



# Influence of Hindu Religious Beliefs and Cultural Values on Non-Hindu/Indigenous Students in a School of Post-Secular Nepal

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper examines the influence of Hindu religious beliefs and cultural values on non-Hindu/Indigenous students through the institutionalization of particular rituals and festivals (the recitation of Saraswati Vandana and the celebrations of Saraswati Puja, Guru Puja, and Holi) within Nepal's public education system. Based on the critical ethnographic method in one of Kathmandu's oldest public schools, the study shows the Hindu rituals and festivals that are actively celebrated in school are taken as normative school culture in the post-secular context of Nepal. Applying Bourdieu's ideas of cultural reproduction and symbolic violence, the analysis reveals that the school legitimizes Hindu values as common while marginalizing non-Hindu and Indigenous students. Teachers, positioned as "gurus" under the Hindu notion of Guru Bhakti, reinforce hierarchical teacher-student relationships that discourage critical thought and promote values such as obedience and loyalty towards teachers. Such practices reproduce socio-cultural and religious hierarchies within the school, legitimizing Hindu dominance. Consequently, the school, supposed to be a secular and inclusive institution functions as a mechanism of subtle Hinduisation and symbolic violence against non-Hindu/Indigenous students. The study concludes that the school perpetuates privileging students from dominant religious and cultural groups and marginalizes diverse non-Hindu and Indigenous groups. Thus, there is an urgent need for educational reform that recognizes the religious and cultural diversity and promotes equity and inclusion of all students.*

**Keywords:** Hinduization, cultural reproduction, symbolic violence, secular, Indigenous

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## INTRODUCTION

There is a long history of Hinduization in Nepal. According to Ahuti (2014), the process started in three different places and at three different times: a) when Hindu Lichchhavis (c.200-879) overthrew the Kirat dynasty in the Bagmati valley; b) when Indian Hindu Vedic Aryans arrived in Nepal's west region in the 12th century; and c) when India influenced Nepal's Mithila region (eastern Terai). The process intensified during the Malla (1201-1769) and Shah (1743-2008) dynasties. Prithvi Narayan Shah's (1769-1775) campaign of territorial unification integrated diverse religio-Indigenous groups under a single nationality (Poudyal, 2013). He made it quite evident that he intended to turn Nepal into a Hindu state when he declared the newly formed Kingdom of Nepal to be *Asali Hindustan*, or the "true land of the Hindus" (Gellner, 1997; Gellner & Letizia, 2019). The image of a homogenous Nepali Hindu society was constructed by the Muluki Ain of 1854, the first legal code promulgated in the autocratic Rana administration, which placed the Indigenous groupings of Nepal under a caste hierarchy (Hangen & Lawoti, 2013). The Kings of the Panchayat system (1962-1990) established *Ekmatra Hindu Rajya*, the only Hindu state in the world (Gellner & Letizia, 2019). The state backed "the Hindu religion, the Hindu monarchy, the Nepali language, and hill Hindu culture" (Hangen & Lawoti, 2013, p.14). The catchphrase "one language, one religion, one dress, and one country" (*ek bhasa, ek dharma, ek bhash, and ek desh*) became well-known for fostering Nepali nationalism. As a result, Nepali culture and Hindu culture were compared. These were the methods used by the state's previous rulers to Hinduize the socio-cultural and religious lifeways of multiple Indigenous groups. The various non-Hindu Indigenous groups were subjected to ongoing acculturation, which involved interaction with and exposure to the prevalent Hindu religious and cultural practices (Gaenszle, 2000; Russell, 1997; Gaige, 2009).

