

# Crisis in Education and Future Challenges for Nepal

Kedar Bhakta Mathema

The modern education system in Nepal is one of the youngest in the world. In 1951 when Nepal emerged as a “new nation” after the fall of the Rana oligarchy, it had only 9,000 pupils in primary, 1,700 in secondary schools and a little over one hundred in two undergraduate colleges. There was no university. Adult education stood at a bare 5%.

## Quantitative achievements

Over the last few decades, more particularly in the three previous ones, there has been a rapid increase in the number of students enrolling at all levels of education. In absolute figures, primary school numbers grew significantly from around 400,000 in 1971 to 3.9 million in 2001. Over the same period, the combined numbers in lower secondary and secondary schools increased from 120,000 to 1.5 million. At post secondary level, including tertiary education, numbers increased from 17,000 in 1971 to 210,000 in 2005, resulting in a current enrolment ratio of around 6%.(NLSS II).<sup>1</sup>

The credit for these quantitative achievements in terms of schools, teachers and students at all levels of the education system is down to a strong social demand for education and the efforts made by the people as well as the government. Credit must also be given to bilateral and multilateral donors for providing the government with the necessary resources to develop the educational infrastructures required to meet the increasing demand.

## Literacy

Nepal is also making steady progress in literacy. The overall literacy rates for populations above 6 years have improved significantly, from 23% in 1981 to 54% in 2001. Literacy rates are improving, both for males and females. Since the female literacy rate is increasing more rapidly than the male one, the gap between the two is narrowing. The bad news is that,

---

<sup>1</sup> In Nepal, the school education system comprises of Primary (1-5 grades for 6-10 year olds), Lower Secondary (6-8 grades) and Secondary (9-10 grades). Grade 11 to12 (known as Certificate level or 10 + 2) is Higher Secondary Education but is still considered part of tertiary education. University education comprises Bachelor (13 -14) and Master (15-16). An analysis of recent trends in the number of students enrolling indicates that the rate of growth is slowing at primary level. It is, however, strong at Secondary level and very strong at tertiary level.

despite over 50 years of development, almost half the adult population is still illiterate. Since our literacy programmes are supply driven and not responsive to the local needs of learners, our several Five-Year Plans have failed to achieve their literacy targets.<sup>2</sup> Studies show that only around 60% of learners complete courses and are literate. Many literacy-programme graduates give up due to the limited availability of reading material and of post-literacy programmes where new literates might practise their literacy skills.

The low adult literacy rate, particularly among females and underprivileged groups is a factor involved in the continuing lack of participation in the education system on the part of girls and children from underprivileged communities.<sup>3</sup> Studies carried out in Nepal and elsewhere claim that the low level of adult literacy prevents people from reaping the full benefit of or contributing to the country's socio-economic development. Studies have shown that while a farmer with some schooling is more productive than a farmer with no schooling, his level of productivity is even higher if most farmers in the community have had at least some primary schooling. However, in neither the Terai nor the Nepal Mountain belt does the male literacy rate reach 50%.

Studies have also shown that a woman with some primary education is less fertile, but has healthier children than an unschooled woman, and that the differences tend to be significantly marked if most of the women in the community have benefited from this level of education. Unfortunately, however, in none of Nepal's five development regions does female literacy exceed 30%.

### **Problems of access**

With regards to school education, the problem at this level is both access and equity. Although access to primary education has increased considerably, increasing this access and improving equity in education still remain a formidable challenge. The gross enrolment ratio is 131% at primary level. Net enrolment is, however, only 84%. This means that 16% of the 6-10 age group do not go to school and, given the high drop-out rate, there are many more in the same situation. A large number of pupils have to redo their school year, whatever the class, especially in poor rural schools. Most of the time when girls fail a year, they simply drop out. The

---

<sup>2</sup> Nepal launched its first Five-Year plan in 1956. We are currently in the fourth year of the Tenth Five-Year plan.

<sup>3</sup> According to the 2001 Census the 6 years+ literacy rate is 54% (65% for male and 43% for female).

gross enrolment ratios at the lower secondary and secondary school are 86% and 50%. Net enrolment is, however, only 44% and 33% respectively.<sup>4</sup>

There are many reasons for these unsatisfactory enrolment rates at school level. Although primary school is free, parents have to bear many direct and indirect costs for their children's education. Since public schools receive just enough grant from the Government to pay for salaries, they have to raise funds among parents to meet other expenses such as the procurement of teaching materials (blackboard, chalk and furniture). It is not therefore uncommon for public schools to charge admission or examination fees for the students in order to meet daily school needs. Some schools also introduce compulsory uniforms for their students, which puts additional financial burden on parents. On top of this, household demand for or the price of child labour discourages many parents from sending their children, particularly girls, to school. In addition, apart from the cost factor, some parents in rural areas do not see the point of education in everyday life and employment. Among other barriers that exclude poor children from educational opportunities in Nepal is the distance from school, the negative attitude of teachers toward poor children's ability to succeed, language and cultural factors, and in the present context, the Maoist conflict.

