

Socio-Cultural Dynamics of Pre-School Education in Nepal

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Abstract

The article 'Socio-Cultural Dynamics of Pre-School Education in Nepal,' explores the increasing trend of the Early Childhood Education (ECE) system in Kathmandu Valley, which is shaping the perspective of people on education, and in turn, the ways people's attitude is reshaping this emerging ECE trend. The gradual breakdown of the conventional education approach and adoption of new system is in the liminal stage. Unplanned introduction of such education borrowed from different cultural contexts seems to generate a complex, and sometimes conflicting response from society. The fieldwork of this paper was carried out at Ravibhawan of Kathmandu Metropolitan City. Two Montessori-based pre-schools from the Ravibhawan area were chosen for this purpose. It follows the anthropological inquiry with descriptive and exploratory approach. Participant observation and the narratives of the informants constitute the basis of primary information. Both key informant interviews, and informal discussions are employed to explore the emic perspectives of the concerned. Government documents and other relevant literatures are the source of secondary information. Purposive sampling is the main basis of informant selection.

This paper finds that there is a complicated and much-embedded relationship between pre-schooling, and the existing socio-cultural contexts of the communities. Several factors including the notion of family, gender roles, economic and social status, and the increasing global connectivity seem to be in complex interaction to influence the final choice of the parents. This study is a contribution towards the anthropology of pre-school education in Nepal. Despite the increasing importance of pre-school education, and its increasing trend in Nepal, anthropologists seem to be less interested in exploring this field.

Keywords: early childhood education, pre-school, Montessori, culture, parenting

Introduction

Nepalese education system is rapidly expanding, and striving to reach out to more population. The realization of the importance of quality education amongst people, and the subsequent increment of educational institutions of different modalities

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can be seen. Early childhood education is increasingly being popular amongst urban societies like Kathmandu valley. The pre-schools providing early childhood education seem to have recognized the need for partnership and collaborations with parents, which to some extent, has also contributed to change the perception of how knowledge should be provided. Many people believe that the pre-school students are well trained, active in extra curriculum activities, disciplined and confident. However, there are various concerns on the impact of these market driven foreign education concepts and methods in socio-cultural and economic domains of people's lives.

In the context of Nepal, Pre-school education came into existence only after the early 1950s era. Since then the education system has seen various changes and modifications. According to the Department of Education (2016), it is estimated that 34,335 Montessori schools are running throughout the country (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

The objective of education is to facilitate changes in behavior, language, social values, and culture. Education broadens the horizon of the existing knowledge base of children, and helps to question the prevalent knowledge systems, cultural values and norms. This brings about production and reproduction of cultural systems. Reproduction due to '*aru kodekhasikhi*' (i.e. imitating others) is also significant in children's new surroundings. The cycle of reproduction is always dynamic, always in transition, and construction of new ones and deconstruction of the older ones is a gradual process in the society. Thus, it is impossible to think about a static and unchanging culture. I have explored why the notion of pre-school education has been changing, along with the subsequent increase in the number of early childhood educational institutions.

This paper is significant in bringing out the less discussed cultural connection of education system in Nepal. Bhatta (2009) cites G. Hilliard and states that 'the use of culture in education can be a vehicle of either liberation or oppression.' Despite such a linkage of cultural values for determining what kind of education is necessary in a community, only a few studies have been carried out in Nepal to explore and discuss the socio-cultural domain of education. Besides the existing studies on education, anthropologists seem less interested in anthropological exploring of the day-to-day experiences of parents and the education providers in Nepal.

The primary purpose of this paper is to explore the transformation of early childhood education, which is shaping the perspectives of the people on education, and in turn, the ways people's perspectives are reshaping this emerging ECE trend. The primary objective of this study is to explore the trajectories of emerging pre-school education system in urban area of Nepal. I want to analyze the factors behind parents sending their children to pre-school, and analyze why pre-school education system has been an agent of social change in Kathmandu valley.

The specific objectives are to analyze and understand the various socio-cultural, and economic factors and trajectories of early childhood education system in Kathmandu Valley, and to understand the changing notions of family, gender roles of parenthood through pre-school culture.

Methodology

The fieldwork of this study was carried out at Ravibhawan, Ward Number 14, of Kathmandu Metropolitan City. Two Montessori-based pre-schools educating students from a diverse background - located within the Ravibhawan area were chosen for this study.

