, claims to valid knowledge tend to silence or to denigrate other forms of knowing and to cut off common ties. My argument was, however, that the different realms of knowledge are thoroughly interconnected through social relations and practices. Whether in the field of modern education, of development, or of environmental protection, different actors with their differing knowledge reservoirs come together, even if in unequal social positions, and try to put their knowledge to use.

We are all confronted with the question how to act in the complex world of knowledge, but those located in elevated positions within the knowledge fields of power need to be made more aware of their crucial role in shaping the nexus between knowledge, power and responsibility (Levitt and Crul 2018). We academics dispose of key resources to decide what knowledge is of relevance and which knowledgeable actors to support. While knowledge production and dissemination is a relational process, knowledge elites dispose of substantial means to decide what knowledge to endorse and

what to silence. Scholars, intellectuals and artists are—figuratively speaking—sitting on a hedge, i.e., at the decisive venture point where strategic differentiations are made. I increasingly see it to be my duty to acknowledge the importance of knowledge deemed non-academic or non-canonical. It is also important to do justice to the different forms of knowing and to support their bearers. As an academic, I deem it increasingly important to work towards a more inclusive education, alerting myself and my peers that we should open ourselves to those coming from disadvantaged positions, to find appropriate ways of strengthening their education, and also to help them share their knowledge (as unfitting it may seem for academic purposes at first glance). This requires questioning what we consider ‘academic normality’ (including the question who belongs to this realm); this requires rethinking the canonical nature of the humanities, social science and, also partly, the life science and natural science knowledge; and this requires rethinking how to learn and transmit knowledge in order to render it more inclusive. Social Science Baha is a very appropriate place for sharing these thoughts with you, my distinguished audience, since it has undertaken numerous efforts to do precisely what I am suggesting—by providing an open forum for societal debates around inclusion and related issues.

So far, I was arguing, following Joachim Kurtz and Dhruv Raina (personal communication), for situating knowledge by spatially shifting our attention to different sites of knowledge production. Following these colleagues, I asked for deprivileging the geographical centres and institutional sites of knowledge production that have, thus far, occupied the foreground of our understanding of valid knowledge. I hope that it became obvious that our turning to other sites of knowledge opens up windows to other forms of knowing. In studying forms of knowledge embedded within specific sites, we encounter more than plural conceptions of what counts as knowledge. We simultaneously obtain insights into diverse modes of transmission, forms of validation, circulation, and sharing.

This position notwithstanding, in the remaining time of this lecture I shall concentrate on the realms of modern knowledge because I know them best and also because they send out important impulses to other knowledge fields that are relevant for the well-being of Nepali society. I am certain that the colonisation of contemporary life worlds (Habermas 1988) by modern forms of knowledge is inevitable, but this does not mean that we can ignore the value of the other forms. One of my predecessors in this lecture series, Ashish Nandy, argued for a 'plural ecology of knowledge' (Nandy 1989), and I follow suit.

How can then the elevated places of knowledge formation, of teaching and learning be put into use for society and its members? Many avenues come to mind. First, we must not forget that even very privileged sites of knowledge production can turn into spaces of political social contestation, i.e., into spaces where knowledge and visions for societal well-being are negotiated. All over the world, schools and universities have been targeted from outside and from within in the course of struggles over domination and the power of definition within societal orders. In this sense, knowledge regimes are deeply embedded within societal constellations.

Since the liberalisation of the economy brought about by the partial victory of democratic revolution in 1990, Nepal's higher education policy has envisioned increased access to more people. As in other parts of South Asia, Nepal's universities, especially Tribhuvan University, provide a fruitful ground for political contestations (see especially Snellinger 2018). Universities have turned to be breeding places for the rejuvenation of political parties and knowledge production becomes a battleground for conflicting societal visions. Frequently, its functioning is impeded by repeated *bandhs* and strikes. Political parties have time and again acted as gate-keepers in knowledge production and certification. Did these battles enhance peoples' chances of acquiring quality education? While the new constitution and government policies have provisions for equitable access for women, Dalits, people with disabilities, and poor families – and, indeed, the number of some of these groups

has increased in higher education—universities and colleges have not yet substantively changed the academic culture to overcome structural inequities in higher education (Bista et al, forthcoming; Shields and Rappleye 2007).

