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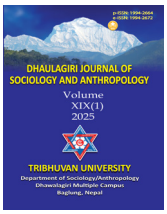

Interview with Professor Samira Luitel

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Introduction and Background

Born on March 7, 1952, into an educated and socially active family, Professor Samira Luitel is a distinguished sociologist and education consultant based in Kathmandu, Nepal. With a professional career spanning over four decades, she has made substantial contributions to the fields of education, gender studies, and social inclusion. Since her retirement in 2013, she has continued her work as a freelance consultant. Professor Luitel has held significant academic and research positions, including Senior Researcher at the Research Centre for Educational Innovation and Development (CERID) and Professor at the Central Department of Sociology/Anthropology at Tribhuvan University. She has also served as a Supplemental Professor at the University of Delaware, USA. Her research focuses on the intersection of education and development, particularly concerning women, ethnic minorities, and other disadvantaged groups, employing both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. She holds a Ph.D. in International Intercultural Education from the University of Alberta, Canada. Her dissertation explored literacy and empowerment among Maithili women in Nepal. Professor Luitel has authored several publications, including books, manuals, and over two dozen research reports on gender, education, and social issues. As the first female professor of Sociology in Nepal and an active member of numerous academic and development organizations, she has significantly influenced policy-making, curriculum development, and capacity-building initiatives. Her contributions have been recognized with the Mahendra Bidhya Bhushan award for academic excellence. Professor Luitel continues to impact Nepal's education and social development sectors through research, teaching, and advocacy. This interview was conducted in March 2025 by Professor Madhusudan Subedi and Dr. Man

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Bahadur Khatri, and the excerpts are presented in the order in which the questions were asked.

Question 1: Could you please share your date of birth, place of birth, information about your parents and family, number of children, and details about your family?

Answer:

Family History: Grandfather's time

I was born on March 7, 1952, in the remote village of Namsaling, Ilam District, Nepal, to my parents Dharma Prasad Dhakal and Dharma Kumari Dhakal. My grandfather, Abhi Narayan Dhakal, was a respected figure in the village, holding the title "Lopton", conferred during the Rana regime. He was responsible for collecting revenue, resolving local disputes, and managing the border area connected to India in Ilam. He was married to the daughter of Captain Kashi Nath Bastola of Ilam, who was known for his wealth and philanthropic work. The title "Captain" was also given by the Ranas, granting him administrative responsibilities for the entire district.

Unfortunately, my grandmother (Captain Bastola's daughter) died shortly after giving birth to three sons and a daughter. Left with four young children and unable to manage alone, my grandfather remarried. His second wife, from the Acharya family of Dhankuta, was of the same age as my father (12 years old) and came from a wealthy and well-established household. As a result, my father was compelled to take on the responsibility of raising his younger siblings at a young age. My grandfather had ten children—eight daughters and two sons—from his second marriage.

A Sanskrit scholar, my grandfather was deeply versed in Dharma Shastra and Jyotish Vidya and frequently engaged in philosophical discussions with learned pundits. According to family stories, he was affluent, owning vast lands and operating a money-lending business. He was also highly religious, frequently organizing Yagyas with sadhus and spiritual leaders from India. He built a hermitage for their stay and took responsibility for their food and lodging. He even performed Tuladan—an offering of gold, silver, grains, and cash equal to one's body weight—a rare feat that only a wealthy individual could afford.

He believed in the value of education and established a Pathshala (school) at home for his sons to teach Sanskrit. Influenced by his brother-in-law Tanka Nath Bastola, who studied in an English-medium school in Darjeeling, he later enrolled his sons in a boarding school there. The younger two sons from the second wife later pursued higher education. However, his daughters were denied this opportunity, as girls' education was discouraged at that time.

My father and his two younger brothers were enrolled in Darjeeling Government High School as adults—aged 16, 15, and 13. My father passed the entrance exam in Grade 6 and was recognized as a bright student by his teacher, Dharanidhar Koirala, who introduced him to Mahabir Samsher Rana, a government officer visiting the school. Impressed, Mr. Rana promised to offer him a government job after his education. My father topped the Cambridge University High School Examination, achieving record marks and earning a "star."

Although he joined a medical college in Calcutta, he had to leave midway due to his father's illness and the pressing need to support the family. He was uninterested in his father's business and asked for permission to seek a job in Kathmandu, which Mr. Rana had assured him during his student life. Grandfather was quite impressed and allowed him to look for a job. He got a job as a kharidar in the Guthi Sansthan, Kathmandu, with the negotiation to teach the Rana Children in his free time. That title he continued, as he was fondly known as 'khardar ba' throughout his life.

Father's education and occupation

My father was married at the age of 15 to my mother, who was only 9 at the time. She belonged to the Khatiwada family of Ingla, a village in Ilam District. While her father and brothers were learned pundits, she herself was denied the opportunity to study. In those days, it was believed that women who read and wrote might turn into witches. Despite this, she managed to learn some Nepali and English with my father's help after their marriage. He taught her in the evenings during his free time, although she struggled to grasp English.

She gave birth to her first daughter in Bikram Sambat (B.S.) 1990, at the age of 20, during the devastating earthquake that shook Nepal. At that time, the country was also undergoing a political revolution against the autocratic Rana regime. Being educated, my father supported the revolution but remained cautious; direct involvement could cost him his job—or his life. He resigned in B.S. 1992 for his safety and returned to his hometown.

His fears were later validated when, in B.S. 1997, four political activists were executed for their opposition to the Ranas. With my grandfather's approval, my father purchased land in Jhapa—then a malaria-infested forest region where criminals were often sent to die. The government was offering land there at a low price to encourage cultivation and increase revenue. Though there were no limits on how much land could be purchased, only a few could afford it. My father, being forward-thinking and resourceful, was one of them.

He started farming in the area, bringing in Santhals and Bengalis from India, along with a few Rajbanshis—the indigenous people of the region. He and a cousin managed the land, commuting on foot for hours to the safer hills since staying overnight in the lowlands was dangerous due to malaria and wild animals like tigers and cobras. Eventually, they bought horses to ease travel. While the rest of the family lived in Namsaling, Ilam, my father endured a lonely and challenging life to secure our future.