### **Problems of equity**

Participation in school education is unequal across social, gender, regional, and income groups. According to the recent Nepal Living Standards Survey II, fewer than 30% of 6-10 year old Brahmins and Chetris, and fewer than 29% of Newars, have not been to school compared to 43% of the Hill Dalits (occupational caste), 76% of the Terai Dalits, 62% of Muslims and 45% of Hill ethnic groups. The Dalits also have the lowest rate for completing primary education, followed by the Muslims.<sup>5</sup> There are also gender disparities in primary numbers. The national net enrolment for 6-10 year old girls is 67% versus 78% for boys. Gender disparities are particularly higher in the Terai Middle Class/Caste group where only 58% of 6-10 year old girls are at school compared to 94% of boys. Traditional high-caste Hindus in rural areas adhere to strict Hindu rules that restrict a girl's movements after they reach puberty. It is also distressing to note that among children from poorer households, the percentage of 6-10 year olds out of school rises to 36%<sup>6</sup> and that more than two thirds of these are girls.

---

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Education and Sports, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Bennett, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> World Bank, 2005.

The School Leaving Certificate examination (SLC) which is held at the end of 10 years at school is the only readily available means of assessing how well or badly children are learning, the strengths and weaknesses in terms of our efforts to improve the performance of girls and children of ethnic and underprivileged communities; and in a word how well our school system operates. An analysis of the 2000-2004 SLC results reveals widespread disparity in SLC performance between genders, between public and private schools, and among students from different regions and ethnic groups.

The average SLC performance of girls has been historically lower than that of boys. In 2000-2004 the average overall score for girls was around 7% lower than that for boys, and the pass rate for girls was only 41% compared to a 50% rate for boys. There are two compelling reasons why girls perform so poorly in comparison to boys. The Study on Student SLC Performance reveals that most families do not offer the necessary conditions at home for girls to do well at school.<sup>7</sup> For instance, girls do not get enough time to study at home because they spend hours on household chores (more than 6 hours a day in some cases). The amount of support and attention that girls receive inside and outside the classroom from their teachers is minimal compared to boys. It is a fact that most teachers in Nepal perceive girl students as incompetent, lazy, submissive, and less intelligent than boys.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, even the girls themselves do not have much faith in their ability to learn and succeed. In rural areas there are also cultural and social barriers to girls being effective and successful in their learning role in the classroom, since both their family and community expect them to be shy, submissive and quiet.

The disparity analysis and equity analysis carried out under the recently completed Study on Student SLC Performance<sup>9</sup> have documented sufficient evidence to suggest that failure and/or low-performance is a phenomenon which frequently occurs in districts or geographical areas with a low Human Development Index (HDI). Likewise, children belonging to ethnic and Dalit communities have a significantly much lower level of achievement than other groups. Evidently, school results are not a purely school-related phenomenon. It is deeply rooted in the socio-economic and ethnic composition of society. One of the shortcomings of the ADB- and World Bank-financed Primary Education Development Project and Basic and Primary Education Project in Nepal is that “No aspect of the (reform) package addressed factors such as parental education, nutrition and

---

<sup>7</sup> Mathema & Bista, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Bista, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Mathema & Bista, 2006.

health, household economy etc., which, though admittedly difficult to influence, are known to have a significant impact on student achievement, possibly greater than the effect of school inputs.”<sup>10</sup>

Apart from home factors, many children from ethnic communities also suffer from the language barrier.<sup>11</sup> It is found that even after many years of schooling in Nepali, most linguistic and ethnic minorities have difficulties in expressing themselves in the official language at school. It could be that the way Nepali textbooks are written and the way Nepali is taught in the classroom does not help students acquire language skills. In Nepali classes the emphasis is usually on teaching literary aspects rather than the language.

### **Private schooling as a source of inequality**

One of the relatively new sources of inequality in the Nepalese education system is the mushrooming of private schools over recent years. One third of the total increase in school numbers has been in the private sector. The proportion of numbers at private schools is 10% at primary level, 21% at lower secondary and 23% at secondary level. This rate of enrolment is expected to grow by 12% at primary level, 22% at lower secondary and 27% at secondary level by the year 2010.<sup>12</sup>

One of the major reasons for the increase in private schooling in Nepal has been the growing disillusionment with the public school system as a result of its continual poor results. An analysis of the 2004 SLC results demonstrates that public schools, on average, lag far behind private schools in terms of performance. Compared to an average pass rate of 85% for private schools, for instance, the figure for public schools was only 38%. Similarly, while an overwhelming majority of private schools showed pass rates in the 80-100% range, less than 7% of public schools could boast such high pass rates. Also, the average SLC score for public schools was around 17% lower than that of private schools.<sup>13</sup>

The large difference in performance between public and private schools betrays the regressive character of the Nepalese education system. Considering that generally only relatively rich urban families can afford private school education for their children, the continuing disparity in achievements between these two types of school will no doubt frustrate

---

<sup>10</sup> Khaniya & Williams. 2004.