Modern education played a crucial role in expanding Hindu religious beliefs and culture, thereby actively excluding the histories and cultures of multiple Indigenous groups of Nepal. The Shah period (1768-1846) is thought to represent educational neglect (Bhatt, 2007). The autocratic Rana regime (1846-1951) is described as the dark ages because the Rana rulers were unwilling to educate the general public through modern schools, except for a few instances such as Dev Shamsheer's attempt to open *Bhasa Pathshalas* (Khas/Nepali language schools) for upper-caste groups and Chandra Shamsheer's introduction of *Shrestha Pathshalas* (book/record-keeping schools) (Parajuli & Onta, 2021). However, few Sanskrit schools were supported to uphold traditional Hindu beliefs and the sacred Sanskrit language (Joshi, 1989-90; Parajuli & Onta, 2021). Education during the dictatorial Panchayat administration (1962-1990) further contributed to expedite the influence of Hindu religious beliefs and culture. The first commission, Nepal National Education Planning Commission (1956), recommended Nepali as the only language of teaching in school thereby completely restricting other Indigenous languages (Pandey, K.C., & Wood, 1956). Nepali, as the language of instruction, played a key role in encoding and transmitting Hindu religious beliefs and cultural values (Maffi, 2005). Furthermore, the majority of high-caste Hindu authors of Nepali school textbooks omitted the histories and cultures of the country's numerous Indigenous

groups (Hangen & Lawoti, 2013). History textbooks written in Nepali portrayed the heroic exploits and nationalistic traits of upper-caste Hindu warriors (Onta, 2009).

Education served as a powerful tool for maintaining social control and legitimizing the status and authority of the Hindu state elites (Fuller, 1991). The state was declared a Hindu monarchy in the 1962 Constitution (Bhandari, 2017). For materializing the constitutional spirit, the National Education System Plan of 1971 introduced “a curriculum to be used throughout Nepal” to “promote the hegemony of the Hindu nation-state and its rule by members of Hindu elite families” (Skinner & Holland, 2009, p. 307). Through the national curriculums and textbooks written in Nepali, schoolchildren of diverse Indigenous groups with multiple languages were compelled to study Hindu folklore, stories about Hindu gods and epics, rituals, and festivals (Skinner & Holland, 2009). The universal primary education was the most successful means to introduce Nepali language and Hindu culture (Poudyal, 2013). The celebration Hindu festivals such as *Saraswati Pooja* (worshipping of Hindu goddess of knowledge) and the performance of national songs (Onta, 2009) were intended to evoke Hindu religious beliefs, reinforce cultural values, and promote a sense of national unity. Informal education deeply rooted in age-old cultural practices of diverse Indigenous groups have received no attention.

Notwithstanding the declaration of the Hindu state and Nepali as the official language, the 1990 Constitution of Nepal acknowledged Nepal as a multicultural, multireligious, and multilingual nation (Bhattachan, 2009). According to Carney and Bista (2021), the High-Level National Education Commission (1998) made a strong recommendation for the preservation of diverse national languages, cultures, literatures, arts, and heritages. The 2015 Constitution defines the state as secular, meaning that all religions and cultures are to be respected and preserved (Government of Nepal, 2015). The Constitution also ensures the right to local management and operation of formal education. Numerous religious schools (*Gurukul*, *Gumba*, and *Madarsa*) exist to preserve and propagate major religions (Hindu, Buddhha, and Islam); however, the constitution fails to clarify how the spirit of secularism should be translated into an educational system (Bhandari, 2017). Nonetheless, the research has not focused as much on how public schools continue to legitimize the hegemony of Hindu religious beliefs and cultural values over non-Hindu students within the framework of the secular state.

This paper explores the legacy of Hindu religious and cultural dominance in school. More specifically, it examines how the school institutionalize the belief of the school as temple of knowledge, teacher as *Guru*, and culture of harmony and cohesion, taking the case of a specific school in the Kathmandu Metropolitan area within the context of the clearly defined landscapes of mass schooling circulated from the West. These landscapes include uniform and centralized education systems, heavily structured and standardized curriculums, textbooks, teacher-centric pedagogies, time-bound and rigid assessments, and Nepali or English as the medium of instruction (Valentin, 2011; Madsen & Carney, 2011; Luitel, 2009). We argue that the school is a legitimate structure of indoctrinating Hindu religious beliefs and cultural values on students from non/Hindu Indigenous groups. The research explores

how dominant cultures establish supremacy in schools thereby creating non-physical cultural violence. For this, we apply symbolic violence and cultural reproduction, Pierre Bourdieu's concepts (Bourdieu, 1973), as analytic tools.