Family Life and Struggles

My mother gave birth to four daughters consecutively, which deeply disappointed the family, especially since there was an expectation for a male heir. Pressure mounted for my father to take a second wife, but he firmly refused, unwilling to be unfair to my mother. Fortunately, she later gave birth to a son, which was a cause for great celebration. She went on to have three more children, a son, me, and my youngest brother at the age of 45. Family planning was not an option then, as it was considered taboo. In total, she had nine children—three sons and six daughters.

During our childhood, my father was mostly occupied with his work in Jhapa and would return home only during Dashain and our care was left to our mother and house helpers. When he did return, he brought joy and abundance—quintals of rice, lentils, sugar, oil, fruits, and new clothing for the entire extended family, including his stepmother, her children, and the household staff. He supported everyone financially and educationally. Due to his generosity and socialist approach, he was affectionately known as Kharidar Ba throughout the Mechi Zone.

However, the family's internal dynamics were often challenging. My elder sister was married off at the age of 11 to a boy from the well-known Rijal family of Biratnagar. Although she remained with us until reaching maturity, her husband remarried out of frustration, giving my sister a co-wife at a young age. This devastated my father, prompting him to prioritize the education of his remaining daughters.

My second sister was exceptionally bright. She was given private tutoring to prepare for her SLC exam and was brought to Jhapa to sit for the final exam at the Bhadrapur center at age 14. Tragically, she died in a fire caught in the house —a heartbreaking loss that took years for our family to recover from. Another sister had died of diarrhea at the age of 3 due to a lack of proper care, as our mother was overburdened with responsibilities in a large joint family.

During my father's absences, my mother was treated poorly—almost like a housemaid—and the daughters were neglected. This forced her to start a separate kitchen. Eventually, my father's brothers also pushed for a family separation, citing mistreatment of their wives by the stepmother. My grandfather, then ailing and with young children from his second marriage, was distressed. My father promised to look after them as his own, leading to the family's separation. They divided only the hill land; gold, silver, and cash—earned by my grandfather—remained with him.

My Mother's Life

My mother was deeply religious. She observed fasts, performed daily rituals, and conducted poojas, believing these practices brought blessings and protection for the family. We enjoyed a lot when there used to be whole night jagram with bhajan kirtan after Swasthani brata (a one month long fasting). She took great pride in hospitality and was always ready to welcome guests with elaborate meals whenever father visited home. His visits mostly focused on village development programs, school management and settling disputes among village people. She was a traditional but stylish woman, often seen in long saris with a long pallu and a well-kept hairdo—possibly influenced by the Rana ladies she saw while living in Kathmandu. Her beauty and grace were often admired.

Father's Business and Political Engagement

Inspired by the birth of a son, my father expanded his ventures. He owned paddy fields, oil mills, and jute businesses, exporting goods to India. In B.S. 2003, he co-established a rice and oil mill under public ownership and later, in B.S. 2016, launched Morang Canning Company and Sudha Falras Company as private enterprises. These produced pineapple rings, jams, marmalade, squash, and pickles.

He cultivated pineapples and sourced lemons and oranges from Ilam, as well as from our own garden in Namsaling. His ventures employed over a thousand people. The farmhouse and kitchen regularly served 50–60 core workers and remained open to visitors. Large logs burned day and night for cooking. Vegetables were organically grown using compost from over a dozen milking cows and buffaloes.

He owned a Land Cruiser, a Russian Jeep, a truck for exports, and a tractor, while most people still used bullock carts or buffaloes. For short distances and in the hills, he preferred horseback. He encouraged local landlords to invest in industries, especially as the government prepared land reform policies. He was part of the Land Reform Draft Committee that secured tenant rights to one-fourth of the land they cultivated.

Following his example, many others started tea plantations and rice mills. At one point, dozens of mills operated between Sanischare and Birtamod. Though self-taught, he was a natural entrepreneur and often advised others.

His philanthropic spirit extended beyond business—he helped build roads, canals, and river dams. The Panchayat government offered little support for private initiatives, so people had to lead local development on their own.

Political Career and Tragedy

My father played a pivotal role in the 1949 revolution (B.S. 2007) and succeeded to liberate Mechi Zone before other parts of the country. Alongside his cousins Bhairav Prasad Acharya and Narendra Nath Bastola, he helped form an interim government in Eastern Nepal, serving as its Finance Minister. However, the Nepali Congress party later accused them of betraying the party, forcing them to withdraw. He ran independently in the 2015 B.S. general election, narrowly losing due to rumors that he had withdrawn from the race.

Later, he was elected as an MP in the Rastriya Panchayat in 2020 B.S. He had visited China in 2013 B.S.

as a Cultural Delegate, meeting Chairman Mao Zedong and Premier Zhou Enlai, and was deeply impressed by the socialist model.

Despite his contributions to the nation, he was assassinated by Naxalites in 2029 B.S., labeled a bourgeois oppressor. Alongside him, my second brother Gyanendra Prasad Dhakal, an M.Sc. biochemistry student at BHU, was also killed during his vacation at home. He had planned to continue our father's legacy by founding a pharmaceutical company. His dream was cut short by this senseless violence.

The assassination devastated our family. We not only lost loved ones but also the stability and prosperity built over decades. Leadership gaps and fear of further attacks caused the businesses to collapse. Successive governments have offered no support to revive these ventures.

Nepal's unstable political climate—whether under monarchist, communist, or democratic leadership—has done little to promote industrialization or protect business owners. The burden of taxes and corruption weighs heavily on entrepreneurs. Even the lives of the poor and working class have seen little improvement under so-called "proletariat" governments. Instead, a new class of petty bourgeoisie has emerged under the guise of political reform.

Question 2: How was the perception of general people, relatives, and family members towards education and female education in your childhood days?