Moreover, Nepali higher education has remained a political combat zone for political forces that had been contending to shape education policy in their image, with political parties rather than autocratic regimes now using education to advance their political agenda (Bista et al, forthcoming). Political parties greatly interfere in academic and administrative appointments and exert political power through their student organisations. In Nepal's highly politicised educational realm, educational visions are also highly embattled among the political parties.

Besides universities, private educational institutions have often been targeted either by those in power (for instance, by accusing private institutions of corruption) or by political mobilisers. They are often aligned along political party lines (Cadell 2007: 8). In the Maoist period, private schools, especially the elite private schools, had to carefully navigate the contested political space. The Maoist demands included the reduction of school fees, the removal of references to the monarchy in school activities, and an end to teaching the Sanskrit language. They also addressed the necessity to prevent 'western influence' in teaching, while arguing for a nationalisation of schooling (see Cadell 2007: 13). The Maoists saw students 'as the "reserve force" in a future "mass uprising"' (Ibid) and insisted upon having access to schools to acquaint students with their political ideas and to mark their presence in the political space. Thus, places of modern education will remain sites for contestations in the future to come. Yet, a number of the new social openings can certainly be attributed to pressures social actors exert upon educational institutions and to the changing awareness of those responsible. Even if highly incisive and dramatic, crises can be creative, compelling those attacked to position themselves, to seek support, and to enter into a process of reconsidering one's objectives and means. This can result in consolidating one's own position, but also in addressing reforms.

Second, educational institutions in more and more parts of the world are engaging (and need to engage) in alternative educational pedagogies. Globalisation enables processes of democratisation and decentralisation that increasingly enter the realm of education.⁷ Many initiatives have developed to both counter and complement the curricula that mainstream schooling and learning systems have offered for topical questions such as what delineates ‘being human in the world’ (Kavira and Verges 2016) and what types of knowledge transmission are considered ‘valuable’. As Stodulka et al (2019, personal communication) argue in Southeast Asian contexts, from the alternatives of radical unschooling to cooperative life-long learning centres, different ‘paths of learning’ shape diverse ideologies about ‘what makes a person’ in respective societal and cultural contexts (Kavira and Verges 2016). With alternative education on the rise in Asia (Nagata 2006), including in Nepal, new practices of knowledge construction feed from innovative hybrids of local and transnational pedagogies, producing alternative curricula of subject formations and resistance. It is expected that personal and institutional transformations will contribute to reforming the fields of economic distribution, environmental protection and social justice, along with issues from structural inequality to local empowerment, pedagogic resistance, or religious reformation movements. Embracing alter-pedagogies will certainly open up opportunities to identify and address common ideals, sensibilities and practices (Stodulka et al 2019, personal communication). By changing the coordinates of value systems and of educational practices, individuals and communities would acquire resources to meet their personal needs and to put them at the disposal of the collective well-being.

On a more immediate, practical level, we need to establish – and this is my third point – what those in elevated social positions can do in order to support the cause of their less-privileged co-citizens. By asking this question I am entering a highly contested and ambivalent ground. It is not necessary to highlight the many tensions existing

⁷ On the engagement of the NRNA, see Rasali et al 2015 and Adhikari and Gellner 2018.

between the educational elites and the broad population lacking key capital forms (in Bourdieu's terms), I presume. 'Mass' and 'excellence', 'diversity' and 'canonical standards', 'quantity' and 'quality' are usually taken to stand at odds with one another (see, for example, Sijapati 2004). 'Quality maintenance' is often taken as the rationale for compromising on inclusion. Strengthening individual and institutional capacities is considered to be instrumental to enable Nepal's rise within the global knowledge society, and the result is the drifting apart between elite education and that of large sections of the population. And, yet, the forces of democratisation intersecting with new societal preoccupations (sustainability, equity, inclusion) render the educational institutions a locus of knowledge production and consumption. At the same time, they also provide spaces for young people in enacting alternative expressions of citizenship (Cheng and Holton 2018). These preoccupations usually adopt a national lens (with a pronounced stress on national belonging) while locating themselves in global and international constellations and also, while occupying subnational terrains that mediate citizenship, values, ideals and norms (Ibid).