I am very close to my niece. I love to spend time playing with her. As she is enrolled in a pre-school, I often get a chance to visit her school, interact with her teachers, and observe her doing different activities. This also aroused my curiosity to explore pre-school education, and my niece became the first subject for observation and study. Hence, my research design is descriptive, comparative as well as explorative, to study the reasons of sending kids to pre-schools. I have described their social backgrounds in terms of class, caste, and gender. I met the informants through the snowball method.

This study has encompassed the techniques of anthropological inquiry, and has tried to bring out emic perspectives through the narrations and observations. Mostly, I have focused on the narration of parents and teachers relating their experience of pre-schooling captured by both the key informant interviews and normal discussions. Similarly, textual source included the review of government documents and other relevant literatures. I have tried to critically examine my questions, and maintain the diversity amongst my informants, selecting based on gender, class, caste, and education levels. The diversity was also maintained with the cross-sectional selection of parents, grandparents, teachers and children, from diverse cultural backgrounds. Bodily expressions, and other non-verbal gestures of the informants during the conversations and the interviews also helped me to contextualize this study in the particular socio-cultural space. It assisted in ensuring more inclusion, keeping in mind the operational concept of validity and reliability.

One Facet of Education in Nepal

Lyricist Aavash and music composer Ramesh have created a beautiful song that expresses the sentiments of the children living in rural areas where access to education is difficult. Here is a Nepali song depicting the plight of kids from mountains, who are unable to attend school:

leka ka hami keta keti kuhiro vitra school chha,

chaurilai charaudai din bitchha padhnu ra lekhnu muskil chha.

(We are the kids from the high mountains, our school is submerged in the fog,

We pass our days grazing yaks, and it is not easy to go to study.)

hiunma koreko akchhyar ta ekchinma bilai jaijanacha,

dinvari hernucha gaibastu nahere bhalule khaijanacha.

(The letters written on the snow melts away quickly,

We need to tend our cattle through the day, or else the bears have them all.)

nagima udeko dhuwa ta badal banna jai janchha,

badal ko akshar akash ma dekhera yo man kalpanchha.

(The smoke arising from the rooftops move to become clouds,

And seeing the letters formed in the clouds, the mind imagines.)

kalam le lekhne man thiyo hiunle po aula khaidiyo,

kuiroma lukeko school le tadai basera chiyayo.

(We had desire to write with a pen, but the snow consumed our hands,

The school was peeping from far, hidden inside the fog.)

This song symbolically captures the situation of primary education in Nepal, depicting the hardships of many children who are not privileged to attend schools regularly. The value of quality education is understood by almost all, but what percent of children actually has easy access to quality education in Nepal. The Right to Education (Constitution of Nepal 2015, Article 31) allows everyone despite their caste, creed, culture, age, and gender to have access to basic education. There is a visible difference among education in urban and rural areas, and the differential needs of different cultures, groups and geographies seem to be ignored by the present education system in Nepal.

Results and Discussion

Early childhood education has recently become a part of the discussion in national education policy. The government of Nepal has made pre-primary and primary education free aiming to provide basic education for all. However, systematic accessibility for all the population cannot be seen, rather mushrooming private sector-led, and urban-focused pre-schools have dominated the ECE in Nepal (School Sector Development Plan, 2016).

The transformation of the global phenomena of pre-schooling into the local level has brought several conducive and conflicting socio-cultural changes in society. Nowadays, priorities and motivations differ from people to people in sending their children to pre-schools. This study finds the increasing trend of sending young children to early education, which has also impacted some of the facets of ongoing socio-cultural and economic changes in the society. During my fieldwork, a housewife shared her story, *'Ke garnu hami ta Montessori padhauna sakdainau, tara sabaile pathaunchaan, saki nasaki pathaunai paryo ni alik sasto ma vayepani.'* (Everybody is sending their kids to Montessori. We cannot afford it, but are compelled to follow the trend, albeit choosing a cheaper school). This is the story of many low-income parents that I have interviewed.