For this paper, we used critical ethnography as a method of inquiry, which allowed me to understand the structural injustice (Madison, 2020) faced by Indigenous students. We chose one of the oldest schools founded during the Rana dynasty and located in the heart of the Kathmandu Metropolitan area. The primary participants were chosen from among students from various religious and cultural backgrounds and teachers, including the head teacher, who represented the majority of upper-caste Hindu groups. We maintained diversity when conducting the open interviews (Brewer, 2000; Murchison, 2010) with ten teachers and twenty students. In addition, informal observation remained a crucial method for gaining access to non-discursive information within the educational setting (Murchison, 2010). Fieldwork for this study was conducted throughout the year 2022, during which we spent time intermittently at the school observing classes, attending events, and conducting interviews with teachers and students. We attended the three largest Hindu festivals (*Saraswati Puja*, *Guru Purnima*, *Holi*) celebrated at school at different times. We maintained recordings of interviews, wrote field memos, and took photographs, all of which were later translated into detail transcription (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). The school's website and Facebook page were utilised to gain an understanding of school events. Key ethical principles, including informed consent and the confidentiality of research participants, were carefully maintained throughout the study (Flick, 2018).

## THE SCHOOL CONTEXT

The school is situated in the heart of Kathmandu Metropolitan City, the capital city of Nepal. It was founded in 1948 during the dictatorial Rana dynasty and named Padma Kanya Vidyashram Secondary School, in the name of Padma Samsher, the Rana Prime Minister, making it one of Kathmandu's first schools exclusively for female students to study Sanskrit. *Kanya* is an unmarried girl, and *Vidyashram* is derived from *Vidhya* (all forms of knowledge, wisdom, and education) and *Ashram* (hermitage or place of spiritual endeavor or learning). The school's name invokes images of Hinduism and Hindu culture. Numerous schools in Nepal are named after former autocrats as well as Hindu religious and cultural concepts. This is due to the autocratic Rana rulers' desire to use schools to spread Hinduism and its culture (Joshi, 1989–90).

The school provides service to the students from multiple religions (such as Hindu, Kirat, Buddhism, and Bon), particularly the migrants from different parts of the country. Many of them are domestic workers, and many come from immigrant families that are considered to be economically underprivileged and 'uneducated' and come from rural areas. Wealthy local families who live close to the school send their kids to private schools. From early childhood development (ECD) through grade XII, there were about 763 female students, 73 teachers, and 61 support staff members in 2022. The overwhelming majority of

teachers and non-teaching staff were from Hindu religions, and very few were from non-Hindu religions.

The school has contributed to providing need-based education for the students with significant achievements. The school has alumni of thousands of graduates. The display of medals, trophies, and certificates in the offices of the head teacher and staff illustrates the school's dedication to fostering extracurricular activities that support students' holistic development. The achievement reflects the school's constant efforts to meet society's expectations and adapt to international educational standards. While Nepali remains the primary language of instruction, English has recently been implemented as an optional medium of teaching to meet community expectations and adapt to global trends. In addition to the diploma-level civil engineering program, the school offers elective courses in arts, management, and education for grades XI and XII. For grades IX and X, the school recently added a beautician course.

The school constructed in the 508.72 sq. meter is well-equipped with modern facilities, including a playground, cafeteria, computer lab, conference hall, parking area, library, multimedia resources, and science lab, to mention a few. Additional initiatives include the Scout club, Junior Red Cross Society, nursing and first aid facilities, and an eco-club for kids. The head teacher's room is decorated with pictures of previous head teachers as well as *Saraswati*, the Hindu goddess of wisdom and knowledge. Just beyond the entryway, there's a small *Saraswati* temple, enclosed by a fence with a small gate. According to the Nepali calendar, the goddess *Saraswati* is honored on *Shree Panchami*, which falls in January.

