

Post-conflict Identity Crisis in Nepal: Opportunities for Reconstruction?

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Background

In February 1996, the Communist Party of Nepal [Maoist] [CPN-M], announced a 'People's War' in Nepal, with the aim of overthrowing the constitutional monarchy and establishing 'a new socio-economic structure and state' (Bhattarai, 2003; Maoist Statements & Documents, 2003). The ensuing conflict spread rapidly across the country with profound consequences, leading to a political failure to respond to rising insurgency (Bohara et al, 2006), social inequality (Murshed & Gates, 2005) and abject poverty and deprivation (Deraniyagala, 2005; Do & Iyer, 2007). In total, over 13,000 people were killed by the war, before the Comprehensive Peace Accord was eventually signed between the Government of Nepal and the CPN-M in November 2006.

Against this backdrop, we explore the post-conflict scenario in Nepal to examine the concept of national identity, and critically consider the implications of change for education and society. We contend that a radical revision of the education agenda is necessary to address the dominance of the political state and hegemony of a state defined pedagogy. While the 'People's War' was born in the context of considerable public dissatisfaction - (generated by several post-Panchayat [1990] governments), it was also partly a political response to deep and historically embedded socio-economic divisions. In the last 13 years, Nepal has suffered a significant loss in social and political stability, resulting in a breakdown of state institutions. Yet political change has led to improved public participation, where historically suppressed castes and communities have begun to challenge the dominance of the state: to such an extent there is now a significant need for restructuring to account for emerging social and cultural identities, as well as complex social and educational needs.

Research Questions

In this paper we bring together several inter-related themes: education, politics and the pervasive influence of globalisation, to argue in favour of a radical revision of education in Nepal. We reflect on the 'People's War' in Nepal to examine the recent crisis of identity among the multi-ethnic and indigenous populations. In response to the rupturing of tradition and in the midst of a rebellion against state nationalism, we examine the tensions of identity formation in the context of an evolving political state. Focusing specifically on aspects of education reform, our investigation centres on how national identity is being redefined through the education system of Nepal. In this analysis, we reveal the tensions between embedded notions of 'national unity' and the political 'fragmentation' of the state, as new communities, identities and political affiliations continue to emerge in the post-conflict era. We examine how such tensions are operating to undermine the significance of national identity and consider how 'Nepali' identity and citizenship may be usefully reconstructed through education.

Methods

The national project of creating a unified Nepali state was the top priority of the Panchayat system (1951 - 1990), leading to the development of a state defined pedagogy. A policy of 'national schooling' was imposed through 'restrictive textbooks and curricula that aimed at reinforcing a one-party system' (Carney & Madsen, 2009: 175). The process of creating 'Rastiya Itihas' (National History) through the political state, led to the imposition of a national curriculum, a 'particular idea of nationhood' (Onta, 1996: 215) and the marginalisation of indigenous culture(s) and language(s). In turn, this impacted on the learning abilities of children from minority ethnic communities and non-native Nepali speaking backgrounds (Ragsdale, 1989), where literacy rates are significantly lower for lower caste groups (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2003).

Ethnic divisions and hierarchies displayed through public images in textbooks have promoted an 'evolutionary understanding of social stages': moving from deprived rural lifestyles to affluent and advanced urban cultures. The propagation and legitimation of such imagery serves to reinforce the concept of social stratification, by educating (indoctrinating) children in a process of compliance with the status quo (Pigg, 1992: 500-501). This produces a submissive and 'fatalistic' view that deprivation is predetermined and hence inevitable (Bista, 1991). While the multi-party democracy to reform education has largely failed to 'address a centuries-old legacy of social and material inequality' (Carney & Madsen, 2009: 175), we contend that the 'People's War' has nevertheless provided Nepal with an opportunity to rewrite national history and review the politics of national identity in the context of the post-conflict era.

Frame

Our analytical framework facilitates a broader scrutiny of education and its role in promoting national unity. Drawing on data from interviews of educational stakeholders in Nepal, we argue that any state-imposed homogenisation project, while superficially appearing to achieve national unity, is nonetheless hostile to communities whose identities remain dormant behind the mission of the state. We draw on a range of political and social theory (cf. Young, 2004; Taylor, 2004; Bourdieu, 1977), and post-structural perspectives, to examine and critique the influence of the 'Khas'-led programme of 'nationalism' through education, and further question how the underachievement of non-Khas children may be usefully addressed. Our findings reveal the views of educational stakeholders that question the wisdom of the dominant culture across all spheres of social and political activity, but especially educational contexts in which disadvantaged indigenous cultures have been traditionally muted. Through this analysis, we show the incompatibility in vision between different local communities and the national educational agenda, with the effect of producing tensions that undermine the long-term stability and cohesion of Nepali society.

Research findings

By critically questioning the formation of national identity through education, we challenge the dominant model of state education in which national unity is privileged over difference and diversity - (ethnic and indigenous identities). As Nepal begins a process of political restructuring, we suggest that educational reform provides a key opportunity to recognise difference, through a revival of indigenous identities which may usefully mitigate ethnic and caste based inequalities. Our analysis contributes to a wider debate in which education is centrally positioned in developing and reshaping notions of identity and citizenship in post-conflict societies. Ultimately, we argue that educational reform should seek to develop a 'multilogical' (Modood, 2007) process in which a 'politics of difference' (Young, 2004) and 'politicization of ethnicity' (Kymlicka, 2002) and respect for diversity becomes a key to national unity.