New Languages of Schooling: Ethnicity, Education, and Equality in Nepal

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Mother tongue education has remained a controversial issue in Nepal. Scholars, activists, and policy-makers have favored mother tongue education from the standpoint of social justice. Against these views, others have identified this effort as predominantly groupist in its orientation and not helpful in imagining a unified national community. Taking this contention as a point of inquiry, this paper explores the contested space of mother-tongue education to understand the ways in which people position themselves within the polarizing debates of ethnicity-based claims on education in Nepal. Drawing from the ethnographic fieldwork in a mother-tongue education school, I illustrate that the students made meaning in their everyday world by maintaining the multilingual repertoire that included their mother tongue, Nepali, and some English; multilingualism was used as a strategy for mother-tongue education. I propose a notion of simultaneity to explain this attempt to seek membership into multiple groups and display of apparently contradictory dynamics. On the one hand, the practices in these schools display inward-looking characteristics through the everyday use of mother tongue, the construction of unified ethnic identity, and cultural practices. On the other hand, outward-looking dynamics of making claims in the universal spaces of national education and public places could also be seen. The salience of these processes is the simultaneous membership to multiple groups, claims over public spaces and in the spaces of nationalism, hitherto associated with Nepali language. Contrary to the essentialist categories espoused in both nationalist discourse and ethnic activism, students in these schools display affiliation to multiple languages and identities that were seen as neither incompatible nor binary opposites.

Keywords: Nepal, education, ethnicity, language, identity.

Introduction

The issue of ethnicity is increasingly becoming one of the central issues in the politics and scholarship on Nepal. Scrutinizing the contemporary socio-political context of Nepal, scholars have deliberated over the entanglement of ethnicity in everyday life. The nature of these entanglements in relation to social and political aspirations has been a matter of considerable debate. In the first section of this paper, I elaborate on this discussion. I highlight a tension between analysis that focuses on the locatedness of the group for social justice and analysis that focuses on the fluidity of its boundaries to emphasise national unity. Taking this contention as a point of inquiry, in the second section, I present empirical material from an ethnographic study mother-tongue education school to illustrate that students made meaning in their everyday world by maintaining the multilingual repertoire that included their mother tongue, Nepali, and some English; multilingualism was used as a strategy for mother-tongue education. In the third section, I propose a notion of 'simultaneity' (Bakhtin 1981; Woolard 1999) to explain this attempt to seek membership into multiple groups. I highlight two distinct dynamics displayed in the school. On the one hand, there were inward-looking characteristics through the everyday use of mother tongue, the construction of distinctive ethnic identity and cultural practices. On the other hand, there were outward-looking dynamics to make claims in the formal institutions, public places and spaces of nationalism. This paper argues that the negotiation of spaces for multiple languages and their speakers within one national collective was often articulated through the simultaneous presence of different languages and identities. These were seen neither as incompatible nor as binary opposites.

Educating Difference?

Mother tongue education has remained a controversial issue in Nepal. Especially given the political backdrop where the country is debating ethnic federalism and attempting to rewrite its constitution, the issue of mother tongue education has made schools a distinct site of contestation. Since the Panchayat period (1960-1990), various ethnic groups have raised the discontent on the issue of language (Lawoti 2007: 19). They have demanded active state support for the development of their own individual languages and their use as the medium of instruction in school especially up to primary level (Yadava 1992; Gellner 2014; Turin 2013). An important contention has also been on the sole use of Nepali in civil services and courts. This has led to the demands for recognition of minority languages as the language of official communication. Before the 'People's War' (1996-2006), the Maoist group also put forward 40-point demands which included the demand for equal rights for all languages and dialects. Since the 1990 and 2007 rewriting of the constitution, which declared different languages as national languages of Nepal, language increasingly has emerged as a distinct category to articulate community membership and to make claims on the state.

The literature that argues for mother tongue education has drawn our attention toward unequal education outcomes (Awasthi 2004) in non-Nepali speaking populations and highlighted the symbolic exclusion of ethnic groups (Ragsdale 1989; Onta 1996). In this context, authors have argued that the official use of mother tongues ensures better access to education and serves as recognition of ethnic identity and therefore holds a meaning in the social hierarchy (Yadava 2007). Accordingly, activists contend that indigenous languages should be introduced at least as 'elective' subjects (Tumbahang 2010). Other authors (cf. Rai 2009) claim that the concept of regional languages should be developed. Many recent reports have pointed out that the use of mother tongue bridges the gap between school and community (UNESCO 2011; Awasthi 2004). Moreover, many others view mother tongue education as a way to redefine educational systems within broader efforts to democratize, pluralize, and reconstruct public lives. In doing so, it addresses the needs of those who traditionally have been excluded from the dominant education discourse and counters the effects of language "unplanning" (Giri 2011). As schools exemplify the most visible symbol of the state, it is important for educational institutions to open up spaces where plural notions of nationalism can be imagined (Hangen 2012).