<sup>11</sup> Nearly 50% of the population speaks languages other than Nepali as their mother tongue. Cf. *The education sector report for discussion at the Nepal Development Forum 2004*, Ministry of Education, March 2004.

<sup>12</sup> World Bank, 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Bhatta, 2004.

whatever plans the government may have of bringing members of ethnic and underprivileged communities into the mainstream living conditions. More importantly this will further widen the gulf between the haves and haves-not in Nepalese society.

In recent years the student wing of the Maoists party has been demonstrating against the commercialization of the school system and demanding the end of two categories of school – one for the rich and the other for the poor. Indeed, education in Nepal has failed to serve as “a great equalizer of men” (Horace Man 1848). Although education in our society has been understood as a major gateway from poverty and it has served this function admirably for some, academic success has been elusive for a large number of young people, who are economically poor or culturally and racially different from the mainstream or both. The Marxist anthropologist, Stephen Mikesell, thus observes “The rural schools in Nepal basically serve the role of disqualifying rural young people from roles in society and turning them into failures. In the School Leaving Certificate examinations of 1996, my last year of residence in Nepal, not one child from rural schools passed in the first division, which means that rural kids are eliminated from more prestigious college tracks, particularly from being engineers and doctors, the aspiration of middle class parents for their children.”<sup>14</sup>

Nepali elites, who regard this serious issue with a “dismissive attitude” and “theory of rejection”, somehow refuse to believe that the regressive character of our education system which offers quality education to few and denies it to the great majority will be a threat to social cohesion. It will also erode our trust in social institutions and weaken our democratic practices which we so badly need to build in post-conflict Nepal.

### **Problem of quality**

Closely-related to the issue of the disparity in achievements between private and public schools is the problem of the quality of the school education system, particularly in public schools. The nationwide survey involving 450 secondary schools and approximately 22,500 students and the case studies of 28 effective and ineffective secondary schools carried out within the Study on Student SLC Performance<sup>15</sup> reveal that hardly any teaching and learning take place in many public schools in rural areas. There is very little testing and no remedial support for students in difficulty. This practice of neglecting weak students starts at primary level, and carries on through secondary.

---

<sup>14</sup> Mikesell, 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Mathema, 2006.

The report says:

It is not just the lack of physical, instructional, and human resources. Even when resources were available, there was no teaching and learning. Courses were not completed in time. Teacher absenteeism was high. Even if the teachers were present in schools, teachers did not teach.

In the recent past the abrupt closure of schools and the abduction of students by Maoists rebels for political training also adversely affected the already poor performance of many schools in rural areas. Besides, many parents were reluctant to send their children to school or they simply pulled their children out of schools fearing such abduction.

The teachers' morale in most public schools is low for numerous reasons which include too much politicizing, a lack of professional support, poor school management, a shortage of resources and ineffective leadership. In recent years there has been a further knock to the teachers' morale, especially in rural areas, due to the immense pressure that they have to work under in conflict-affected areas. They are often forced to pay donations every month to Maoists rebel groups out of their meagre salary. Often government authorities and security forces mistrust teachers because they are historically opposed to the establishment. The rebel forces, on the other hand, are said to have harassed, humiliated and tortured teachers affiliated to political parties.

To make matters worse, there is a total absence of support for monitoring and supervising public schools despite the fact that the Ministry of Education and Sport has on its payroll an army of school supervisors, resource specialists, and training staff. The District Education officer who is responsible for all the schools in the district hardly visits any schools outside the district headquarters, partly due to the ongoing conflict, partly because of his lack of commitment, and partly due to a lack of resources (travelling costs). Nobody in the public system – head-teacher, teacher, school management committee member, school supervisor or District Education Officer is held accountable for the poor performance of schools. The community served by the school has no sense of belonging to the school and does not feel accountable for its performance or non-performance.

Under the current Education Regulations, schools that perform below 15% levels (in terms of the SLC examination pass rate) over three consecutive years are penalized. More recently, schools with a pass rate of 50% or more for SLC have been awarded a sum of Rs. 300,000. Although these policies are the fruit of good intentions, it is usually the schools operating in difficult circumstances and serving children from poor households, ethnic minorities, and underprivileged communities that are penalized, for it is these schools which usually produce the worst results.

Private schools, which are mostly centred in urban areas and cater for relatively richer families however portray a different picture. Most private schools are better managed with strong leadership. Not only are classes held regularly, they are also supplemented by additional coaching and tutorials. Remedial support for weaker students, lesson drills and frequent class tests and assessments are regular features in private schools. Critics of private school education argue that these schools put too much emphasis on teaching to test. Since there is a furious race among schools to achieve high pass rates in the SLC examination, private schools spend too much valuable curriculum time on directly preparing for examinations while neglecting critical thinking, creativity and generally what is not tested. They also argue that the high success rate among private school-children is also largely due to their home backgrounds which provide them with the opportunity to succeed. Moreover, parents also expect results as they have paid higher school fees.