I am not aware of any existing analyses dealing with how Nepali elite institutions contribute to the well-being of their fellow citizens, but I am more and more interested in this question. It is my contention that elite institutions are one important locus—among many others—from where reformatory impulses towards knowledge production and dissemination can be brought into broader social fields. Highlighting the role of elites is in no way denigrating the emancipatory movements 'on the ground'. On the contrary, my point is to take them to task because Nepal cannot afford ignoring such important 'stakeholders'. I am starting at the top of educational excellence, assuming and expecting that a broad range of further educational institutions and citizen groups are currently engaged in balancing educational advancement, on the one hand, and reaching out to fellow citizens, on the other. After all, the balance between investments in individual life *and* social investments for the common good remains among the biggest tensions for many Nepalis (see

also Bista et al, forthcoming). This act is full of tensions because knowledge and knowledge credentials have always been scarce goods, instigating competition and even open conflict. But it is my contention that Nepal can only gain by working towards balancing excellence *and* inclusion.

Since analyses are lacking, I can only narrate what can be inferred from the homepages that are indicative of how values and the related fields of action fit with the self-understandings of elite colleges and schools.⁸ Let us look for a short moment at the self-representations of the most prestigious schools or colleges – such as Budhanilkantha School, Rato Bangala School, St Xavier’s School, Kathmandu Model College, Global College, KIST College, Trinity College, Chelsea International College, Nobel Academy, the British School, Malpi International College, most of them based in Kathmandu – that are preparing students for higher education and for prestigious and well-paying occupations. This short overview immediately brings us back to the international students’ flows and their positional competition with which I started my talk. These elite institutions cater to Nepali aspirations for educational mobility by promising entrance to prestigious global universities. (Many families sending their children to these institutions are aware that their children may not come back after completing their studies, obtaining good positions abroad.) Even the names and institutional partnerships of a number of schools are indicative of their predominantly western orientation. More sporadically the contacts reach towards India, China, South Korea, Singapore or Thailand. The future aspirations of the Nepali elites seem to be still directed towards the West.

While promising excellence, homepage narrations are indicative of the schools’ turning towards social issues. It is very noticeable that inequality and diversity have been embraced as important objectives to be considered in designing self-images and – hopefully – action fields. How diverse are the students’ and teachers’ bodies is largely

8 I thank Richa Neog, Bielefeld University, for conducting the research and for the data analysis.

unknown, but I assume that diversity is not very pronounced, especially in the case of the latter. Only a few of the schools provide needs-based scholarships: Chelsea International College provides 60 to 100 per cent scholarships to orphans, children from remote districts, underprivileged children, differently-abled children, children of martyrs and teachers. Global College also mentions scholarships of partial financial aid to needs-based students. Some schools like KIST College and Trinity also provide social equity scholarships which include a 50 per cent tuition waiver to those who are physically, socially or geographically disadvantaged.

Although all the schools mention social service and civic engagement in their vision and values rhetoric, only some have provided evidence of the students or the institution actually undertaking such activities. Institutions like Ace Institute of Management have a social work programme where students volunteer for 10 days with a social organisation to make students aware about social problems that exist in their community. They also take part in blood donation and fund-raising campaigns aimed at helping the needy undergo medical treatments. Other schools like Chelsea International College and Global College also have social service clubs run and organised by the students. KIST College mentions a social service club and has a Youth Red Cross Circle. The Community Service Programme at Rato Bangala School includes activities like volunteering and camping overnight at a rural primary school; A-Level students can aim for the Duke of Edinburgh Award with 140 community service hours, work with non-profit organisations, and take part in the school's UNESCO awarded outreach programme.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) forms an important part of the ethics of some of these institutions.⁹ Following the commitment to CSR, the British College for example links international graduates with voluntary English teaching placements in underprivileged communities in Nepal. Other schools take a wider view of social

9 We may wonder of the genesis of these narrations. Possibly, they have their origins in the Maoist pressure upon private schools.