Answer:

Educational Transformation in the Dhakal Family

Until my grandfather's time, sons were prioritized for education while daughters were married off before puberty in pursuit of punya (religious merit). The prevailing belief was that kanyadan (giving away a daughter in marriage) was the highest form of charity. As a result, girls, including my elder sister, were married before the age of 12, without any opportunity for education.

This tradition was broken by my father, who was firmly against child marriage and a strong advocate for girls' education. Though he could not prevent the early marriage of his eldest daughter, he resolved to educate all his daughters—and even his sisters—thereafter. All school-aged girls in the Dhakal family were sent to school, which my father had established. They continued their education as far as they wished, without any financial constraints.

My elder sister was initially sent to a boarding school in Kurseong, India. However, once Karfok Boarding High School was opened at Aaitbare, Fikkal—an initiative led by my father—she was brought back to attend there. Many local children studying in India were also brought back to support and promote the new school. Highly qualified teachers were recruited from both Nepal and India to maintain high academic standards. The renowned poet laureate Mahananda Sapkota was among the resident teachers, while Narendra Nath Bastola oversaw the school's administration. My father bore all financial responsibilities for the institution.

Educational Revolution

During the Rana regime, public education was prohibited. Only Brahmins and high-caste Kshatriyas could afford to educate their children through private tutors. In such a context, it was revolutionary for someone like my father to not only educate his own children but also strive to uplift an entire region plagued by illiteracy, entrenched traditions, and prejudice. Raising awareness about the value of education was the first step.

Initially, he hired private tutors for his own children, then extended this opportunity to cousins and village children by constructing a small hut as a classroom. Once the number of students grew, he sought to formalize the setup. With permission from the Director General of Education—and a compulsory letter of consent acknowledging that the government could take action if any political activity occurred—he established two primary schools: one in Sanischare, Jhapa (in 2005 B.S.), and another in Namsaling, Ilam (in 2006 B.S.). He donated 10 bighas of land for the Sanischare school and 20 bighas for the Namsaling school.

To ensure quality education, he brought teachers from India to teach English, mathematics, and science, while local educators handled humanities and social sciences. These schools eventually developed into middle and high schools, and later, higher secondary institutions.

In 2010 B.S., Karfok Vidya Mandir, a secondary boarding school, was founded in Fikkal to serve students from across the Mechi Zone. My father donated another 10 bighas of land for the school, and additional land was contributed by donors from Jhapa. The school received students from various feeder schools in Ilam and Jhapa. All school-aged boys and girls from the Dhakal family attended either these schools or the boarding school at Karfok.

A regional educational campaign, Shikshadan Mahayagya, was launched involving figures such as Mahananda Sapkota, Narendra Nath Bastola, Punya Prabha Dungana, and Naradmuni Sharma. A National Conference on Literature was also organized at Karfok Vidya Mandir, inviting literary icons like Laxmi Prasad Devkota and Balkrishna Sama to inspire students.

Notable students from Karfok included Dr. Taranath Sharma, Birendra Khujeli, Pasang Goparma, Jaya Prasad Dhakal, Devi Prasad Banstola, Dr. Vishnu Dhakal, Sarita Dhakal, Shanta Dhakal, Kedarmani Dhakal, Dr. Guru Prasad Dhakal, Khagendra Prasad Dhakal, Sita Dhakal, Birmani Dhakal, and Chakra Prasad Banstola.

Challenges in Promoting Girls' Education

Despite these efforts, girls' education remained a challenge due to widespread social beliefs that women

were meant solely for household work and child-rearing. Families feared that education would lead to greater independence, possibly resulting in daughters eloping. Middle-class agricultural families lacked the time and means to send even their sons to school. Many believed education was impractical, claiming, "Padhiguni ke kaam, halo joti khayo maam" (What use is studying? The plough fills the stomach). For lower-caste families, education remained a distant dream, limited by caste-based discrimination, poverty, and societal pressure.

Only a handful of students from lower-caste backgrounds were enrolled as symbolic gestures, but most eventually dropped out. At the time, most students in the area came from the Dhakal family and other education-conscious Brahmin and Kshatriya households.

My sister Vishnu and my father's sister Sarita were the first girls from the whole region to pass the SLC examination. They went to Banaras for higher education, where my uncle Jaya Prasad was studying. Vishnu completed her MA in Psychology from BHU and later taught at Ratna Rajya Laxmi and Padma Kanya Colleges in Kathmandu. She eventually married Dr. Tikaram Sharma, an Associate Professor at BHU from Kurseong, and settled in Banaras. While in Kathmandu, she was politically active, associated with notable figures like Kamal Rana, Angur Baba Joshi, and Punya Prabha Devi Dhungana.

My father had high hopes for her career and was disappointed by her move to India, believing she could have achieved great prominence in Nepal due to the lack of educated women at that time. As an MP representing Jhapa in the Rastriya Panchayat, he aspired to see her lead.

Eventually, over a dozen members of the Dhakal family earned graduate and postgraduate degrees. My uncle Jaya Prasad Dhakal completed his MA, and his brother, Dr. Guru Prasad Dhakal, earned an MRCP in London. He served at Bir Hospital and various district hospitals and later became a founding member of Nepal Medical College and Om Hospital. Sita Dhakal, their sister, completed an MA in Sociology from BHU and taught at the Institute of Medicine in Maharajgunj. Birmani Dhakal, son of Chandra Prasad, topped his MSc Mathematics class at TU and served at Khwapa Engineering Campus in Bhaktapur. He also held the position of Minister of Forestry in a Nepali Congress government. His sister, Shanta completed an MA in History from Lucknow and taught at Patan Multiple Campus.

My elder brother, Khagendra Prasad, completed an MA in English and Law from TU and assisted my father in business. He also served as Pradhan Panch in the local government and engaged in various social activities. My second brother, Gyanendra Prasad, was pursuing an MSc in Biochemistry at BHU but was tragically killed alongside my father by Naxalites in 2029 B.S.