Scholars note that post-1990 Nepal has seen an opening up of space for *Janajati*[1] activism making ethnic identities a site of strategic contestation (Gellner et al. 1997; Lawoti and Hangen 2013; Onta 1996). The establishment of *Nepal Janajati Adivasi Mahasangh* (Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities or NEFIN) in 1991, representing 59 member organizations from different ethnic groups, indicated the consolidation of 'ethnic identity' as a principle of collective action (Onta 2006). Against this backdrop, Nepal also ratified the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) Convention 169 on the rights of indigenous and tribal people in 2007. Several international actors like United Nation's (UN) Permanent Forum for Indigenous Peoples, ILO, and UNESCO have been playing an active role in utilizing categories of ethnicity and language to address the issues of inequality. Authors have also noted that these processes have spawned a significant political impact and influenced the ways in which people, in turn, make use of these categories (Shneiderman 2013; Tamang 2012).

Many indigenous and ethnic movements around the world have focussed on demands for official state recognition of their languages as a way to assert their claims on the state. When discussing the bilingual education in Bolivia, Gustafson (2009: 4) points out the how these schools reforms played out as a "struggle over the (de)legitimation of inequality amid shifting strategy of elite rule and contested narrative of the trajectories of Bolivian nation-state." His study illustrates the ways in which bilingual education reforms are instructive to understand the process of production of knowledge as a vehicle of self-transformation and socio-political transformation. Similarly, Bilanuik (2005) discusses the use of Ukrainian and Russian languages in the public media as a way in which newly formed Ukranian nation-state constructed their distinct national identity. Aikman's (1999) study traces the indigenous language program in Peruvian Amazonia to understand the ways in which indigenous communities sought recognition from the state.

These processes are often referred to as a 'politics of recognition.' Identities are seen as a means to forge solidarity and as centers of collective action. The key feature is thus the recognition of difference, and often demand equality on the basis of the very grounds on which recognition had previously been denied. Two distinct claims are made in this regard. First, the groups that have been excluded need equitable access to education. And second, the education system also needs to consider the ways differences are recognized in education. Growing scholarship on the issues of minority rights around the world have pointed that ethno-linguistic marginalization is the consequence of socio-political hierarchies and that these groups need to be the relevant units from the standpoint of justice (Kymlicka and Patten 2003; Young 2000). This perspective suggests that the issue of equality in education is therefore not just about getting the marginalized groups in and out of the schools successfully, but also about changing the nature of education itself both in its organization and in its curriculum. Drawing on this, various researches on everyday language practice illustrate that people assert their 'locatedness' in a group to negotiate the dynamics of identity formation (Gal and Irvine 2000). The literature on linguistic imperialism (Phillipson 2003), linguistic human rights (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000), and minority language rights (May 2005) also points towards utilizing linguistic identity in an attempt to question the relations of power. In order to alleviate social disadvantage, this approach supports limited form of segregation or what Young calls "differentiated solidarity," for the purpose of alleviating social disadvantage (Young 2000: 210—228).

Intervening in this issue, a range of scholars identify this group-based approach as predominantly divisive in its orientation. They have pointed out that schooling in different languages is not helpful in an imagination of a national community and in the addressing the issue of poor social-economic outcomes that the country struggling to achieve. Concerns over the practical consequences of following a politics of difference rather than a politics that focuses on social solidarity across differences have also been raised (Whelpton 1997). We are reminded of the need to encourage multiple and crosscutting identities, including common Nepaliness (Dahal 1995) and caution against the trends of "atomization and communalization of ethnic identity" (Sharma 1992). To some, Nepali language is considered a unifying language (Bandhu 1989) that fosters cohesiveness and national identity in Nepal. This literature has questioned both the need and the practicality of using numerous minority languages of Nepal. groupist

These debates uncover the tensions inherent in recognizing school spaces, which continue to be perceived places for uniformity, into spaces of multiple and often competing interests. These perspectives offer important insights about the complexity of group inequality and the challenges in attempts towards equality. These debates, however, also raise various questions. Even as we recognize the fluidity of ethnicities, how may we challenge practices of exclusion that are themselves based on ethnic identities? And, while we reject ethnicity as a residual category that needs to be assimilated, can we avoid the construction of ethnicity as a solid reified entity?

Using these questions as the framework of inquiry, in the following section I explore the contested space of mother tongue education[2] to understand the ways in which people position themselves within the polarized debates of ethnicity-based claims on education in Nepal. What is the meaning and significance of mother-tongue education in the context of Nepal? And how is this shaping and being shaped by the experience of people who participate in them? The paper is based on the ethnographic research[3] in a school in Kapilbastu that uses mother tongue, Tharu, in their school curriculum. I call this school Buddhabhumi School. During the course of my fieldwork, I spent time interacting with students and teachers, attending the classes, studying the textbooks and participating in the everyday life of the school. I also conducted interviews with various government officials, development workers and ethnic activists.

'Private' Languages in Public Spaces

On my first day in Buddhabhumi, I recorded in my field diary that the students talked to each other in Tharu, especially the younger ones in the primary classes. I could hardly hear Nepali spoken on the playground. As I walked in the corridors, I heard a group of older students talking to their friends, again in Tharu. When they saw that I was a bit lost and looking for teacher's office, they spoke to me in Nepali and told me the direction to the school office and reverted to Tharu. In the staff room, the teachers were talking mainly in Tharu, though I could hear some conversations in Nepali as well. As I began to explain the purpose of my visit, Rama Khanal,[4] a primary teacher, promptly asked me, "Do you know how to speak in Tharu?" When I told her that I could not speak but I could understand it, she told me, "You will need to learn Tharu to work here, if you want to work well!"