Despite the tremendous contributions made to Nepal's educational development by private schools in providing increased access to and quality education without incurring any financial burden on the government, they are on the defensive at present time. The main line of attack concerns their high fees, which make them inaccessible to the majority of people. They are also being criticized for creating two classes of citizens and for being indirectly responsible for delaying reform in the public education system.

One of the major problems of overall school education in Nepal is the high attrition rate in terms of students failing, redoing a year and dropping out before the end of the course. Out of 100 children enrolling in Grade 1, for instance, only around 18 complete the course after five years and less than 50% complete it at all. Although drop-out rates are lower at secondary level, the number of pupils having to redo a school year is very high. Only 40% and 50% of those who complete the lower and secondary cycles respectively do so without having to stay down a year. According to a recent study undertaken by Training for Employment Project, out of 100 who enter Grade 1, sixteen pass Grade 10 and only 8 pass the SLC examination.<sup>16</sup>

Apart from the waste of resources as a result of the high attrition rate at school, the system also produces young men and women who have some years of schooling but none of the necessary skills for future employment. Except for Grade 10 graduates, the education system offers these persons (84% of Grade 1 students who drop out before passing SLC) no opportunity of any career orientation toward technical and vocational

---

<sup>16</sup> Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and Alliance, 2006.

training courses. Many young people who are now going abroad for unskilled or semiskilled employment send their families a substantial amount of their remittance. They could have done much better had they acquired technical training at home. A great many, who cannot go abroad or find employment in Nepal because of their lack of employable skills, fall victim to all sorts of temptations created by internal conflicts.

### **Higher education**

Those who pass the national School Leaving Certificate examination have the option of going on to pursue a technical training course or higher education either in academic subjects or technical applications. At present, higher education is being offered by five universities and two autonomous institutes. The total number of students at these universities is estimated at 210,000 of whom 90% are at Tribhuvan University.

Tribhuvan University is the oldest and the biggest institute of higher education. One of the biggest challenges of this university is that it has grown too big and has become very difficult to manage. Being a state-financed university (a little over 80% of its budget comes from the government) with almost 190,000 students, this institute of higher learning is also highly politicized which makes it difficult to introduce any reform into this system.

### **Problem of quality**

Except few technical institutes, Tribhuvan University(TU) does not offer high-quality education. Academic standards on most campuses are mediocre with teachers lacking dedication and scholarship. University classes mostly consist of lectures, and learning is simply the passive absorption of facts rather than any active intellectual discourse, participation or research. Seminars and discussions rarely take place and reading assignments, drafting term-papers, project work, and case studies are unheard of. University campuses provide neither the rigor nor the challenge of university life. Academic calendars do not exist and students leave early for vacation and return late. Unscheduled holidays, student meetings and teachers absenteeism frequently disrupt classes.

University students probably spend less time in the classroom here than in any other country. No wonder student failure rates in non technical faculties in 2002-03 were 75%, 74% and 73% at certificate, bachelor, and masters levels respectively.<sup>17</sup> Some responsibility for this disappointing result, however, may also be attributed to students' poor

---

<sup>17</sup> Shrestha, 2005.

academic background due to inadequate schooling and the University's almost open-door policy regarding student admissions.

### **Problem of funding**

One of the many causes for the decline in the standard of university education has been the shortage of funds for spending on those inputs which contribute to improving standards such as libraries, laboratories and scientific equipment, extra classrooms, research and field work. Nepal spends 3.7% of its GDP on education which is 16% of the national budget. The share of higher education in the education budget has been on the decline over the past few years. It was 6% in 2004, which is one of the lowest in the world.

The university, on the other hand, has failed to increase its own income to compensate for the decline in government financing by leasing out its centrally-located landed property, encouraging university departments to offer research and consultancy services and organizing many other activities. Tuition fees are negligible and any attempt at increasing them is met with major resistance from students. Government funds for the university are approved by Ministry of Finance officials who have little understanding of higher education in general, of universities' goals and potential and the context in which they operate.

The shortage of funding for capital investment and non-salary operating expenses has seriously undermined the institutional framework of higher education in Nepal. Most campus buildings are dismal structures with poor facilities and inadequate equipment. Campus management complains of having no funds to buy spare parts for equipment, books for the library, and even to pay for routine structural maintenance (for instance sanitary facilities). According to a study carried out in 1996, 60% of laboratories had no adequate space for practical work and 70% of laboratories had no basic materials in adequate amounts, while there was no renewal of supplies in more than 50% of laboratories.<sup>18</sup> One of the fairly large campuses, with over 6,000 students near Kathmandu, has a library with only 3,000 books, most of which are out of date.

The internet revolution now allows people all over the world to access information on an unprecedented number of topics both instantly and relatively cheaply. However, hardly any campus in the TU system has computer facilities for faculty members and a very insignificant number of teachers have access to electronic networks and CD-ROMs. Faculty access to computer-based technologies contributes to reducing

---

<sup>18</sup> HMG/TU/UNDP/World Bank, 1995.

intellectual isolation while providing increased access to the very latest scientific information.