There is a complicated and much-embedded relationship between pre-schooling and the existing socio-cultural contexts of the communities. Several factors seem to be in complex interaction to influence the final choice of the parents. The peer pressure to maintain social status in the neighborhood also seems to have a substantial impact on the choice of parents. One of the parents shared his story, *'hernus bahini aba yo ta fashion jastai vako cha, montessori napathaune manchhe ta aba kahi pani hudaina hola, sarkari vanda ta ramro pani chha ni'* (these days there are hardly any people who do not send their child to Montessori. It has become a fashion. But overall, it is also better than the government schools). This acceptance of private pre-schools by society reminds us of Gramsci's (1971) views on cultural hegemony. The changing values of the ruling class are changing the way we perceive education in Nepal. The new system of preschools has utilized - market forces, political influence, and consent from civil society - to establish itself as a dominant culture reflecting the socio-economic condition and values of the ruling class. As time passes, ruling class's new values are slowly inculcated as the common values of the mass, and are taken for granted. This is evident in how the government-funded education system is run, and also the increasing popularity of privately run education system. The major findings are summarized in the following themes.

Preference of Pre-Schools in Nepal

Pre-schools have become a new culture in Nepali society. The globalization of educational trend has seemed to impact Nepali academic demand and its subsequent supply. Having an open economy gives access to all the worldwide nations to introduce various products and services to the global market, often affecting that nation's socio-cultural index. Although, globalization has a different meaning in different contexts, anthropologists have emphasized more on 'globalization as culture flows' (Edelman & Haugerud, 2004, 3). It has not only contributed towards change in education models,

but also brought about various unintended consequences. For instance, it has brought some change in our existing social and cultural norms on how we conceptualize education. In this line, Upadhaya (1997, 68-69), says, “Wealth alone does not confer social statuses, but that ‘social status can be acquired with wealth by giving a large dowry in the marriage of daughter, and sending sons to private engineering colleges.’”

Accordingly, for some people in Nepal, pre-school has become a way to showcase their social status and prestige. Similarly, business families are converting economic capital into cultural and symbolic capital through elite private schooling (ibid). These trends, as this study also shows, seemed to have some level of influence, on the middle-class families, in the form of their choice of preschools for their children. Ms. Sanu Amatya (child specialist), who is developing a new model of ECE known as *Nepalshowri*, says, “*Nepalshowri* is different than Montessori because people can learn Nepali culture such as the technique to peel off the cover of banana, egg and making them playthings from clay. It does not demand expensive equipment for games and also develops their palm. The main objective of Montessori is ‘grow with culture and learn with nature’ (*balbalika lai sanskar ma hurkau ra prakriti sanga sikau*). But it has not been correctly implemented due to the different reason. Ms. Amatya says, “Our culture is not to say ‘Hi’ and ‘Bye’ but to greet with *Namaste*.” However, developing a broad and yet culture-specific model of *Nepalshowri* can be challenging, as we are a country with many nationalities with various cultures.

Expectations of School Management

Principal Ms. Shrestha putting forth her expectation from the parents, says that the parents have the wrong conception regarding childrearing. Parents are giving excess freedom to the child. Shrestha says, ‘It is true that we should not beat the child, but they should be controlled by other means. There should be some boundaries in freedom, and those boundaries have to set by the parents. There is no balance between control and warmth.’ The above views of the Principal resonate with the notion of power, as explained by Foucault. Discipline ‘makes’ individuals; it is the specific technique of power that regards individual both as object and instrument of its exercise (Foucault, 1984, 206).

Ms. Shrestha opines that the children need both love and control from parents. So, when parents understand this, it is good for the child and also for the teachers. She said, ‘*alikasi boundary rakhidiyo vane pachi gayera discipline ko kura ma problem aaudaina jasto lagcha* (if we set a little boundary then it will not be that difficult to discipline the children).’ According to Shrestha, parents are the foundation in the rearing and education of a child. She recollected a moment at her school during a cultural show, one of the parents asked her child to sing a certain song but, the child

wanted to sing a different song. The child started crying and I hugged him. I said to him that he could sing what he felt comfortable in. He remained silent for a while and, he sang another song. This attitude of parents, treating their child as an object and not as a person - asking their child to do specific acts in front of others 'yo gara tyo gara' (to do this and that) - is a big problem in child development. They don't have any idea about what actually the child wants. However, in a different tone, she said that the development of the children and disciplining them depends on our culture, and it happens gradually. Parents are not being sensible enough while choosing school, as there are huge numbers of schools in the market. Parents need to have some information regarding this for the proper guidance, and well being of the child. This also helps to minimize the gap between the teachers, and the parents.