Buddhabhumi and five primary schools in the locality have recently started using Tharu/Awadhi and Nepali as the official languages of instruction in primary education. Buddhabhumi and two primary schools uses Tharu and Nepali and three other primary schools use Awadhi and Nepali. Buddhabhumi functions as a resource school for these five primary school, and provides textbook and training support to the teachers. This program was initiated through the joint collaboration of the Ministry of Education and United Mission to Nepal (UMN). These three languages were officially introduced as the 'new languages of schooling,' complying with the recent multi-lingual education guidelines approved by the Ministry of Education. It is based on the principle of 'first-language-first' in order to help the children make a better start, and continue to perform better, than those for whom school starts with a language they don't understand. Secondly, it also operationalizes the provisions in the Constitution of Nepal that declares the country multi-ethnic (*bahu jatiya*) and multilingual (*bahu bhasik*) country. As Hutt (2012: 307) points out in his analysis of the new national anthem, the celebration of multiple ethnicity, language, and religion is presented as "symbolic shorthand for inclusive and progressive nation." The idea and practice of mother tongue education is thus played out largely in changing discourses of social inclusion, multi-ethnicity and social justice increasingly espoused not just by language enthusiasts, but by the Nepalese state itself. Mother tongue education was not only about minority languages such as Tharu but also about the languages of social inclusion, multi-ethnicity, and diversity of the nation.

Buddhabumi is situated in the middle of a Tharu community. Tharu is the most common language that was used by the students, especially to talk to each other.[5] However, most of them easily switched to Nepali, especially the students in secondary level, while speaking to me. Tharu was thus a 'private' language — the language of close relations between friends, between family members, and among members of the same community. For outsiders like me, the public language was Nepali. It was the language associated with formality, education, and exposure. This was not unexpected. However, within a few weeks in this school, I realized that the boundaries between this private language and public language were not impermeable. The language of instruction was a mix of Tharu and Nepali. This practice was more common in primary classrooms, which had officially been using Tharu for as medium of instruction, but could also be observed in higher grades. In any case, many teachers recalled that, even before the use of Tharu was officially sanctioned, *unofficially* the practice of explaining through Tharu had been going for many years.

Tharu was commonly used to explain the lessons in the classroom and most of the teachers spoke fluent Tharu. Rama Khanal often told me, "I have also become Tharu after living with these people. Most of us who have lived here for a long time have learnt to speak Tharu. It is otherwise difficult to do our job as a teacher properly." She belongs to a Nepali-speaking hill community; commonly referred as '*pahadi mul*' (with the roots in the hills) in the locality. She started in this school some twenty years ago. "Primary teachers need to know all the languages," many teachers often told me. "I need to explain the lessons in the student's own language. I have to explain even Nepali lessons in Tharu, otherwise they will not be able to understand it. Take the word '*dai.*' It means 'mother' in Tharu but 'elder brother' in Nepali. If the teacher is not able to differentiate between the two, it can get very confusing. The teachers need to understand these local terms and respond to the students accordingly." According to the 2001 census, 52 percent of Nepali people do not speak Nepali as their first language. Awasthi (2004) argues that the use of Nepali-only policy in education institutions propagates language disadvantage on the non-Nepali speaking population.

As Rama Khanal entered the classroom, all the students stood up and greeted her with "Good morning ma'am!" She replied, "Good morning. Sit down," in English. As the students settled into their seats, Rama called out the students' names for the regular attendance call. Each student stood up after their name was called and shouted, "Present, ma'am," again in English. After this morning ritual was over, she explained the task for the day to the class, "*Aaja samuhik kaaj garne. Timi haru najik au*," which

translates from the Nepali as "We will do group work today. You come together." She then divided students into groups, "*aur aage aav*," meaning "come closer" in Tharu, as the children had not responded to the instruction in Nepali. She then assigned math problems to students. She went around to have a look at the students' work. When she stopped in front of one group she asked them, "16 *se pahal kadna hou? Hei kadna likhi*?" In Tharu, this means "What comes before 16? What have you written here?" She sat next to the group and explained the series of numbers to the group in Tharu. Some students answered correctly; others did not. Some asked some more questions. The conversation between teacher and students took place mainly in Tharu. She looked at me and asked, "How can I explain the maths concept in Nepali, if the students do not understand the language?"

First, whether or not she used the language properly is an important but a different question. Nonetheless, it demonstrates the discourse of local language as an important and desirable part of pedagogy. This stands in contrast with the earlier education policy that sought to prevent the use of local language on the school premises. Even while the languages were used, this was seen as an informal intellectual activity to achieve the larger goal of formal education. Being one of the very few schools in Nepal that uses mother tongue, Buddhabhumi's approach to language use is showcased as a successful pedagogical innovation. According to teachers' code of conduct displayed on a board in the playground, the school strives to become a 'model school' and the use of mother tongue in the primary grades is one way to achieve this goal. They frequently had visitors who came to understand how this policy is implemented.