My youngest brother, Rajendra Prasad, earned an M.Com from BHU, determined to carry forward our father's legacy. However, he struggled to find employment in Kathmandu during the political uncertainty leading up to democracy in 2045 B.S. while our father's business assets were stuck in debts and litigation. He eventually gave up and moved to Namsaling to live in seclusion. This led to a deep depression, and he ended his life at the age of 31—a tragedy that shattered our family. Our mother, already grief-stricken by so many losses, passed away from cervical cancer just two months later.

Question 3: How was your childhood and education. Who encouraged and inspired you to pursue higher education at Banaras Hindu University (BHU) in India?

Answer:

I was the youngest daughter, followed after the birth of two sons. Even though my younger brother was born six year later, being the youngest daughter, I was the most pampered child in the family. I was told that my parents were happy to have me, seeing me as a replacement for their daughter whom they had lost earlier.

I was raised alongside my brothers, without being made to feel different as a girl. We all attended Namsaling Middle School, located at the top of the hill in Sukrabare Bazar, which required us to walk about an hour each way. I studied there up to grade 9, when the school was upgraded to a high school. My brothers, however, moved on to Karfok after completing middle school.

My father arranged for teachers at our school, many of whom stayed in our home, ensuring we had no difficulty with our education. He was deeply concerned about our studies and would check our academic progress during his visits from the Tarai. He paid particular attention to English grammar and arithmetic, often assigning exercises during his free time. If we failed to perform well, the teachers would be held accountable.

Our daily routine included studying early in the morning after waking up and having tea around 7 a.m., and again in the evening until 9 p.m. before bedtime. Although I was an average student during my primary years, I consistently ranked first in my class from grades 6 to 9, thanks to my father's guidance.

After completing grade 9, I moved to Kathmandu to accompany my sister Vishnu, who was teaching at Padma Kanya and Ratna Rajyalakshmi Colleges. During parliamentary sessions, my father would stay with us, and he continued to tutor me in English grammar, essay writing, and translation, which greatly improved my language skills.

I sat for my School Leaving Certificate (SLC) exam from Pashupati High School, Chabahil, and passed with second division marks. I then enrolled in the science stream at Tri-Chandra College, becoming the first girl in our family to study science. However, my path soon changed. I was unable to succeed in the I.Sc. program and instead took the IA exam privately through the Allahabad Board,

staying in Banaras with my sister, who was married to Dr. Tikaram Sharma, then an Associate Professor of Zoology at Banaras Hindu University (BHU).

After passing the exam with second division marks, I joined BHU for my B.A. I performed well in both my undergraduate and postgraduate studies, even while staying in the women's hostel on campus.

Question 4: You studied English Literature and Home Science at the Bachelor's level but chose Sociology for your MA at BHU. What factors or individuals influenced your decision to study Sociology?

Answer:

There were several subject combinations available for the B.A. program at BHU, but I was particularly interested in three that I considered to have good prospects. As a student of the humanities, teaching was seen as a viable career path, and I believed these subjects would offer good opportunities for a teaching position after graduation.

Sociology was a relatively new subject at the time and had not yet been introduced at Tribhuvan University (TU). Although job opportunities in the field were limited, I found it more engaging than traditional disciplines like Economics, Political Science, and History. English Literature and Home Science were my favorite subjects, but since BHU did not offer an M.A. in Home Science, I had to choose between Sociology and English Literature.

While I was pursuing my B.A., Vivian Condos, a Professor of Anthropology from Australia who was conducting her Ph.D. research on Hindu rituals, visited BHU. Her work and the idea of pursuing a Ph.D. in Sociology greatly inspired me. I had intended to pursue a Ph.D. after completing my master's degree, but I got married during my M.A., which delayed my academic goals.

Ultimately, my dream of earning a Ph.D. was fulfilled 18 years later while I was working at CERID.

Question 5: How was the teaching and learning environment at BHU? What were the major focuses of the Sociology curriculum? Additionally, what were the prevailing theories and research trends during your studies, and how have they evolved since then?

Answer:

BHU was a large university spread over 14 acres, housing faculties of Science, Arts, Music, Engineering, Medicine, and more. Each faculty had its own hostels and professors' quarters, including a single girls' hostel for female students from all disciplines, where I lived. The university had a vast library stocked with all kinds of books, and the well-qualified librarians were always ready to help students find the materials they needed.

The teachers were highly qualified Ph.D. holders and were very supportive of the students. I studied at the women's college, which offered bachelor's level courses taught primarily by female teachers. Male professors were invited only when necessary, such as for sociology courses. Both the college and the hostel were located within a secured complex, so the girls were confined to campus and closely monitored. Students needed the superintendent's permission to leave for shopping or other errands and had to attend evening prayers, during which roll call was taken.

The superintendent was strict; if she had any concerns, she would immediately contact the student's guardian or local guardian to inform them of the issue. In serious cases, disciplinary actions were taken, including possible expulsion from campus. The hostel had a mess run by South Indian cooks who served a variety of foods, accommodating students' dietary preferences or health needs.

Students were highly disciplined and dedicated to their studies, both inside the hostel and on campus. They were friendly and willing to help each other academically or otherwise. Senior students treated juniors with affection, while the juniors showed respect to their elders. Life on campus and in the women's hostel was truly memorable. BHU was an educational hub attracting both national and international students, and it was a matter of pride to study there.

Most of my classmates pursued M.A. in English Literature, but I was the only one to choose Sociology. Our Sociology class had only seven students: four Thai monks, one Laotian, one Indian, and me, a Nepali, the only female in the English-medium class. Meanwhile, the Hindi-medium classes had over a hundred students. All the teachers in the Sociology department were male except for one female who taught Principles of Sociology.

Hindi-medium students had more opportunities to study various sociological disciplines such as Sociology of Education, Medical Sociology, and Industrial Sociology. However, due to the small number of English-medium students, we were limited to choosing only one discipline. Though we were interested in Medical Sociology, Professor Gopal Singh Nepali, the department head at the time, recommended Industrial Sociology as more beneficial for our future careers. This was likely due to the availability of qualified English-speaking teachers.