Parents' Expectations

Most of the parents are educated, career-oriented and child becomes '*aljho*' (*hurdle*). As stated by one of the parent, Mrs. Neha KC (Himalayan Times, 16 May, 2016), 'Myself being a working woman, I was able to complete my studies and continue working as I was able to send my daughter to preschool. We are very satisfied and happy with her. Pre-schooling challenges the concept of housewives by providing the opportunity to explore and continue either studies or work, which makes them independent.'

The new trend has been challenging to the parents because they have a fear of conflicting values that the new system may impart. Parents think that if they teach their children in Montessori, they become confused as teaching is different at home from that of school. One parent shared their experience that their daughter teaches them saying 'A' sound with 'Aa', which is new for the parent. Parents are slowly learning about the Montessori education system through their children. I found that, parents also feel that they need to know the Montessori system so that their children will not be in confusion.

The Paradox of Teachers and Parents

Although teachers have some knowledge about the Montessori methods but still, they are compelled to follow the traditional way of teaching. This is due to the competition of the schools in showing the graded performance of their students, and eventually attracting more students. Another factor, as stated by the teachers (and also some parents), is the demand of parents to intensely involve their kids in academic activities and keep them occupied with more homework.

When I attended a parent-teacher meeting, most of the parents were talking about homework: '*Homework lekhna mandaina runcha ani jhagda garcha*' (the child doesn't want to do her homework and cries'. To this query of the parents, the Principal replied,

'bacha haru ko palm nai developed vako hudaina uniharu lai haat dukhcha, khas bachako lagi home work nai चाहिदaina, khelera sikne ho' (children's hand are not fully developed to write continuously, they do not need home work, they learn through playing). It seemed that teachers were trying to follow the Montessori Method of teaching in which there is no need of homework and exam. However, many teachers expressed that, the school management at the same time tries their best to achieve the academic excellence of the children to compete with other schools. In this scenario, they are directly or indirectly persuaded by the school management to give some homework.

Expert Bidhyanath Koirala opines, 'Playing is both the 'Exam' and 'Home work' of children at this early age. *Bachha ko mul mantra nai play ho* (the main focus for the children should be playing).' According to Koirala, the current practice shows that both teachers and parents are responsible, in some ways, for overburdening the child with home works.

In some other cases, parents were also demanding some punishment to their children. They said to the teachers, '*Nepali homework garda runcha alik gali gardinu, alik jhagda garne vako cha*' (My child weeps while doing Nepali homework, he has also become quarrelsome. Please scold him a bit). The parents have a lot of expectations from young children. Teachers try to convince that homework and exam was not for the Montessori education system, but they were compelled to listen to parents' demand. Nowadays, children are information junky. They have various sources to gather information, but they are still obliged to follow the traditional way of teaching and learning methods. Between the different approaches of parents, grandparents, and teachers, children may find them confused and overburdened. Expert Sanu Amatya viewed that they should know that each child is different and each child has different set of skills which should not be compared. Almost all parents send their children at a very young age to school and bring unnecessary burden to children. Child psychology and education theory state that learning should begin with maturity. Prof. Koirala elaborated that learning without maturity is like injecting knowledge more than required.

Teaching and Learning Approach

The Principal of a pre-school shared that they try their best to educate the children according to their needs employing appropriate psychological approaches. However, Child expert, Ms. Sanu Amatya said that, most of the pre-schools do not employ properly researched curriculum and pedagogy, and mostly depend on the rapid-fire short duration popular Montessori trainings, which they receive from the people who do not have required knowledge and skills regarding child psychology and child education. Similarly, parents have differing views regarding this. A father of a pre-

school child said that, in this highly commercial environment, it is less likely that the pre-schools hire qualified teachers. According to him, most of the pre-school teachers are SLC (School Leaving Certificate) passed or are studying in higher secondary, and only very few have done a proper academic courses on education. However, I found that, many parents to be indifferent with these issues. They were mostly concerned on whether their child learned to speak English.

As per Professor Bidhyanath Koirala, '*Sarkar le chayo khelera padhos, Private le chayo thelera padhos ra family le chayo jasari ni mero bacha le dheri janos ra ramro garos*' (Government seems to be carefree regarding education and wants the children to be educated whichever way they like. The private sector wants to push the students harder to show the better academic performance of their school. The parents want their kids to learn more, and be competitive). These kinds of differential priorities can jeopardize the education of children, making them vulnerable to the mismatched interests of these sectors.