service which also includes environmental responsibility. GEMS takes an institutional point of view on civic engagement and community service. It makes 'corporate social responsibility' a core theme of its system. Under this CSR initiative, GEMS claims to protect its employees' right to affiliations, fair salary, human rights at the workplace, protection of privacy, equal employment opportunity, and avoiding discrimination based on gender, religion, ethnicity, caste or political affiliation. GEMS also undertakes environmental initiatives such as rainwater harvesting, making the school a polythene-free zone, and installing solar panels. At St Xavier's, A-level students get the opportunity for community service and participation in the annual Rural Immersion Programme. Some schools mention the involvement of their alumni associations in serving local communities. For example, the Budhanilkantha alumni group called SEBS is dedicated to community service and undertakes many projects.

Rato Bangala School also runs the Rato Bangala Foundation (RBF), which through teacher training, research and development of new and innovative modules for teaching, works to bring meaningful education to government and private school classrooms. RBF works in partnership with the government as a training institute for primary and secondary school teachers. Another interesting observation is that while most schools do not cater to underprivileged and non-elite populations in terms of scholarships, community service projects and eligibility criteria, those that do have such programmes aim to serve students outside of the elite institution's framework. For example, the Rato Bangala Outreach Programme provides scholarships to academically strong students in neighbouring schools who would have found it difficult to afford requirements such as uniform and stationery.

Different schools endorse themselves based on the efficacy of the different pedagogical methods they are proud of—and this brings us back to the theme of educational reforms. For example, the Ace Institute of Management is a specialised establishment on management studies and they take pride in their 'value-based

management education', which includes such values as care for resources and respect for laws and regulations. The teaching-learning methods they claim to employ include such techniques as management games, project work, use of technical aids, and interactive lecture sessions. The British College advertises its personalised approach to education which allows students a lot of freedom regarding their subject combinations and individual monitoring. GEMS advertises its 'learning while earning' approach whereby the institution provides deserving students with internship opportunities. Global College endorses its theoretical and lab practices along with field-based research models of teaching and learning as well as case study learning for A-level students to enhance their analytical skills in solving real-life problems. Nobel Academy takes pride in its child-friendly environment and time-based technologies along with its teaching and learning strategies such as Life Skills, Lifelong Guidelines, Multiple Intelligences, Bloom's Taxonomy, Cooperative Learning, etc. Rato Bangala, on the other hand, employs its own teaching method called the Rato Bangala Method.

We need a thorough-going analysis to grasp how these ideas are put into practice and what effects they have. These schools are able to afford reflexivity and engagement, and they are increasingly under scrutiny with regard to the embraced educational objectives and methods and with regard to their inclusiveness. While admired by many, these schools (in their significant diversity) are under critical observation, even if not in the form as during the Maoist conflict when they were targets of physical attacks and of severe social criticism. Have they carved a privileged space within Nepali society without giving (much) back? Have they forged their students' belonging to Nepal and to the Nepali cause (as embattled as its understanding may be), or have they rather turned their outlook towards the West, neglecting Nepali languages, cultural forms, and, above all, the many problems Nepali society is facing?

In any case, the narratives are driven by top-down orientations. It is the knowledge at the disposal of the elite schools that is offered to 'society'. The different kinds of practical and technical knowledge

(crafts and arts used to establish the premises and their maintenance) as well as the 'caring knowledge' (of the 'serving' staff, the gardeners and cooks) they are thriving upon are not acknowledged. Elite education and the narratives espoused maintain societal hierarchy rather than pay attention to the interchange of different forms of knowledge used by different 'stakeholders' while assuring the elites' educational success. The question is how knowledge from 'the peripheries' can acquire further legitimacy in the knowledge centres in the sense of reversed colonisation (also within the national confines). While alternative curricula of elite institutions seem to integrate non-canonical knowledge forms, the tendency is still to translate this knowledge into expert language and then redistribute in the same place from where it has been collected. It would be crucial not simply 'to offer' or 'to teach' (as important as it has become), but also to listen and learn. And, learning as well as listening has to be done in a different order than it has so far been: from the 'peripheries' towards the centres and from non-elites towards elites. This preliminary analysis demonstrates that power, wealth and knowledge are interrelated and that these interrelations must be paid attention to and addressed through such tools as revaluing knowledge regimes, becoming aware of one's privileges of cultural, educational, symbolic and material capital, and using this awareness to augment the voices of those whose wells of knowledge have traditionally been ignored within the modern knowledge regime.