### **Institutionalization of School as Temple of Knowledge**

The daily recitation of *Saraswati Vandana* in school illustrates the institutionalization of Hindu religious traditions while marginalizing Indigenous and non-Hindu students by portraying Hindu customs as common to all. We observed *Saraswati Vandana* (Hindu prayer to Goddess Saraswati) printed on the first page of a school diary (every student has to buy it to record their assignments). The purpose is for the students to learn its lines by heart because they must recite it in the assembly period every day. We observed the students reciting *Saraswati Vandana* and national anthem. We noticed that all the teachers and students from non-Hindu communities accept it as of their common culture. For example, in an informal conversation in a group of teachers and students, they agreed on the idea of a teacher. The teacher noted, "It is our culture. All the teachers and students are happy to recite *Saraswati Vandana* as they become fresh and enter the class". One non-Hindu Indigenous student shared, "we are all required to recite *Saraswati Vandana* during the school assembly". Like in other parts of Nepal, regardless of their Indigenous or religious background, teachers and students generally believe that the school is the temple of knowledge (Madsen & Carney, 2011). This was a legacy enforced in the past to promote Hindu religion and culture via schools. Under the Panchayat regime, national anthems and songs were substituted for this tradition to create a sense of national cohesion (Onta, 2009). This reflects that *Saraswati*



*Vandana* acts as a doxa, the beliefs, values, and assumptions deeply accepted as natural and unquestionable (Bourdieu, 1973), that Hindu religious capital, forcing non-Hindu Indigenous students to accept as of their own culture.

By worshipping *Saraswati* on *Shree Panchami*, also known as *Basanta Panchami* (19 January of each year), in school, Hindu religious practice is presented as the starting point for learning of children. Every year, the school promotes free admission for students in Early Childhood Development (ECD) through Grade V. School also notifies the parents via a Facebook page and other electronic media about the free admission on this occasion to attract students and parents to take the opportunity. The *Shree Panchami*, referred to as the “initiation of letter learning” program, *Aksharambha* enables children from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds to enroll in school and begin writing their initial alphabetic letters. It is believed that the children can learn easily and faster when they start learning on the day. In line with Hindu communities in Nepal, the school has embraced the custom of having children visit *Saraswati* temple to write and read their first letter after their birth (Jha, 2020). The day, *Shree Panchami*, is thought to be the ideal day to begin learning new things. The school authorizes this Hindu belief as a gateway to schooling.

The school’s celebration of *Saraswati Puja*, or the worship of *Saraswati*, which brings together teachers and students in a lively and well-planned ceremony to honour the goddess *Saraswati* through devotion, decoration, and ritual offerings, reflects the profound cultural reverence for knowledge and learning. We observed that *Saraswati* temple, situated within the school ground, is adorned with vibrant papers, vibrant garments and materials, and garlands of flowers. After taking an early morning bath, the teachers and students arrive at the school bearing offerings such as flowers, candies, fruits, incense sticks, *tika* (a concoction of rice, crimson vermilion, and yogurt), etc. They worship the goddess *Saraswati* more assiduously and respectfully. The phenomenon of worshipping *Saraswati* is confirmed by what a student from non-Hindu Indigenous background shared:

On the day of *Saraswati Puja*, the temple is decorated with garlands of flowers. All are happy. All are in amusement. We worship and offer sweets and flowers to the *Saraswati Mata* (mother), the statue inside the temple. We ask for a blessing of wisdom and knowledge. We ask for the strength to be dedicated in studying. We ask for our progress. We also get blessed by our teacher. We receive *tika* from the head/teachers. We worship books and other learning materials at home.

Though there was no Brahman priest attended but we felt that it was a reproduction of how “the Brahmin/holy priest performs *Puja* in the community, chanting the Sanskrit *shlokas* from the sacred texts and offering water-soaked rice, fruits, flowers, grass blades, etc.” (Jha, 2020, p. 36). However, the school’s celebration of *Saraswati Puja* is a manifestation of the Hindu community’s sacred ritual of respecting knowledge and learning.