An acute shortage of resources has been compounded by its inefficient use. For instance, many campus libraries are closed evenings and weekends in accordance with civil service regulations. In some subjects there are more teachers than are required and the ratio of non-academic staff to academic staff is high. A sizable portion of the university budget is also spent on non-educational expenditures in support of student scholarships, grants and subsidized student services. Low student-teacher ratios on some courses, the high drop-out rates, the high number of students having to redo their year and low graduation rates have also gone towards putting up the cost for graduates on many university campuses.

### **Politicization**

One reason which discourages management to take any initiative towards reform is the highly politically-charged atmosphere on university campuses. Politicization has its merits as it promotes the democratic practice of dialogue and debate on contentious issues among various groups and prepares a way for managing and solving conflicts. It is only a few highly political faculty members, students and student groups taking up positions as combative agents of rival political factions that affect the academic atmosphere of the campus and upset the university's agenda for reform. Each campus has an elected student body which for the sake of protecting students' interests opposes any attempt at cutting back subsidies or raising tuition or other fees even when these are unreasonably low.

When tuition fees were raised at TU in 1992 after remaining frozen for almost two decades, students unions across the country violently protested against the decision, although the actual increment was very low. When TU leadership introduced an entrance examination for students applying for science courses, the students were up in protest again and demonstrated for several weeks. Since 1992, no university management has dared raise the tuition fees again until now. Many other items on the agenda for reform have also been left in abeyance at the university due to the fear of a student uprising.

It is not just one elected student body which is active on the campus. Each campus has several student groups which are affiliated to the student wing of various political parties. There is much competition and rivalry among the various student groups and each tries to outdo the others in terms of protecting and promoting so-called student rights and privileges. Competition and populism have driven many student groups to

demand more and more concessions even on matters such as admission requirements and examinations. As a consequence of regular student unrest on campuses and the subsequent deterioration in academic standards, some students who can afford to pay higher fees go to Kathmandu University (the only university in the private sector) which to date remains unaffected by students politics. Many, however, prefer to go to other public universities on the subcontinent, particularly in India.

University teachers are not spared the effect of national politics either. There is a *Nepal University Teachers Association (NUTA)*, a body elected every year by university teachers to protect and promote the interest of university faculty members. There is also *TUTA*, an association of Tribhuvan University teachers. Besides, there are two other separate organizations, one affiliated to the Nepali Congress and the other to the United Marxist Leninist (UML) Communist party. Those who hold office within these organizations regularly meet party leaders and exert influence on the Government's political calendar.

The rivalry between these two groups surfaces whenever there is a senior university staff vacancy, with each group trying to get its own member or supporter appointed. Appointments to senior leadership or management posts and sometimes even to academic positions are highly politicized. It might not be wholly untrue to say that political beliefs weigh heavier in choosing a candidate than his or her competence, leadership qualities, academic credentials, and past track record.

### **Impact on teachers' morale**

One can imagine the effect all this has on the teachers' morale. Hardly any teachers spend much time on the university campus. Quite a few professors on campuses located in Kathmandu spend more time negotiating donor-supported projects than on the campus giving lectures, supervising researchers or working on his or her own research. Some of them have their own consultancy offices in town. Others who are not in the consultancy business take up evening teaching sessions in other private schools or campuses. Those who teach Engineering or Law or Medicine act more like part-time teachers than full-time professors, as they spend more time working outside the campus than lecturing to students and devoting their time to research .

None of these professors working outside the university brings any overhead to their campus. Some years ago when the Japanese government built a modern teaching hospital as an annex to a Medicine campus in Kathmandu, doctors teaching on the campus were given a non-practising allowance on top of their salary so that they would teach, treat patients at the hospital and research on a full-time basis. A few years after its

implementation, this practice fizzled out as some senior doctors started practising outside the hospital, albeit clandestinely, much to the donor's disappointment. This practice was reinstated in 1992 by taking sterner action against those who violated the rule, only to be discarded again after the reshuffle in University management due to a change in government in the first months of 1994.

One of the negative consequences of excessive moonlighting and absenteeism among teachers is that the country's elite scholars and scientists slowly become isolated from the international community of academics and scholars and lose their ability to keep up with developments in their own field. As the university loses its ability to act as a reference point for the rest of the education system, the country suffers as it finds it harder to make key decisions on matters of national interest.

TU still has some very good professors educated at some of the finest universities in the world. Many of them are however nearing retirement age, and once they do leave there is a very serious threat of inbreeding in the system.

## **Way forward**

### *Literacy program*

The poor rate of adult literacy is one issue which the new government that will come to power after the election in 2007 has to address as a priority. As discussed earlier, almost half the adult population is still illiterate. One of the reasons for the high adult illiteracy rate in Nepal has been the slow progress towards universal primary education along with a sustained high school drop-out rate. Our success in reducing adult literacy for the next generation therefore depends on how much progress we make towards global school and university attendance, overall completion of primary school and a high standard of teaching.