Our coursework included Principles of Sociology, Social Thought, Social Psychology, Statistics, Research Methodology, and Industrial Sociology. Principles of Sociology covered various sociological theories; Social Thought involved critical analysis of these theories; Social Psychology focused on society and human behavior; while Statistics and Research Methodology dealt with the practical application of sociology, including questionnaire preparation, observation methods, and statistical tools like Chi-square and T-tests, which were valuable for sociological research.

Industrial Sociology explored the development of industries in different countries, especially India, and

their social impacts. Overall, the master's courses were fascinating as they dealt with people's everyday lives. What I found most interesting was their interdisciplinary nature, incorporating aspects of history, political science, economics, and other social sciences.

Among the topics, Sociological Theories intrigued me the most. The curriculum included ideas from Auguste Comte, the father of sociology and the theory of positivism, to M.N. Srinivasan's concept of Sanskritization. We studied Spencer's Social Darwinism theory, which compared societal development from primitive to modern societies with Darwin's theory of evolution; Durkheim's Division of Labor in Society; Parsons' Structural Functionalism; Tönnies' Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft; Marx's Class Struggle, and more. These theories inspired deep thought and a strong engagement with the discipline.

Lectures were the primary teaching method, and taking notes was the main way students learned. English textbooks from Western publishers were expensive and unaffordable for most students, so we relied heavily on the library to supplement our class notes. Library books were in high demand, so one had to be quick to borrow them or else remain on a long waiting list. Exchanging books among friends was the best way to study regularly, saving both money and time otherwise spent hunting for books in the library.

Question 6: What did you do after completing your MA from BHU? How did you join Tribhuvan University, and what were your initial responsibilities?

Answer:

I had an arranged marriage before completing my master's degree, due to family pressure following my father's passing. Fortunately, I was able to complete the final year of my studies without interruption. After marriage, I became fully occupied with household responsibilities, as was customary in our society. Moreover, since I was married into a family in Saptari—a Maithili-dominated region—I had to follow traditional customs such as veiling and staying confined within the four walls of the home. It was a society completely unlike the one I had grown up in—something I had never imagined.

The marriage was arranged without any proper background check of the family or the man I was marrying. The decision was made when my cousin sister, with whom I was very close, brought the proposal to my family. Everyone agreed. She spoke highly of the family, saying they were well-off and educated, and described the groom as an MA graduate, highly disciplined and respected in society. Although he was ten years older than me, she convinced me he was the perfect match. The real, unspoken reason behind the proposal was her hope that we could live as best friends forever, since he was her husband's cousin.

The marriage was finalized with the consent of my sister and brother-in-law, and the groom and I first saw each other at their house. The following day, he took us shopping for an engagement ring. I observed him interacting confidently with rickshaw drivers in their native language and later taking us to a restaurant for coffee. Even though we didn't have a real conversation, I agreed to marry him on the condition that he would allow me to complete my master's degree.

For the next seven years, my life revolved around household chores, childbearing, and raising children. Although the family was educated and financially stable, I was still expected to fulfill all the traditional duties of a daughter-in-law. My husband was the eldest of eight siblings—three brothers and five sisters. The brother immediately younger to him was pursuing a doctorate in medicine in Kerala, India, and the other siblings had graduated from a local college. The eldest daughter had been married off before reaching puberty to fulfill religious obligations and had only completed SLC. Three sisters were married before I joined the family. The rest of the siblings, along with my in-laws, my husband, and I, lived under the same roof.

I gave birth to two beautiful daughters, which was a disappointment to the family, who had expected a male heir. My husband was engaged in the family business and social work, as he did not hold a formal job. Over time, my frustration grew. I felt increasingly trapped in the traditional role of a daughter-in-law in a large joint family, with no way out. My academic degree mocked me. As Dr. Dor Bahadur Bista stated in Fatalism and Development, "Education will bring no change in the lives of women in a conservative and tradition-bound society." I saw no change coming in my own life and had almost lost all hope. I worried about the future of my daughters, fearing they too would end up as housewives after graduating from the local college.

After four years of relentless physical and emotional struggle in this traditional setup, I was shocked one day when my husband came home with surprising news: there was a teaching vacancy for Home Science at a local secondary school, and I could apply if I was interested. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. This was the same man who didn't hold a job himself—was he now allowing me to work? Would his parents permit a daughter-in-law to leave the house to earn an income? When I learned that they had already agreed to the idea, I was filled with deep respect and gratitude for them.

The condition was that I would still fulfill my household duties. In the winter, I completed all the morning kitchen chores and handed them over to my mother-in-law before heading to school. In the summer, when school started early in the morning, she took care of the early chores, and I resumed my duties in the afternoon and evening. Although the job was for Home Science, I ended up teaching English and Social Studies, as another teacher was already handling Home Science.

After a year of teaching at the school, a vacancy

opened at the local college for a Home Science teacher, and I worked there for another year. Then, in 2039 B.S., I received an appointment at CERID (Research Centre for Educational Innovation and Development) as an Assistant Research Officer. I had actually applied two years earlier, when my husband had brought home a vacancy announcement for several research positions during a visit to Kathmandu. He had promised that if I was selected, I could take the job. He accompanied me to the written examination and the interview, which happened a year later. I had nearly forgotten about it when I unexpectedly received the appointment letter at home. I was thrilled and ready to take the opportunity.

However, my in-laws were not pleased. They were reluctant to let me leave with three small children—my youngest, a son, was only four months old. My husband convinced them that I could eventually transfer my position to the local college I was teaching, but that letting go of such a permanent opportunity would be unwise. With their reluctant consent, I left for Kathmandu with my infant son and a 12-year-old helper, whom my mother had arranged. My two daughters, then aged six and four, stayed back until I could find proper accommodation and settle into life in the city.

Questions 7: Could you please share your experience working at the Center for Educational Innovation and Development (CERID) at Tribhuvan University. What were the research priorities at that time? What were your responsibilities, and what were your learning experiences at CERID?