Security Concerns

Parents feel more secure if they know the teachers well, rather than looking at infrastructure or distance. A familiar environment for parents is an influential factor as they feel secured about their child. 'Nepali people make more distinction between 'them' and those people who do not belong to their inner circle. Those from the inner circle are perceived as reliable, while the others are seen as unpredictable.' (Bista, 1991, 97). In the same line, a parent said, '*Montessori rakhne vaneko chineko thauma nai ta ho* (we send our kids to those pre-schools which is runned by the people we know)'. Another factor they consider is the attitude of the owner or the managing teacher (Principal). A good educational environment and proximity do not always get priority over the familiar relations with the teachers or school management. Similarly, some parents also opined that the involvement of more female teachers and more female staff makes them feel more secured.

Pre-school as a Common Culture

'The prevalent longing to make our children competitive and successful stems from the dominating trend of globalization and market economy.' says Bidhyanath Koirala. He said that we have not only kept the names of schools as 'White House,' 'Chelsea' or 'the Pentagon,' we are also desperate to show that we are a part of the shared global culture. It is very 'cool' to show that we are part of the worldwide white supremacy. However, Koirala admits that the trend of pre-schools has generated some level of consciousness amongst the parents in regard to different models of parenting and schooling. "This discourse can be a good start for the future of education system in Nepal," says Koirala with some hope.

Conclusion

The growth of preschool in Ravibhawan of Kathmandu is embedded in both the local cultural contexts and the overarching globalization trends. There are many facets of this complex interaction. This study has come up with three main thematic areas, which have significantly impacted the growing pre-school trend.

Firstly, there are continuous confrontations and adjustments in the implementation of the emerging pre-schooling trend in Ravibhawan. These confrontations and adjustments are the product of existing cultural values of the community, and the new business model of early childhood education. Parents still want their children to be burdened with homework, which was the norm in the traditional approach. On the other hand, the pre-schools adjust their pedagogy to cater both the local demands of the parents, and also follow some early childhood development practices. Parents still want their child to be ranked first, second in the class instead of general grading. Schools want to save cost and attract more students. This can be related to one of the many facets of struggle and adjustments that happen in the complex cultural milieus where these negotiations take place. The result is the mixed way of teaching and learning approach, which encompasses both traditional aspirations of the parents and the new teaching pedagogy introduced by the pre-school system. Similarly, in most of the schools the curriculum was not prepared or approved by the experts, nor was widely brought into discourse, but instead largely depended on the training and personal interest of the school management. The schools argue that they follow the concept of learning by doing, and hence revise the methods and curriculum as the time demands. However, lack of standardization from both the government and the pre-schools, has created a situation of confusion amongst the parents in deciding what is appropriate for their children.

Secondly, due to the advent of globalization and gradual increase in the flow of ideas across the world, people are finding themselves subject to the trends brought about by this phenomenon. The advent of pre-school in Nepal is the result of this phenomenon. Similarly, the changing notion of parenting and gender roles can be seen in the ways working parents prefer to send their kids to pre-schools. Due to globalization and urbanization, Growth of unitary families has resulted in the lack of early childhood care at homes, thus the need to send the toddlers to pre-schools. Thirdly, parents come to know about the new pre-schooling trends from their children, kinship networks and other social networks. Many parents seem to feel secure when they are familiar with the school management and the teachers, due to the sense of kinship bond characterized by '*Aafno Manchhe*.' The decision of the neighbors and relatives creates a peer pressure to send the kids to expensive pre-schools. This social

trend seems to generate a sense of status symbol. It has become a matter of prestige to send one's kids to expensive pre-schools. The implication is that; the relatively poor parents find it increasingly challenging to meet this exuberant cost of maintaining their social status.

Despite the increasing importance of pre-school education and its increasing trend in Nepal, anthropologists seem to be less interested in exploring this field and global trend as well. Hence, this study is believed to be a contribution towards the anthropology of pre-school education in Nepal. The present paper opens up avenues to revisit the concept of 'education for all.' Education for all needs a broader critical evaluation, to include the voices and needs of the diverse socio-cultural contexts of the society. It would be much insightful to explore these voices and aspirations of the people from different cultural contexts, through further research works.

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