While formal education systems hold the key to reducing illiteracy, schools alone cannot solve the problem. The huge delay in achieving satisfactory adult illiteracy rates needs to be addressed with special programs. Our past failure in achieving our literacy targets indicates that we should launch a nationwide literacy campaign, involving school-teachers, college and university students and young and prospective members of political parties, NGOs and community groups. Such campaigns should avoid any mistakes made by the regular national program and be responsive as far as possible to the learning needs of individual communities, by focusing on the real contexts in which people need to use their literacy skills. Considering the newly-earned air of freedom and democracy in the country, the combination of the literacy process with the empowerment process, based on people carrying out

their own detailed and systemic local analysis might be an ideal way of motivating adult learners.

### *School education*

The government needs to make a special effort to attract to school the very poor, girls and children from underprivileged communities by adopting various strategies such as increasing the number of female teachers in order to increase girls' attendance. Currently only 25% of teachers are women. Similarly more children from Dalit and ethnic communities need to be encouraged to attend school. A recent survey of 1,000 schools revealed that only 23% of pupils and only 2% of teachers were from ethnic groups and Dalits respectively, with most of them being from the Brahman-Chetri group.<sup>19</sup> The Government should also make efforts to recruit teachers who are bilingual (speak local languages as well as Nepali) to help children whose mother tongue is not Nepali.

It is important for the government to adequately finance public schools which mostly cater for girls and underprivileged children and to make serious efforts to improve the quality of teaching in these schools. The Government's policy of providing just enough funds to pay for teachers' and other staff salaries will go no way to improving the standard of education in public schools. Several studies carried out in Nepal and elsewhere have revealed a strong association between spending per student and school performance, implying that schools with high expenditure per-child do a better job in terms of their students' achievements. Private schools in Nepal spend 11 times more than public schools. It is important that the Government ensures full funding for public education. Where communities are able to bear part of the cost of schooling for their children, schools should be allowed to raise funds locally in addition to what they receive from the government.<sup>20</sup>

The near collapse of the monitoring and supervision system is one major problem public schools are currently facing. The Government must strengthen the supervision and monitoring of public schools to ensure that classes are held regularly, homework is given and marked, children in difficulty are given remedial support, class assessments and tests are conducted regularly and that they are used not just to assess learning but to help students with problem solving and to promote critical thinking. In short, each teacher and each school and school management committee should be made accountable for students' performance.

---

<sup>19</sup> Bajaracharya, 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Maoists, and in particular their student faction have been protesting against the practice of some public schools to raise certain student fees, claiming that education should be the State's sole responsibility.

Each District Education Office must also develop parent/community roles in promoting children's education or in improving schools' performance.

Parents or community members could assume the role of monitoring teachers' attendance, their attitude toward children's performance and their overall management of the classroom. Many countries in Africa have influential Parent Teachers Associations which are doing a lot to improve the standard of primary education, especially in rural areas.

The Government should also monitor progress made in the social integration of Dalits and other ethnic groups via its District Education Offices. Rural schools with a rise in girls' attendance and satisfactory achievements among girls and Dalits should be rewarded with cash prizes or additional government funding, in addition to awards for the best teachers. With this aim in mind, the Ministry of Education and its District Offices must reinforce the management of their monitoring and supervision system.

The Government must put a stop to two types of education which only offer quality education to a chosen few, while denying it to the great majority. This means that the Government must be fully committed to supporting the public education system at school level, at least from grade 1 to 10. One way to put an end to this dual education system is to help public schools to recover their lost credibility and thereby check the flight of students from public to private schools.

#### *Vocational and technical education or training*

As discussed earlier, a considerable number of cohorts of a given age group either never enters the general education system or leaves school before completing primary school. The Government must implement various technical and vocational training programs at different levels for students who drop out after primary or lower secondary or secondary education. Training in practical skills or vocational education should also be considered for boys and girls who fail to complete their schooling or those who have more aptitude toward vocational education.

#### *Higher education*

The biggest problem facing higher education in Nepal is the standard issue. The standard is abysmal due to a lack of funding, mindless bureaucratization and an excessive politicization of university campuses, with the subsequent effect on the teachers' morale.

Higher education in Nepal, as elsewhere in the developing world, is heavily dependent on government funding, and unit costs are relative high compared to other segments of the education system. In recent

years, Nepal has been allocating about 3.7% of its GDP, which is around 1% of the national budget, to education. The share of higher education in the education budget has been on the decline over the last few years. It amounted to 6% of the education budget in 2004 which is considered to be one of the lowest in the world. While one can appreciate the government's reduced capacity to support higher education as a result of adverse macroeconomic conditions in the country, it is very clear that unless public funding for higher education increases there is very little hope of improving the performance of university campuses.