Answer:

I joined CERID with the hope of eventually transferring back to Rajbiraj so that I wouldn't have to live away from home. It would have been difficult to manage alone with small children. When I shared this with my Director, he expressed his disapproval, saying that a great deal of effort had gone into selecting candidates, and it was not feasible to repeat the process. As a result, I had to stay in Kathmandu with my children, while my husband visited us periodically whenever he could take time off from his responsibilities in the family business.

We searched for rental rooms near my office in Panipokhari, but the costs were beyond what I could afford on my salary. Eventually, we found a small place in Ason. I had to leave early each morning, taking an auto-rickshaw from Bhotahity to reach the office on time. My 4-month-old son was left in the care of a 12-year-old caretaker throughout the day, which meant I couldn't return home to breastfeed him.

When my Director, Prem Kasaju, a kind and humble gentleman, learned about my situation, he helped me find a house in Maharajgunj, not far from my office. It was a single large room with a small kitchen and a separate bathroom, available at a reasonable rate. I was overjoyed and sincerely thanked him. A few months later, we brought our daughters to Kathmandu and admitted them to a nearby primary school. After a year, they were enrolled in the Laboratory School, which was considered one of the best at the time.

My first project at CERID was "Parents' and Students' Expectations from Higher Education." My background in Sociology helped me develop questionnaires, interview schedules, and observation tools for field research. During the planning phase, I requested the Deputy Director—who was overseeing the project—to replace one of the proposed sites (Pokhara, Butwal, Palpa, or Nepalgunj) with Biratnagar, as it was near Rajbiraj and I could receive family support there. However, he insisted on sticking to the original proposal, saying, "No one is privileged to choose their field site, and you are no exception."

Left with no choice, I had to manage everything on my own. My husband had just taken our daughters to Rajbiraj for their winter holidays, so I couldn't expect his help. I didn't want to share my difficulties with him, fearing he might urge me to quit my job. Nor did I want to approach the Director with a complaint, as it might reflect poorly on me as a female researcher. Instead, I approached the Deputy Research Officer, the project coordinator, and requested permission to bring my child and the caretaker along. He agreed without hesitation.

Taking a leap of faith, I embarked on the two-month fieldwork journey with my child and the caretaker, carrying all the necessary supplies. I was still in my one-year probationary period and couldn't afford to refuse the assignment, as it would risk my chances of securing a permanent position. Upon our return, the Director expressed concern about the additional expenses and advised me to apply for reimbursement. However, I didn't feel it was appropriate and chose not to claim them. I was simply relieved that everything had gone smoothly.

As a Research Assistant, my role was to support the project coordinator, who was responsible for writing the final report and received an additional 50% allowance for it. Noticing that I had strong writing skills, the Deputy Director asked me to assist in writing the report, and I gladly agreed. However, when I brought up the topic of receiving part of the allowance, he curtly responded, "Why do you need an allowance, being the daughter of a big Jamindar?" I was deeply shocked and hurt, as if I had asked for a personal favor rather than compensation for my work. I left his office with a heavy heart and kept the matter to myself. The fact that I was a single mother living on rent didn't seem to move him—but my father's wealth, not my hard work, was what he saw. That hurt the most.

During my tenure at CERID, I was involved in numerous projects—both in formal and non-formal education. These included evaluations of government, non-government, and international programs, baseline studies, action research, and development of post-literacy materials. As CERID was affiliated with the university, our primary focus was

on educational research from the primary to higher levels. Additionally, as a semi-government institution, we were obligated to undertake government-assigned projects.

Some of the major projects I coordinated as a sociologist included:

Educational Status of the Tharus
Action research on the Chepang community
Gender and Secondary Education
Education of Disadvantaged Populations

As the coordinator of the Educational Status of the Tharus project—my first in that role—I was ambitious and applied my sociological training rigorously. The sample included Tharu children from East to West Nepal, including school-goers, dropouts, and non-enrolled children, along with their parents. We studied school attendance, academic performance, and reasons for dropping out. Data collection tools included interviews, observations, and key informant interviews. Analyzing both qualitative and quantitative data was a demanding task. Surprisingly, the results showed a literacy rate higher than the national average. Some researchers suspected a sampling error, but in hindsight, we failed to consider that there were many other disadvantaged groups who had never attended school—making the Tharus comparatively more privileged.

The action research project on the Chepang community in Darechowk, near Kurintar, was a valuable experience. I lived among them as a participant observer and helped develop programs on food and nutrition, as well as sewing and tailoring. My background in Home Science proved particularly helpful in designing programs for women and children. We also introduced agricultural training for a forest-dwelling community that had never seen a sewing machine or owned land for farming. Their livelihood previously depended on collecting firewood and foraging for yams in the jungle.

Over the three-year project, significant changes took place. The community learned to cook nutritious meals, mend and stitch clothes, and grow vegetables in kitchen gardens. Many children enrolled in school, and the families began to integrate with the broader community. The project even received an international award.

Life at CERID was a continuous struggle—physically and emotionally—but it taught me invaluable lessons and provided tremendous learning opportunities. I was fortunate to receive a Ph.D. from a well-known university in Canada and gain international exposure. Managing small children while frequently relocating—as the office moved from Panipokhari to Lazimpat, then Tripureshwor, and finally Balkhu—was challenging, but also confidence-building.

I thoroughly enjoyed my work as a researcher at CERID. It helped me achieve my academic and professional goals. My colleagues were good friends, and the staff were supportive. CERID felt like home to me—the place where I began my career and from which I eventually retired after 32 years of university service.

Question 8: You completed your PhD in Sociology at the University of Alberta, Canada. How would you compare the education systems in India and Canada in terms of teaching methods, theoretical focus, student-teacher relationships, and research focus in Sociology?

Answer:

There was a long gap between my studies at BHU in the 1970s and at the University of Alberta (UofA) in the 1990s. During that time, the concept of sociology had changed dramatically, expanding to cover global issues. When I studied at BHU, teaching was mainly through lectures, with students listening and taking notes. The curriculum had not been revised for a long time, and the teachers rarely updated themselves. They mostly taught from old notes or used books as needed. Some delivered lectures, while others simply provided notes—whichever was easier for them. Students were silent learners; they listened, took notes, and supplemented their studies by consulting library books. No one dared to ask questions even if they didn't understand. Except for a few teachers, most were uncomfortable responding to questions, as if being questioned discouraged them.