Second, Rama Khanal's classroom also illustrates everyday language practices in multilingual contexts, where two or more languages are used in a given situation. The sociolinguistic research refers to these flexible language practices as 'translanguaging.' Translanguaging is the process of making meaning, shaping experiences, and gaining understanding and knowledge through the use of two or more languages (Garcia and Wei 2013). In the classroom, teachers and students often ignore the language norms and use languages flexibly to support understandings and build conceptual knowledge. In Nepal, this perspective has guided the Ministry of Education (MoE) and other international education programs. In one of my interviews with government officials for this research, a high official in the Ministry of Education explained, "Multilingual Education (MLE) needs to be understood as a pedagogic intervention. In Nepal, we have an assumption that everybody knows and speaks Nepali. But that is not the case. If you look at the classrooms there is crosscutting practice of 'code-switching'. In many places, Nepali is learnt as a second language. MLE is meant to facilitate this process."

The official adoption of mother tongue generated both support and suspicion amongst the parents at Buddhabhumi. Some of the parents thought that this is a school that teaches Tharu and will keep their children backward, away from Nepali and English. The aspiration of social mobility through the dominant language is a common phenomenon in Nepal. Those who could afford private school fees moved their children to a 'boarding' school in the nearby market area. According to one of the teachers, these schools charge Rs. 500-1000 per month (compared to the Rs. 40 annual registration fee at Buddhabhumi). However, the statistics on the student enrollment in the Buddhabhumi show that the student population has not changed dramatically in last few years. The parents of the students who stayed mainly shared that children have now learnt to speak good Tharu, along with Nepali. "Earlier they used to speak '*phohor*' (unclean) and '*je payo tyehi*' (unsystematic) Tharu. Now they speak '*ramro*' (good) Tharu, while they are learning Nepali," one Tharu parent whose child is in Class 2 shared with me. The legitimacy of mother-tongue education amongst the parents came mainly from the assumed sanitisation of Tharu language along with proficiency in Nepali.

Local Textbooks, Global Knowledge

The construction of '*ramro*' Tharu was mainly done through the publication of textbooks. It was Friday afternoon; the school had a half day off. However, a group of ten teachers from a nearby school had gathered at Buddhabhumi. Janak Chaudhary, the Vice Principal of Buddhabhumi and the the Chief Editor of Textbooks, had invited several teachers from the nearby feeder schools to Buddhabhumi for a follow-up workshop on textbook writing. Buddhabhumi School, with the financial support from United Mission to Nepal (UMN), had already written and printed textbooks for Science, Math, and Social Studies in Tharu, Awadhi, and Nepali, in addition to separate Tharu and Awadhi language textbooks for Classes 1 and 2. Though the curriculum development department (CDC) had centrally printed textbooks in Tharu, the variant of Tharu used in those books was not the one spoken locally, i.e. Dangaura Tharu.[6] Thus, a new set of books were printed with the close involvement of biliterate and bilingual teachers who were primarily responsible for school teaching. These teachers drew from stories recounted by village elders, complied according to curriculum guidelines issued by the Department of Education and thus representing 'correct' Dangaura Tharu texts to the external world.

The notion of 'local' (*sthaniya*) played an important role in this process of developing textbooks. On page 19 of the Tharu textbook, there is a chapter on *Shivgadi Mela*. The chapter is presented in a form of conversation between two characters, Maya and Himmat. Maya asks: "Which *mela* (fair) did you go to, Himmat?" Himmat answers, "We went to Shivgadi Mela." Maya further queries, "Where is Shivgadi and when does this fair take place?" Himmat explains, "Shivgadi is in Kapilbastu District, on the southeast side of the *Dhan* river. There is a big fair on the day of *Shivratri*." As illustrated in this excerpt, the school adapted a specific way of presenting the school curriculum to students through the introduction of 'local' content. Following the learning objective of each lesson, as written in the curriculum development guidelines, the schoolbooks used local names, places, pictures, and local practices to deliver the lesson. Teachers often said comments such as this: *Children can learn how to write an essay through a lesson on Shivgadi Mela which takes place in our district. A chapter on the faraway Pashupatinath Temple that the children have never seen will not help them to learn essay writing*. Similarly, Lesson 10 in the Tharu-language textbook on letter writing has an example of a letter written by a boy to his sister describing his primary school. The lesson also presents a picture of a school from nearby locality. The school building is familiar, the characters have names that sound familiar, and the description is one that the children can relate to.

At an instrumental level, this space occupied by the 'locality' in the textbooks and its relevance to the everyday lives of students affirmed the pedagogic legitimacy of mother tongue as effective teaching practice. In the classes, teachers and students related easily to the lessons that made reference to local issues. Each time the teacher discussed a lesson based on a local topic, the students shared more information than what was written in the book. It also added to students' enthusiasm in class. Pointing to the names and places mentioned in the book, students often exclaimed, "His name is there in this lesson," or "I have been to this place. This is where the weekly market takes place." In the classrooms, the teachers utilized this local content to draw students' attention, make the lessons locally relevant and deliver the lessons more effectively. For the students, the examples were more real and tangible.

Even while the 'local' occupied the central role in constructing knowledge in these textbooks, the writers also made a conscious effort to interpret the outside world in local languages. As Caddell (2006) point out, the more educated the children are, the more they are expected to be acquainted with ideas outside their locale. This expectation from education required reinventing the local languages further in new ways. In one of the book writing meetings, one teacher suggested, "We do not always have to show ancient Tharu artifacts in our books. We can have lessons on astronauts and computers in Tharu." The textbooks writing had primarily focussed on documenting various Tharu objects that the younger generation no longer used. Though there was a general consensus amongst the book writers that textbooks represent the Tharu lifeworld, many writers wanted to look forward to a different future.