A propos of what is said above, the bleak economic outlook makes it unlikely that public financing for higher education will increase significantly in the short to medium term. This means that universities have to learn to be more "cost conscious" and make effective use of the resources they have. This also means that the utilization of facilities such as libraries, laboratories, workshops and other specialized units must be improved. Teachers' "time on task" and personal consultancy work outside the university needs to be monitored. "Casual leave" and other types of leave should be restricted. Teachers must be encouraged to bring in to their departments consultancy, training and research projects from the Government, aid agencies and private firms and industry which generate income for the university or faculty, to involve students in research and at the same time to promote the visibility of the university to the outside world.

Individual campuses must also be asked to raise funds by collecting donations and endowments from alumni and other donors in public and private sectors. These contributions, essentially gifts to universities, may take many forms, including funding for the building of new facilities such as a computer laboratory for a faculty and its students, the endowment of professional chairs, donations for scientific equipment, books or the provision of scholarships for students in need. The Government may introduce tax systems that encourage such donations. University management should also start rewarding campuses which try to diversify their financial base by leasing out their property located in commercial areas. Some campuses in Kathmandu have already been doing this as a result of reform measures initiated by TU management in 1992-93.

The other side to higher education in Nepal is the rapid increase in student numbers as a result of demographic growth and of increased access to lower levels of education. This has made it increasingly difficult for the government to finance and support universities. Considering the rapid increase in the number of students in higher education, which is partially fuelled by the high level of subsidization in public universities, it is important for the Government to encourage private education institutes

as a means of managing the cost of the increase in student numbers as well as broadening social participation in higher education. Since a purely private system will not adequately safeguard public interest, a mixed system of public and private institutes of higher education is the answer to Nepal's needs.

The private sector can also play an important role in promoting non-university higher education institutes such as short-cycle professional and technical institutes, undergraduate colleges and distance learning and open university programs. Their lower cost makes them both attractive to students and easier for private providers to set up. Some private initiatives have already been undertaken in this area. It is the Government's responsibility to develop an appropriate policy to encourage such private initiatives and at the same time to create a mechanism for auditing educational programs conducted by such institutes.

A more complex problem to deal with is the excessive politicization within public universities and their campuses. Higher education institutes inevitably reflect the societies in which they operate and when a country suffers from deep rifts, these will be felt on the campus. No one would disagree that higher education institutes should enable opinions on broader issues facing society and the nation to be freely expressed and debated, and that student awareness and debate should be encouraged. There are situations, however, where the level of activism rises to the point where a high standard of education becomes impossible. Excessive political activism among students, teachers and administrative staff also makes governance of higher education institutes extremely difficult and causes inordinate delay in the introduction of any necessary reform programs.

Tribhuvan University, Nepal's top institute of higher education, has become a beehive of political activism and has ceased to be an attractive place to work, though it once drew new PhDs (nationals or non-nationals) from foreign universities. TU, on the other hand, seriously needs to attract foreign-trained Nepali or foreign-trained nationals to join its faculty or to send some of its best elements to universities abroad for higher degrees so that the university will have the benefit of "cross fertilization" and acquire the much needed energy to revitalize the institute. In order to make TU an attractive place to work, TU must rid itself of excessive politics that have tarnished its image, hampered its academic program and hindered its agenda for reform.

The only way to rid this national university of excessive politicization is for all political parties to come together and make a pledge to keep university campuses free from party politics and government and party

interference. This is undoubtedly not easy to achieve but this is also the most opportune time while the country is trying, with efforts from all major political parties and the rebel force, to bring an end to a ten-year conflict and emerge as a new “fully democratic” nation.

### *Post-conflict reconstruction*

The armed conflict has resulted in massive levels of destruction in Nepal, particularly in the countryside. Schools located in conflict-affected areas appear to be disconnected from the wider national system of education. Teaching in many rural schools has remained dysfunctional. A number of crucial educational activities such as school supervision, teacher training, delivery of free textbooks, calling School Management Committees and parent- teacher evenings, holding SLC examinations, etc. have been seriously disrupted. A rapid assessment of 28 Village Development Committees (VDC) carried out by UNICEF/Nepal revealed that 21% of 174 schools were seriously affected by the conflict.<sup>21</sup> The report says:

Schools were closed for an average of 10 days a month, and children did not enjoy going to school, due to the threat of abduction for indoctrination. Four hundred and fifty students and 250 teachers are reported to have been abducted for indoctrination. Of an estimated 63,000 children under the age of 18 in 28 VDCs, 1,027 were reported to have moved as a result of the conflict.

There are reports that teachers are often harassed, humiliated, tortured and in some cases even killed. According to Human Rights Organizations, 171 teachers have been killed in the present conflict in Nepal. There are also reports of teachers fleeing their village or place of work, resulting in long periods of disruption in teaching and learning. The students most affected by the conflict are girls and children of mostly poor and ethnic communities - groups which are already at a disadvantage in terms of access, participation and educational achievement. Although no comprehensive study has yet been undertaken on the impact of the recent conflict on students, the rapid assessment of 28 VDCs carried out by UNICEF reports that out of 1,027 displaced children, 45% were from ethnic groups, 28% from Dalit and another 28% from other categories. Of 174 children who joined the rebel force most were from occupational castes. There are also reports of the fear of rape and abduction that kept minority children, especially girls away from school. The UNICEF assessment reports “The numbers of students enrolled and appearing for examination fell dramatically in all categories between 2003/2004 and 2004/2005. Most disturbingly barely half the number of girls took final exams in 2004/2005.”