The *Saraswati Puja* celebrated at the school not only upholds Hindu religious tradition and hierarchical teacher-student relationships but also subtly promotes caste-based hierarchies and marginalizes non-Hindu Indigenous students in a system of education as

structural inequality. On this auspicious occasion, in the community, children receive *tika* on their foreheads and blessings from the elders, which is clearly reflected in the school. A teacher noted:

We worship *Saraswati Mata* (mother) on the day. It is difficult for all students to receive *tika* from each of the teachers. Thus, they and we all receive *tika* and blessings from the head teacher (Madam) and assistant head teachers.

The custom of receiving *tika* and *prasad* (an offering to the god that is shared by devotees after worship) from Pandit/Brahman priests appears to have taken on form in local customs (Jha, 2020). The students treated the head teachers and teachers with dignity and respect. It was clear that *Saraswati Puja*, the school's major event, played a significant role in instilling Hindu religious beliefs and values in students who are non/Hindu. Furthermore, the students were indoctrinated with the values of the hierarchical practices between teacher-professionals and students. The customs of other non-Hindu Indigenous groups were clearly silenced. The ongoing exclusion of specific student categories can be attributed to "structural barriers in a school system underpinned by historically constructed privileges to formal education" (Valentin, 2011, p. 100). The educators, including head teachers, belonged to high-caste Hindu groups, which led them to justify and tolerate the marginalization of children from other backgrounds.

### Inculcating Hindu Belief of *Guru*

The celebration of *Guru Puja* (Teachers' Day) at school on July 25 serves as a cultural and educational tradition that reinforces the deep-rooted respect students have for teachers and reflects the Hindu value of honouring *Gurus*, the teachers. On that day, we observed that the students arrive bearing gifts for the teachers and items of worship, such as crimson vermillion, a bunch of flowers, garlands, and *Khada* (which is a piece of ready-made cloth used in place of a garland), chocolates, candies, cakes, etc. As soon as they enter in the school ground, they begin exchanging wishes, 'happy *Guru Puja*'. Everyone appears to be joyful. Following the ceremonial assembly, the children go into their individual classrooms and work together to get ready for the day's celebration in each one. Each teacher enters the classroom one at a time and takes a seat in the front chair. The event takes three or four hours to complete. A teacher shares his experiences with the school's *Guru Puja*:

Each student worships us. We (teachers) receive *tika* from the students, and they also receive *tika* from us. They give us sweets, and some of them hand us small gifts. Some of them offer cards wishing us a happy Teachers' Day. We bless each of them for doing their best in the future. The students miss those who are favorites for them if they do not enter their classes. It will be difficult for us to make rounds in each class.

Chameli (a girl student from the Kirat Indigenous group): Every year, we receive *tika* from teachers. They love us and offer us knowledge. What can we give them? Just on the day of *Guru Purnima*, we express our respect and honor to them. We become joyful that day as we feel blessed by all the sirs and madams.

Each student is blessed by the teachers to be knowledgeable and well-behaved. They are thought of as *Gurus* and are revered. The day's blessings from the *Gurus* are thought to be transformed into reality. The teachers explain the significance of the *Guru Purnima*, appropriating concepts from Hindu epics. Thus, the celebration of *Guru Puja* not only honours the teachers as guiding figures of wisdom and virtue but also reproduces the Hindu values of respecting teachers as the only sources of knowledge and wisdom.

Rooted in Hindu epics and traditions, *Guru Puja* embodies the legacy of reverence for gurus—intellectual guides—who are believed to possess the power to transform their disciples' lives through knowledge, devotion, and moral guidance. The Hindu epics state that *Vyasa*, also known as *Ved Vyasa*, was the chief among the *Rishis* (*Gurus*). The *Gurus* are the source of knowledge and, as such, serve as mentors for their disciples or students. It is believed that the *Gurus* can transform the lives of disciples. There is a claim that *Ekalavya's* mastery of archery stemmed from the influence of *Dronacharya*, the *Guru*. *Ekalavya* showed deep devotion to his guru by cutting off his right thumb and offering it as a sign of respect and sacrifice. Students' attitudes about teachers are influenced by these views. The teachers are regarded as *Gurus* who would “preserve heritage” and “transform irrational beliefs” (Madsen & Carney, 2011, p. 122). Thus, the practice of honoring teachers as gurus reflects a deep Hindu belief in their role as preservers of wisdom and catalysts for education.