I hope that this short overview highlighted the ambivalences and tensions¹⁰ entailed in Nepal's position in the contemporary globalising knowledge society. There is obviously a huge gap between elite education, the quality of education, and educational chances available to most Nepalis. At the same time, modern education is considered the apex of possibilities and a precondition for enhancing individual and collective well-being. The substantial and ever-growing divide is also buttressed by putting modern

10 On these tensions, see Sijapati et al 2017.

education at the forefront, while denigrating the many other reservoirs of knowledge. We are witnessing today a development that more and more sections of the Nepali population, including elite institutions, acknowledge—the importance of diversifying our understandings of knowledge and working towards reforms in educational practices. It is absolutely essential that governmental efforts be geared at decentralising and strengthening educational institutions all around the country.¹¹ While elite schools are beyond the reach of most Nepalis, educational institutions located in villages and in district headquarters should play a crucial role in providing quality education, forging personal development and reforming their modalities of teaching and learning.

Conclusion

Mahesh Chandra Regmi alerted us, time and again, to the pronounced inequalities in Nepal's history that are still significantly affecting the present-day societal order. I started off from the assumption that intellectual and cultural inequalities are part and parcel of socioeconomic inequality and I was trying to show the ambivalences and tensions in knowledge production and dissemination in contemporary Nepal—that is globally embedded.

It is impossible to demonstrate the wealth of knowledge at the disposal of Nepali society, but I was trying to bring to attention the variety of knowledge forms and the many sites of knowledge that I consider vital for Nepal's well-being. The preoccupations with a modern future channel passions in directions that often reduce local historical knowledge, erase memories, and scramble cultural sensibilities. Interestingly, these build upon the hierarchical Bahun model of disembodied abstract knowledge that dominated the applied, technical and practical knowledge of the other population groups. While the spread of modern knowledge and education are inevitable, it is crucial to pay more attention and to confer significantly more recognition to the 'other' knowledge reservoirs.

11 On the importance of critical English language teachers' awareness in Nepal, see Sharma and Phyak 2017.

These are crucial for carrying on societal projects towards more sustainability, equity and inclusion. I argued for an understanding of how closely different forms of knowledge are entangled while remaining in asymmetrical relations.

We need to reflect more thoroughly on the interconnection between power, knowledge and responsibility, and the role of those in charge. Nepal's history is a perfect example for demonstrating how struggles for power and economic resources were accompanied by a competition between epistemic communities struggling over the power of definition, and legitimacy. These struggles shaped the caste, class and gendered orders – that continue to play an important role in contemporary societal negotiations.

I was trying to show that these struggles are largely responsible for the current ambivalences in knowledge distribution. While revealing the substantial disparities and divisions coming about with and through an unequal and skewed command of knowledge, paired with persisting knowledge hierarchies, it is crucial to ask how knowledge is negotiated and put into use for society and its members. Belonging is crucial and it can only be forged when different societal 'stakeholders' can exchange their knowledge repertoires in a less hierarchical footing. Societal belonging can thrive only when knowledge is shared and acknowledged within and across different realms of knowing.

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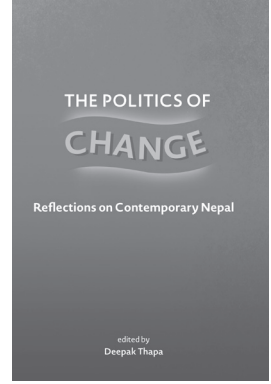
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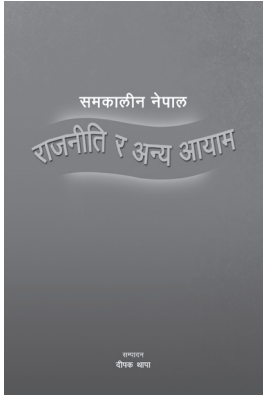
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* * *

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