It is also important to note that at no point did the school seek to establish themselves as separate from the state. On the contrary, their efforts were geared towards engaging with the state more effectively. For the school, strong engagement with the state was essential for gaining both recognition and legitimacy for mother tongue education and strengthening the relationship with the state. As Rama Khanal mentioned, "It is very important for the students to be proficient in Nepali after class three. And by the time they are in class four, it is essential that they are able to do comprehension in Nepali." Even while the 'local' occupied the central role in constructing knowledge, this dual interest—to *engage with the local* and to *expand the local* to national and international—is clearly visible in the textbooks. The representation of people in the book included traditional occupations like farming but also included student journalists and teachers. Students were expected to understand and know about things that were far away (such as geography and history) and abstract concepts (such as mathematics and science) but these were mediated through the 'local' as a fundamental pedagogic tool. The textbooks attempted to depict a specific image of the local while not limiting itself within the boundaries of that locality. And even though there is reiteration of messages about the direction of progress, from rural to urban (Pigg 1992), it does not place language as a barrier to this notion of progress. This framing of the mother tongue as compatible with other knowledge sources played an important role in gaining legitimacy where education is commonly perceived as a route to modernity (Valentin 2011). This also allowed space to reconcile the multiple, and often divergent, conception of legitimate knowledge expected from schooling.

Claiming Quality for Equality

The legitimacy of the mother tongue in an institutional setting such as school depended on the extent to which it could enhance the 'quality' of education. The discourse on 'quality' entered the discussion in the school in two different ways. On the one hand, it was seen as a pedagogical tool to enhance the quality of education for a non-Ne-

pali speaking student population. Here, mother tongue was seen helping the children to achieve quality education. On the other hand, given the current valorization of English-medium schooling, mother tongue education was also seen with suspicion and viewed as a way of keeping children away from mainstream education and thus potentially acting as an obstacle to quality education.

This idea of 'quality' played an important role in building the imagery of competence which placed students along a binary from 'smart' (*chalakh*) students to dull (*buddhu*) students on the basis of language proficiency. Though these were unsolicited acts, such labelling was evident in narratives of students. As Santosh Tharu, a Class 5 student mentioned, "I speak Tharu with my friends and family. I teach my sister and brother in Tharu when they cannot do their homework. It is easier to understand the lesson when I explain in our own language. When I was in primary school my teachers used both Tharu and Nepali. They explained lessons in Tharu but the books were in Nepali. I teach my younger brother and sister Nepali too. It is important to learn Nepali otherwise people will make a fool out of us (*buddhu banauchha)*. I will work very hard to get first division in SLC."

This contradictory perception of the role of mother tongue in education uncovers the deep-rooted tensions around issues of ethnicity and inequality in Nepal. In the historical context, where school education did not include languages other than Nepali, this institutional change also demanded a significant attitudinal shift. One of the main concerns of the students was to ensure that they had control over these languages in order to become the knowledgeable person that a formal education promises. Scholars have discussed the idea of the 'educated person' as key to the culturally constructed character of education (Levinson and Holland 1996). They argue that this shapes the expectations for and hopes in the transformative capabilities of formal education, which are further mirrored in everyday discourse. As Noonan (1996: 5) has noted, young people therefore consider Nepali (and English) as a language needed to "make their way in the world" and the school was the place to acquire the knowledge of these languages. Formal education in Nepal is associated with future opportunities and notions of modernity (Carney and Madsen 2009). Hence, as a symbol of modernity and development, most children and young people accepted the importance of acquiring schooled literacy and shared the assumption that this meant mastery of Nepali and English.

Given the complex processes that shape imaginaries of competence, where language plays an important role, the school negotiated quality education through various external measures such as national level examinations and English language proficiency. Individual students' aspirations and institutional commitment to these external measures played an important role in the negotiation of collective meaning construed around quality of mother tongue education. In these circumstances, external measures of 'quality education' not only facilitated the day-to-day functioning of the school as an education institution but also mitigated the doubts, if any, of the relevance of mother tongue education. The idea that mother tongue education is geared towards 'uniform national education' goals provided an acceptable framework in the context of general under-achievement in education.

In Buddhabhumi, the board listing the educational outcomes of the school was displayed in the head teacher's room. It showed that the school has achieved 60—100% pass rates in last few years. Given that in 2013 and 2012, the national pass rate for SLC was 41.57 and 46.16 percent respectively, these were significant achievements. These displays served two purposes: first as a 'social audit' mechanism of good governance in school policy, where each school is required to publicly display their results and be accountable for them; and second, they were a testament to 'quality education' provided by the school. Especially given the low educational achievement of ethnic populations in Nepal, achieving high educational outcomes was an important goal. This emphasis on national-level examinations also reflects the attempts of the school to be part of the national education system. The school at no point aimed at any exclusive form of education.