The students remain passive, silent, and obedient listener of teachers due to the belief that the *Guru* is the sole source of knowledge. For example, we observed that the students, both inside and outside the classrooms of the school were all loyal to the head/teachers. They respected, obeyed, and supported their teachers with sincerity and commitment. This may be attributed to the Hindu belief that a guru is one to whom disciples offer complete obedience, surrendering themselves entirely at the guru's feet and dedicating their energy and skills in service—an expression known as '*Guru Bhakti*' (Rigopoulos, 2022, p. 5). The notion of 'unconditional obedience' and 'loyalty' (Rigopoulos, 2022, p. 6) implanted in the minds of the students is a sort of violence that prevents students to share their critical views. In this sense, Hindu belief of *Guru* reflects the belief that teachers are perceived as omnipotent figures endowed with various supernatural powers.

In Hindu belief, the *Guru*, as a spiritual guide or manifestation of the divine, and leads disciples (*śiṣya*) toward *mokṣa*, the ultimate emancipation. According to Mlecko (1982), the Hindu texts (*Vedic*, *Upanisadic*, *Manu*, *Puranas*, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Tantras*, and *Bhakti Tradition*) emphasize the conceptions and beliefs of the *Guru* as a spiritual master, divine, deity, *Brahman*, and God for disciples. This demonstrates how the *Guru* is regarded by Hinduism as the unquestionable and undeniable knower of *Brahma*, ultimate reality. The role of *Sisya*/disciples as a devotee, *Bhakta*, fully submissive, reverent and humbling servant, follower, guide, and pathfinder, to name a few. Students are prone to accept these teacher/guru beliefs without questioning promoting the hierarchical relationships between teachers and students in the school.



## Holi as a Symbol of Joy, Unity, and Hindu Cultural Expression

The *Fagu* or *Holi* celebration on the day of *Fagu Purnima*, at the school reflects how it integrates the Hindu religious tradition of promoting joy, love and affection, bonding, spring, and respect for each other. It is a celebration of color and is observed on the last full moon day of the Hindu lunisolar calendar month, which often falls in late February or early March. At the broader societal level, about a week ago, people, especially young people and kids, began celebrating by hurling water balloons at one another inside their circle of friends and family. The state proclaims a national holiday for the Hill people on one day and for the Terai people the next day. *Holi* is also observed in the school. A teacher noted, “The students engage in playful activities, chasing each other around the playground while dousing one another with water and various colored powders.” He added:

The students enjoy smearing a mixture of multiple colors, including vermillion, on each other’s faces and other body parts. Some of them use colored water, and some throw water balloons at others. We let them enjoy the festival, but we advise them to be sensitive and not do immoral things.

Teachers also participate by exchanging *tikas* with various colors and wishes. This is another Hindu tradition that is widely accepted in society and is hence taught in schools. Hindus celebrate *Holi* as a joyful time to forgive others and forget past mistakes. The festival is linked to the Hindu god Krishna, who is said to have started *Holi* by joyfully playing and dancing with girls who admired him (Jha, 2020). Another myth among Hindus holds that *Holika*, the sister of *Hiranyakashipu* who possesses the ability to control fire, tried to kill *Prahlad*, the son of the demon *Hiranyakashipu*, but Lord Krishna, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, saved *Prahlad* when she entered the flaming pyre and held *Prahlad* in her lap (Dhoju, 2015; Jha, 2020). Thus, *Holi* imparts significant values to students through Hindu traditions. It fosters forgiveness, joy, and moral courage, while exemplifying the triumph of good over evil. Additionally, the festival enables students to appreciate Hindu culture and encourages unity, community, and social harmony.