---

<sup>21</sup> UNICEF, 2005.

It is indeed difficult to measure the impact of the conflict on children's psychological state and education. Even when schools are officially open, the number of pupils is down and their attendance is irregular. And where children are lucky to go to school, their learning is often hindered by trauma, depression, untrained or ill-prepared teachers, or a shortage of sufficient teaching material and infrastructure.

Now that peace is tantalizingly close at hand, the Government should start preparing for post-conflict reconstruction of the education system in the areas affected. The Government's first task would be to proceed with proper assessment and documentation of the loss or damage to the education sector and to prepare appropriate reconstruction strategies. The other priority would be to get schools running properly. Teachers and head-teachers may require psycho-social training to deal with children traumatized by the conflicts. Special programs need to be organized for teachers victimized by the atrocities of the conflict. The Government must closely supervise all schools in regions affected by the conflict and make a special effort to provide all necessary assistance to them. It is also important to reach a consensus whereby all political parties including the Maoists strive to keep schools free of "politics". Special programs might have to be developed for young boys and girls whose schooling has been disrupted but who would now like to continue their education.

## Conclusion

Education in Nepal as elsewhere around the world is intensely political. The prevailing system of education works well for the elites and those sectors of society which do not have to rely on public education for their children. Public schools are being now abandoned by those who can afford to send their children to private schools. Following the withdrawal by professionals, businessmen, government bureaucrats, university professors and even school-teachers of their children, public schools in Nepal are now attended by girls and children from poor backgrounds and those living in difficult conditions. It is exactly for this reason that the problem of the massive failure of the SLC examination and the near collapse of the public school system are ignored and not seen as a national problem.<sup>22</sup> What has happened at school level is slowly being repeated in higher education: public university campuses are being abandoned by those who can afford to go to private universities or abroad. The present

---

<sup>22</sup> An analysis of SLC results over ten years (1995 to 2004) reveals an average failure rate of 60%. Further analysis of the 2001 SLC results shows that public school students, with a pass rate of 25.4%, perform alarmingly poorly compared to private school students (75.3%).

system therefore produces two classes of citizen who are schooled and prepared very differently and who would perhaps never meet in their youth anywhere except, after their graduation, in the work place. The failure of the public education system may have a negative impact on the creation of a national culture and a cohesive society, among other things, which is so important in post-conflict Nepal. It not only frustrates government plans for social integration and the empowerment of women, Dalits and ethnic groups but also forces the nation to enter the twenty-first century insufficiently prepared to compete in the global economy. It is for this reason that an education reform in Nepal is far too urgent and important to be delayed by a few vested groups and short-term political gains for individual political parties.

## References

- Bajaracharya, B.B. 2005. *Technical Review of School Education in Nepal*. Ministry of Education and Sports /ESAT.
- Bennett, Lynn. 2006. *Citizens: Gender, Caste and Ethnic Exclusion in Nepal*. Kathmandu: World Bank & DFID/Nepal.
- Bhatta, S.D. 2004. *A Descriptive Analysis of the Disparities in School Performance in the SLC Exams*, SLC Study. Kathmandu: ESAT.
- Bista, M.B. 2005. *A study of Classroom Practices in Secondary Schools in Nepal*. Secondary Education Project, Nepal.
- HMG/TU/UNDP/World Bank, 1995. *A Study of Internal Efficiency in Tribhuvan University, Nepal*.
- Khaniya, T.R. & Williams, J.H. 2004. "Necessary but not sufficient: Challenges to (implicit) theories of educational change: Reform in Nepal's Primary education system". *International Journal of Educational Development* 24: 315-328.
- Mathema K.B. & Bista M.M., 2006. *Study on Student Performance in SLC*. Ministry of Education/ESAT, Nepal.
- Ministry of Education and Sports, 2004. *School Level Educational Statistics of Nepal*. Flash Report I. Nepal.
- Shrestha, D.L. 2005. "Quality Education in Tribhuvan University: Prospects, Constraints and Challenges" (unpublished paper). Kirtipur: CEDA.
- Mikesell, Stephen. 2006. "Thoughts on why the Children of Nepal would Join the Revolution". In *People's Power in Nepal*, edited by R.K. Vishwakarma. New Delhi: Manak Pub.
- Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and Alliance, Nepal. 2006. *Vocational Pathways*.

- UNICEF. 2005. *Assessment of the Impact of Conflict on the Situation of Children and Women in Conflict-Affected Districts, Nepal*. Kathmandu UNICEF Nepal.
- World Bank, 2001. *Nepal: Priorities and Strategies for Education Reform*.
- 2005. *Resilience Amidst Conflict: An Assessment of Poverty in Nepal 1995-96 and 2003-04*.