English language proficiency was also seen as another marker of quality. Buddhabhumi offered optional English classes to their students from 4th class onwards. This was guided not only by the school curriculum framework but also the notions of quality education and social mobility associated with English. Schools, through their medium of instruction, are implicated in the reproduction of advantage in society. Schools that offer access to a high-status language are seen as offering better life chances for those who can take that language. Parents also felt reassured that these schools taught English and therefore their 'quality of education' was comparable to other schools in the area. I did not get into in-depth inquiry about the English language teaching in these schools. However, it was clear in most of my class observation that there was significant room for improvement. The wall painting in Class 2 had misspellings of the days of the week and some months, e.g. 'Thusday,' 'Teusday,' 'Auguest,' and 'Novmber.' Children were rote-learning these incorrect spellings. Some children pointed out the mistake and said they learned it from the book. Caddell (2006: 213) notes, the "use of

English, even of a very poor level, is considered to connect students to a wider international project, offering a greater potential for mobility." Acquisition of English skills was one of the possible ways to a "world of promises and new opportunities" (Valentin 2011: 110). This linguistic capital was thus seen both the medium and outcome of better life chances mediated through school.

The school responded to this by its attempts to maintain both *quality in* mother tongue and *quality through* mother tongue. First, the teachers invested a lot of time and effort to ensure quality in Tharu as a subject. A comprehensive list of words to teach the alphabet through Tharu words had been recently developed keeping in mind the national-level learning objectives for that level. For each of the classes, papers, poems and other reading material had been developed in mother tongue. These processes also marked the transition from oral to written language, developing grammar, vocabulary and standardization of the language. It is through the constant repetition, correction, and practice that the students were learning and perfecting literary proficiency in their mother tongue. Second, Buddhabhumi was also working towards maintaining the overall quality of education. The school recently received training on the continuous assessment system (CAS), which trained teachers to evaluate the progress of students on a regular basis. Like most other schools, Buddhabhumi teachers work their way through past exam papers and questions to ensure that the students performed well on subsequent examinations. The process of teaching these languages in school was thus a process of making oneself an 'educated person' who both spoke and wrote correct linguistic codes in the mother tongue and other inter/national language. It was though this high educational achievement and proficiency in multiple languages that the school and the students sought to unlink the association of mother tongue education with low quality education.

New Capital in New Markets

One day I asked Janak Chaudhary, the chief editor of the mother tongue books, about his thoughts on the value of mother tongue in the employment market. The prospect for better employment has been one of the most contentious issues around the relevance of mother tongue education in Nepal. The material consequence of social practices is a critical factor in understanding the ways in which it shapes capital, social relations and forms of identity. Chaudhary replied, "As you can see, it has definitely helped me. I have just completed my MA thesis on Adjectives of Tharu and English Languages. It has come very handy in my work in the textbooks." While textbook writing is definitely not a lucrative employment opportunity, it is certainly indicative of the gradual social transformation that is underway in Nepal. This has opened up new employment markets for multilingual speakers like Chaudhary. He is multilingual and educated, that makes him uniquely suited for the demands of this kind of work. His Tharu competence helps him to work very closely with the school and the local population and his skill in Nepali helps him in communication with people outside Kathmandu. As a proficient Tharu and Nepali speaker, he was able to act as a bridge between various groups. He was able to utilize his linguistic capital to gain place in the emerging 'linguistic marketplace.' In Buddhabhumi, though Tharu was not primarily seen as a language that could possibly enhance the employment prospects, the opening up of opportunities such as textbook writing, local newspapers, local FM radios, teaching in MLE schools were facilitating the shift in attitude. Other teachers like Rama Khanal, introduced in the earlier section, learned Tharu along the way to gain the 'capital' required to work in a setting where the knowledge of Tharu was essential. As illustrated above, in order to work in the Tharu locality, she learned the language.

However, this opportunity as a writer is not long-term employment. Chaudhary's full time job is as a teacher in Buddhabhumi. He teaches Social Studies in 8, 9 and 10 grades. Since the school uses mother tongue only for the primary school, he does not officially use Tharu to teach. He described the process as follows:

When the UMN program started, we were a bit confused about the way in which we can use three languages in teaching in school. When I studied in this school, the school did not have MLE, so the official language of instruction was Nepali. But most of the teachers translated the text in Tharu. Since we completed our education in Nepali, so we are more comfortable in Nepali especially in writing. Even when we are speaking in Tharu, I sometime use Nepali words. As we are using this language more in formal way now, this should gradually improve.

The precarity of this new emerging employment market raises a lot of uncertainty for the younger generation. Santosh Tharu, the Class V student introduced in the earlier section, was quite unsure about the how he may navigate the existing market. "If you are not educated, you will be *gawar* (an uneducated rural person). People will make a fool out of you," Santosh Tharu told me in one of our conversations. He lives, with his parents and siblings, in the same village in which the school is located. "Tharu is inside me, it will never go. But it is not enough to know only Tha-

ru. If I have to speak to people like you properly, I have to use Nepali. After I complete my SLC, I want go to Kathmandu. There I will learn English as well." As I sat down in the open space in front of his thatched house, his father asked me to "put some sense in Santosh's head." His father said, "He needs to concentrate on his studies more than he does. If he does not get first division, how will be go to study in Kathmandu? He has been good in his studies, but he needs to work hard. He is our eldest son, we are looking forward to him growing up and taking responsibility of the family."