## Reproduction of Hindu Cultural Capital and Symbolic Domination

The school has formally reproduced the dominant Hindu religious beliefs and culture in the society in school setting where students from all non/Hindu backgrounds engage in learning despite the greater dominance of Western culture. Other diverse non-Hindu Indigenous peoples’ religious beliefs and cultures are being valued less. The school as a structure has forced to contact and engage with these dominant religious and cultural practices, thereby making appear as the standard for morality and education. The school is a valid setting in which the ongoing reproduction of the Hinduization process takes place. Non-Hindu students are the passive recipients of these prevailing dominant religion and culture. The phenomenon has evolved into a “habitus” formed by the Hindu cultural capital (Thieme, 2006, p. 45). Students who possess a habitus that most closely aligns with the structural dispositions and values that the school aims to legitimize are more likely to be open to engaging in specific cultural practices that are not part of their original culture

(Bourdieu, 1973). The capital of school norms and regulations dictates how non-Hindu students participate in learning of Hindu religious beliefs and culture. These capitals serve as symbolic credentials that compel non-Hindu students to participate in Hindu cultural customs (Thomson, 2008). The school's policies and practices, which play an essential role in preserving Hindu religious beliefs and culture are silently accepted by all the students without any response.

Arguably, the non/Hindu students are facing subtle and invisible form of coercion that maintain hierarchies and power relations, making them to accept the dominant Hindu religious beliefs and culture as legitimate or natural (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 30). It is now common to all students and teachers to be unaware of such injustice created by exclusionary school structure (systems, values, policies, and practices). Through implicit agreement, the school has legitimized inequity for non-Hindu students in the face of its core values of supporting social justice, equality, and non-discrimination. However, the school values the religious, cultural, and linguistic preferences of the students from high-caste Hindu backgrounds, giving them an invisible advantage (Bourdieu, 1984). It now serves as a setting for the systematic misrecognition of diverse religious and cultural values (Grenfell & James, 2005).

The public school, supposed as the space of teaching to promote morality and human values, equality, harmony and cohesion in the society, is perpetuating inequality, prejudice, and discrimination misrecognizing (Durey, 2015) the religious diversity. The social inequality is reproduced providing advantages to the students of Hindu religious backgrounds as the beliefs and values are aligned with the school (Bourdieu, 1998). The existing religious power disparities and social hierarchies have been maintained and normalised by the school. It displays Hinduism as superior while also systematically encouraging the acceptance of inequity and prejudice against religious minorities. Therefore, a public school in an urban setting, which serves as a microcosm of a broader community with a range of cultures, languages, and religions, is a legitimate context in which it has been sustaining dominant religion by causing students to unknowingly adopt the Hindu beliefs and cultural values.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper, we argue that the public school serves as a legitimate structure of inculcating dominant Hindu religious beliefs and cultural values on non-Hindu and Indigenous students. This study shows that the particular Hindu rituals and festivals are deeply ingrained in Nepal's educational system. These rituals and festivals have been institutionalized in school to promote a belief of school as a 'temple of knowledge'. The rituals like the daily recitation of *Saraswati Vandana* and the celebration of *Holi*, *Guru Puja*, and *Saraswati Puja* demonstrate how school serves as a place of cultural reproduction. The school has institutionalized such rituals and festivals, thereby normalizing Hindu religious beliefs and cultural values as common and acceptable for all. By giving preference to students from high-caste, Hindu families and marginalizing Indigenous and non-Hindu students,

the school perpetuates systemic inequality. It is a form of symbolic violence when Hindu rituals and festivals are accepted without question as part of the common culture. These forces non-Hindu and Indigenous students to internalize and engage in dominant practices that are not consistent with their own religious and identities. Teachers, who are viewed as “gurus,” reinforce hierarchical teacher-student relationships based on the Hindu concept of *Guru Bhakti*, thereby discouraging critical thinking and promoting obedience and loyalty to teachers. Instead of replicating a single dominating religious beliefs and cultural values, schools must acknowledge and value Nepal’s religious and cultural diversity in order to create a fairer education system in post-secular Nepal.

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