There was only one classroom for all subjects, and students usually sat on the same benches and often in the same seats. We studied classical sociological theories from Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Durkheim, Max Weber, Talcott Parsons, P. Sorokin, and Karl Marx, among others. Research methodology focused mainly on quantitative data analysis, emphasizing calculations of mean, median, mode, chi-square, t-test, percentages, and the like, while qualitative research methodology received little attention. Data collection relied on large, close-ended questionnaires that could be mailed or distributed and collected later, covering at least 10–20% of the sample population. The research process was tiring and tedious, yielding only superficial insights without a real understanding of people, their behavior, and their lives—the essence of sociological study.

Studying at the University of Alberta, Canada, was a very different experience. Professors rarely lectured in class. On the first day, students were assigned individual tasks and given a week to prepare and present them. In addition, we had to write two papers by the end of the three-month semester: a long paper of about 20 pages and a shorter one of around 10 pages. We took three courses each semester, all focused on areas related to our Ph.D. proposals. The workload was heavy and often overwhelming. Besides extensive reading and writing, submitting papers in computer-printed format was challenging, especially without computer literacy. Classes took place in different rooms and sometimes different buildings, requiring students to rush from one class to another.

While the courses were prescribed, students were free to select books relevant to their study interests. Each student had a unique topic for class presentations, allowing us to gain knowledge across various fields and fostering a strong desire to learn more. Classes were student-led, with discussions, suggestions, and guidance coming mostly from the students themselves, while professors acted as passive listeners. Professors would conclude sessions with additional insights rather than direct critiques of the papers. These classes were engaging and highly informative—missing them would have been regrettable.

I took major courses in Third World Development, Education and Social Change, Contemporary Sociological Theories, Research Methodology, Capitalism and Development, Education and Curriculum, among others. I was also required to take an undergraduate Women's Studies course for my Ph.D., which involved a challenging exam. Unlike my earlier studies, sociology at UofA was not limited to old theories, conventional research methods, or isolated topics. It extended to the sociology of the global system, Marxist theories of imperialism, the impact of globalization on developing countries, modern and postmodern theories, liberal to radical feminist theories, queer theories, and more. We studied modern sociologists such as Rostow, Dahrendorf, Gramsci, and Schutz, as well as postmodern thinkers like Foucault, Giddens, Habermas, and Althusser.

Sociology focused on contemporary pressing issues emerging from the lived experiences of people and nations rather than on abstract theories developed by scholars in isolation. The study emphasized critical analysis rather than merely explaining and interpreting texts. During this time, we also encountered the lesbian, gay, and queer cultures prevalent in the developed world. Family life was noticeably affected by the rise of radical feminism. Looking back, studying at the University of Alberta was a deeply enriching experience.

Earning a Ph.D. in Canada was also challenging. I had to confront the director when I discovered my name was omitted from the list of candidates. He had not disclosed the requirement of the TOEFL exam as a prerequisite but had instead favored certain candidates. After a heated discussion involving other researchers, he agreed to allow all ineligible candidates a chance. I took the TOEFL exam and was fortunate to do so before others.

Living alone in a foreign country without my family was difficult, so I applied for visas to bring them. However, my application was initially denied, while other male students had no trouble bringing their families. Feeling this was discriminatory, I raised the issue with the Canadian counselor visiting UofA. He was convinced and immediately contacted the embassy, which then helped issue my husband's visa. My family joined me after a year, and I was able to complete my Ph.D. in three and a half years.

My two daughters completed their high schooling in Canada. They went on to do their undergrad in the U.S, studying first two years at a juniors college under the guidance of my husband's maternal uncle. Older daughter finished her Master's in Mechanical Engineering and younger daughter completed her Bachelor's degree in Software Engineering from RIT through scholarships and on campus jobs. My son, who was in grade nine at the time, returned with me to Nepal. After completing his SLC at RIBS, he joined Budhanilkantha School for A Levels, topping his batch and earning a full scholarship to Reed College, U.S. Later, he received a full scholarship to MIT and completed his MSc in Physics and Electrical Engineering at Boston University. All three now hold lucrative jobs in the U.S., which is a source of pride, though living a lonely life here in Nepal is not always easy.

Soon after returning to CERID, I had the opportunity to lead two major research projects: Gender and Secondary Education, and Education of Disadvantaged Populations. The first was conducted in 10 districts, collecting data from schools and examination centers, interviewing beneficiaries and key informants, and analyzing textbooks, curricula, and examination questions. The field data was analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Our recommendations included conducting comprehensive training programs for female teachers to increase their representation from 2% to 36%, and recruiting at least one female teacher in every primary school. Another notable achievement was the construction of separate toilets for female teachers and students, which had been lacking in every school. Following this research, I was assigned to analyze textbooks for grades seven through ten from a gender-sensitive perspective for the Secondary Education Development Project of the Ministry of Education. Gender training was provided to head teachers, teacher trainers, examination center officers, and other stakeholders to raise awareness of gender issues.

The other project, Education for Disadvantaged Populations, was conducted in 15 districts, where the most marginalized groups were identified. Recommendations were made to develop targeted programs to enroll these populations in schools and reduce dropout rates.

Question 9: You taught at the Central Department of Sociology and Anthropology for several years. What were your experiences while teaching and working with colleagues in the department?

Answer:

Teaching in the department was a new experience for me. Moving from working quietly in a cubicle at CERID on research projects to facing a large classroom of students was challenging at first. Initially, I was assigned to teach Social Change, a subject I had studied long ago at BHU. Unfortunately, I couldn't find enough books in the library to prepare, so I had to rely mostly on my knowledge of Sorokin's theory of social change. However, when I was

asked to give a lecture on gender to the final-year students, I found myself much more comfortable. I then requested the head of the department to change my course, and from that point onward, teaching became enjoyable. I looked forward to every class because the students were enthusiastic and eager to learn.