Within this view, learning mother tongue opened up more options for employment than those who spoke only Nepali. Heller (2006: 17) makes similar observation in the study of French school in Ontario. She discusses the way in which the Franco-Ontarian education system sought to produce students who would be able to take up jobs that required French language while also participating in the Anglophone dominated networks. These narratives show multiple trajectories, with often-conflictual role of mother tongue. There were two ways in which the role of the mother tongue is articulated in the employment market. The emerging employment opportunities such as FM radios, language teaching, music industry and textbook writing etc. were seen as small but important arenas where this linguistic 'cultural capital' could be converted into commercially viable 'economic capital.' However, students are also not willing to be limited only to these languages, but wish to have access to wider possibilities. The social meaning of linguistic capital was inevitably circumscribed by the material consequences and the challenges that lie therein.

Simultaneous Membership in Multiple Groups

The focus on language and education brings to the fore tensions between languages and social groups. The choice of language in education can potentially play a critical role in the purpose and processes of school experiences, and change the patterns of exchanges in a given social context. Many researches show the indigenous and ethnic movement around the world (Aikman 1999; Heller 2007; Bilanuik 2004; Gustafson 2009) often utilize language as an important ways to make claims on the state, articulate ideas about ethnicity and nationalism, and express community memberships. In these contexts, scholars have drawn our attention to varied linguistic practices such as production of 'correct' local languages, utilizing languages to assert memberships, and integration of these local languages into a wider linguistic market. These dynamic processes in which the mother tongue is used unsettle the boundaries between neat dichotomies of private-public, ethnicity-nationalism, local-global and the reified notions of identity and fluidity. It highlights the complex relationship between languages in public spaces and private lives. In Buddhabhumi, students made meaning in their everyday world by maintaining the multilingual repertoire that included their mother tongue, Nepali and some English; multilingualism was used as a strategy for mother-tongue education. *Each language has its own role*, I was often told in my conversations with teachers, students and parents. One of the teacher explained: "Mother tongue can never replace Nepali because Nepali is the contact language (*sampark bhasa*). Nepali can never take a place of English because it is an international language. Similarly, Nepali and English cannot take the place of mother tongue because it is the language close to our hearts."

New developments in the socio-linguistic literature have increasingly highlighted the importance of paying attention to everyday practices that is attentive to the actual language exchanges. Drawing our attention to the multilingual contexts in Europe, scholars such as Garcia (2009) point towards varied discursive practices in multilingual contexts where speakers draw on several languages simultaneously. The focus here is not on languages but on the people who draw might on different languages in their multilingual discursive practices. This analysis has made it possible to capture the perspective on multilingualism that is more complex and grounded in the everyday language use. In Buddhabhumi, the negotiation of spaces for multiple languages and their speakers within one national collective was thus often articulated through the simultaneous presence of different languages. These also uncover the tensions inherent in transforming the spaces, what has been and continues to be a space for uniformity, into spaces of multiple and often competing interests. There were, therefore, increasing efforts to 'normalize' minority languages and practices. This was, however, done without dislodging the position of the Nepali language as an overarching language that brings speakers of different languages together. The construction of a particular ethno-linguistic identity was evidently framed through affirmation of Nepali national identity. But they were seen as neither incompatible nor binary opposites—they could be both Tharu and Nepali, local and global at the same time and within the same space.

The salience of these dynamics is the simultaneous membership to multiple groups, claims over public spaces and in the spaces of nationalism, hitherto associated with Nepali. The notion of simultaneity provides a helpful framework in explaining the multiple scales on which identities are expressed. The idea of simultaneity is influenced by

Mikhail Bakhtin's conceptual system of heterogeneity and his rejection of binarism. Simultaneity, according to Bakhtin (1981) is when people do not necessarily select between contrasting elements but, rather, can thrive in their tense intersection. He perceives language as "not a mere wavering between two mutually exclusive possibilities but a real co-presence of contrasting elements in tension," (Bakhtin 1981: 281). Similarly, Woolard (1999: 4) refers to this as bivalency of multilingual contexts where speakers make "simultaneous claims to more than one social identity." They argue that simultaneities can occur in various forms — hybridity (the mixing of two or more forms), polyglossia (the simultaneous presence of two or more languages within a single cultural system) and heteroglossia (where the same language exists in its official and unofficial forms).

From this perspective, I identify two distinct impulses. The practices in these schools, on the one hand, display *inward-looking* characteristics through the everyday use of the mother tongue and the construction of distinctive ethnic identity and cultural practices. The school drew upon, encouraged and built on the everyday use of the mother tongue in students. This was accompanied by the standardisation and sanitisation of minority language to make it '*ramro*' Tharu. New textbooks were written with the notion of 'local' at the center of educational discourse. Here, language and linguistic practices were seen as an important way to center the 'locatedness' of group identification. Far from reflecting the 'return to tradition,' these were wider processes underway in society that aims to mobilize new forms of cultural capital, including the new symbolic value of otherwise disappearing minority languages and cultural worlds. Through these processes, the school aimed to transform the terms in which social identities are represented. This reconfiguration of the social spaces might also reflect the evolving balance of power and emergence of potential new hierarchies.