Guiding students gave me great satisfaction, especially when I could apply my research knowledge with those who worked hard. Some of their theses were so impressive that I wanted to keep them in the department library as examples. My colleagues in the department were very kind, and I always felt comfortable around them. Although there were many teachers, we rarely saw each other because we had separate class schedules. I taught six periods a week and mostly saw only those teachers who had classes at the same time. Teachers usually met each other during conferences or at SASON meetings, where sociology and anthropology faculty from various campuses gathered. These occasions were truly enjoyable and made me proud to be part of the academic community. It remains a memorable experience, especially when I see my students grow into experts in the field.

Entering the classroom with no prior teaching experience was difficult at first, but I found it rewarding to share my knowledge with students. I taught courses on Gender and Analysis of Society and Culture in Nepal, both of which were very interesting. The teaching methods I learned in Canada helped me make the classes more participatory and engaging. After an introductory lecture, students were divided into groups and given assignments to present in class. They could choose to present individually or as a group. After each presentation, there was a class discussion followed by a wrap-up where I provided explanations and additional notes.

When I first joined the department, the class size was manageable, with around a hundred students. In the second year, the number decreased as students specialized in their subjects. However, when the department was later required to enroll more than five hundred students to meet demand, the classes became overcrowded and teaching lost some of its appeal. After teaching in the department for ten years, I returned to CERID following my promotion to Professor. I had to renew my sabbatical to go back to the department, but I did not wish to do so. CERID was my first and last placement, which I left after taking early retirement two years later. Unknowingly, I had made history by becoming the first woman professor in Sociology when Prof. Kailash Pyakurel congratulated me with that title.

I had joined the Department of Sociology and Anthropology to gain teaching experience, which was also necessary for promotion. When Tribhuvan University (TU) made research and teaching interchangeable roles, researchers affiliated with departments had their positions converted to lecturer, associate professor, or professor. To secure promotion, they needed teaching experience. Since there was no separate quota for researchers, they had to compete for departmental quotas to advance. Without teaching experience and connections with departmental professors, promotion was unlikely. Therefore, I decided to teach at least one course. This was only possible with permission from the department head, dean, vice-chancellor, and the director of CERID. With their approval, I was granted the opportunity not only to teach a course but also to take a sabbatical.

Question 10: Social sciences are often the least preferred subjects in Nepal, and their importance is rarely acknowledged by political leaders and bureaucrats. What are your thoughts on the future of social sciences, particularly Anthropology and Sociology, in Nepal? What suggestions do you have for improving the status of social sciences in the country?

Answer:

Social sciences—including Economics, Political Science, History, Geography, and Philosophy—were once the major fields of study, largely due to the availability of teachers and resources. At that time, education was pursued primarily to secure employment in government service or teaching, regardless of the discipline. Subjects like Psychology, Sociology, and Anthropology emerged later, drawing interest for their practical and scientific approach. These fields encouraged independent learning and opened up diverse employment opportunities.

Today, priorities have shifted significantly. The rise of private institutions, which cater to contemporary demands, contrasts with government institutions that still rely on outdated curricula. Learning is no longer limited to job acquisition; it now includes academic advancement and research—particularly in the humanities and social sciences. As a result, it is imperative that the social sciences update their curricula and textbooks to reflect current realities. They must become more specialized and application-oriented rather than just degree-oriented.

Bright students now tend to favor science and technology because of the competitive job market and career prospects. Social sciences, unfortunately, have become a fallback option for students with fewer choices, diminishing their appeal and perceived value. Disciplines such as History and Political Science are nearing extinction in Nepal due to a lack of interest, while institutions like JNU, BHU, and Harvard continue to enjoy high reputations in these fields. Their success lies in the dedication of their faculty, who regularly revise curricula, focus on contemporary issues, and prioritize research and practical application.

If Nepali universities followed the models of these leading institutions—updating courses annually and aligning them with current global issues—there would be renewed interest and academic rigor in the social sciences. For this to happen, universities must function as purely academic institutions, free from political interference and bureaucratic control. The government's role should be

limited to providing infrastructure and financial support, not meddling in faculty recruitment or student admissions. Political involvement has led to a decline in the quality of education, as seen with Tribhuvan University (TU) and the broader Nepali education system. University professors must take this issue seriously if they hope to prevent a complete collapse.

Sociology and Anthropology, as relatively newer disciplines in Nepal, still hold strong appeal among students compared to other social sciences. These fields offer better employment prospects in academia and as consultants in NGOs and INGOs, where research skills are in demand. Moreover, these departments are making commendable efforts to revise and update their curricula frequently to stay relevant. To enhance their impact, all social sciences must prioritize research, innovation, and practical application to remain competitive and academically robust.

Question 11 : As a reader of the Dhaulagiri Journal of Sociology and Anthropology, what specific suggestions do you have for the Editorial Team? How can we continue to improve this journal, and which areas should we focus on to enhance the quality and visibility of the published papers?

Answer:

While I am not a regular reader of the journal, after reviewing a few volumes, I can confidently say that it is a valuable publication for students and researchers in the fields of Sociology and Anthropology. I regret not having followed all the issues more closely. The journal has made an excellent effort to cover a wide range of topics, making it highly beneficial for those seeking to deepen their knowledge in these areas.

One of the journal's most commendable strengths is its inclusion of contributions from international scholars working in their specialized fields, which enhances both its quality and global relevance. Another noteworthy initiative is its outreach through collaboration with Dhaulagiri Multiple Campus in Baglung. This partnership reflects the Central Department's commitment to strengthening the capacities of peripheral campuses, a strategy that deserves appreciation.

To further improve the journal, I suggest publishing Special Issues focused on specific themes or areas of concern. This would benefit scholars looking for comprehensive material in particular domains and would enhance the journal's academic value and readership appeal. I hope the journal continues to grow and serve as a reliable source of knowledge as long as the departments exist. I wish the editorial team continued success and longevity in their mission.

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