Second, there were *outward-looking* attempts to transcend ethnic boundaries and engage as a member of national community. They demonstrated apparently contradictory process of using the mother tongue to make claims in the universal spaces of education, public places, market, and nationalism. The school and students attempted to break the association of 'ethnic' with the 'uneducated' through high education outcomes and competence on other languages. The textbooks served as a means to connect with the state. They sought to make connections with the emerging new markets, transcend class barriers and claim urbanity. Contrary to the idea that ethnicity is anti-state or anti-market, the school and students were engaged in the articulation with the multiple arenas of social change. Since education is most commonly perceived by parents and students as a key determinant upward social mobility and life chances, the school sought to normalise the presence of the mother tongue in different spaces such as public places, state institutions, employment market and educational institutions.

The idea of simultaneity does not do away with the 'linguistic hierarchy' that often denies acceptance of 'low-status' language into the 'high-status' language, and the flow of ideas is usually unidirectional. LaDousa (2005), discussing the multilingual arena of Varanasi, India, interprets the relevance of Hindi medium and English medium within the juxtaposed market of different languages. The market for Hindi is local and within the Hindi speaking elites of Varanasi. The market for English stretches beyond Varanasi. His study point towards the need to recognise the varying ways in which linguistic values are reproduced, while managing the tension between various languages. Studying the use of Catalan and Castilian in Barcelona, Woolard (1985) discusses the higher linguistic capital held by Catalan even though Castilian is the language of the government. Davis (2012) makes similar argument in the context of Srilanka where the tension between Jaffna and non-Jaffna Tamil is becoming more salient, even while both the forms co-exist in linguistic practices. Simultaneity is thus not an absence of contradictions but indicates various levels of unresolved co-presences. The framework of simultaneity is helpful in understanding not only the co-presences of various languages, linguistic forms and its usage but also different positions, voices and identities indicated through linguistic practices. The mother tongue school, in this context, presents itself as 'contact zone' of not only various languages but also of ideas of private and public, ethnicity and nationalism, and the local and the global.

The everyday practices in Buddhabhumi show that neither the ideals of homogeneous Nepali national identity nor the bounded ethnic identity can explain the complex ways in which people negotiate their everyday lives. At both levels, the ideas of cultural unity had led to sharp boundary making between different groups. Ethnic and national identity is often seen as mutually exclusive and considerable tension still exists around the question of these identity positions. The students and teachers in Buddhabhumi transcend the compartmentalisation of their social life on the basis of these ethno-linguistic identities but continue to affirm these as an expression of belongingness. Contrary to the essentialist categories espoused in both nationalist discourse and ethnic activism, students in these school display affiliation to multiple languages and identities. Even as they engaged actively with putatively particularistic mother-tongue education, they did so along with Nepali and English.

As illustrated in this article, with simultaneous memberships in multiple groups, the school and the students through their practices engaged in redefining these universal spaces of national education. In doing so, even while the school conform to the existing norms of the education system, they also transform those same conventions by the distinctive ideas and practices that they bring to the fore. Thus, a framework of simultaneous membership leaves room to explore the everyday life in a more open-ended way. This approach of looking at identity could help to us appreciate both 'locatedness' and 'fluidity' displayed in everyday lives, without being limited by its absolutism. While reconciliation between the two positions is perhaps difficult, there is a need to keep them in 'constant confrontation' (Pennycook, 2006: 71) to appreciate the multiple scales in which identities are expressed.

Conclusion

Through an analysis of mother tongue education, I have presented education institutions as both symbolic and functional spaces, where people negotiate differing ideas and visions for self and society. I have proposed the notion of simultaneous membership to explain various apparently contradictory processes. This approach allows us to appreciate the complex ways in which identities are negotiated in everyday lives. It recognises the dynamic ways in which students and teachers made use of minority languages along with other languages, while also making claims over public spaces and in the spaces of nationalism, hitherto associated with Nepali. This emerging narrative of identity and social change may help us to understand the issues of ethnicity in education in a more open-ended way: not as the only constituting feature of the country's polity, but one whose salience cannot be ignored when pursuing transformational politics.

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Endnotes

1. Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) describes Janajati as politically marginalized ethnic nationalities with distinct collective features such as: own mother tongues, distinct cultural traditions and social structures, and who also have written or unwritten histories.

2. I use the term 'mother tongue' to reflect both popular and official usages. The census formally classifies the Nepali population using 'mother tongue' as a category on the basis of languages associated with their ethnic groups. People in the schools used the terms 'matri bhasa' (in Nepali and Tharu) and 'ma bhay' (In Nepal Bhasa) very frequently to allude to these associations.

3. During my PhD fieldwork, I conducted ethnographic research in two schools — one in Kathmandu (that uses Nepal Bhasa) and another in Kapilbastu (that uses Tharu). For the purpose of this article, I have presented the analysis based on ethnography from the school in Kapilbastu.

4. All the names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

5. In Budhhabhumi, Tharu is the language that is spoken by most of the students. However, Awadhi is also spoken by small proportion of students in other primary schools that UMN is partnering with. UMN has thus chosen to publish the textbooks in three languages — Tharu, Awadhi and Nepali. In 2013, Save the children started working

in six other school in the locality. Since the majority of students in those locality spoke Awadhi as their mother tongue, they have published books only in Awadhi and Nepali.

6. There are approximately nine different regional variants of Tharu. See Gunaratne (2002) for a detailed discussion on the variety of languages spoken by community that is commonly categorised under the broad ethnonym Tharu.

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