

Book Review

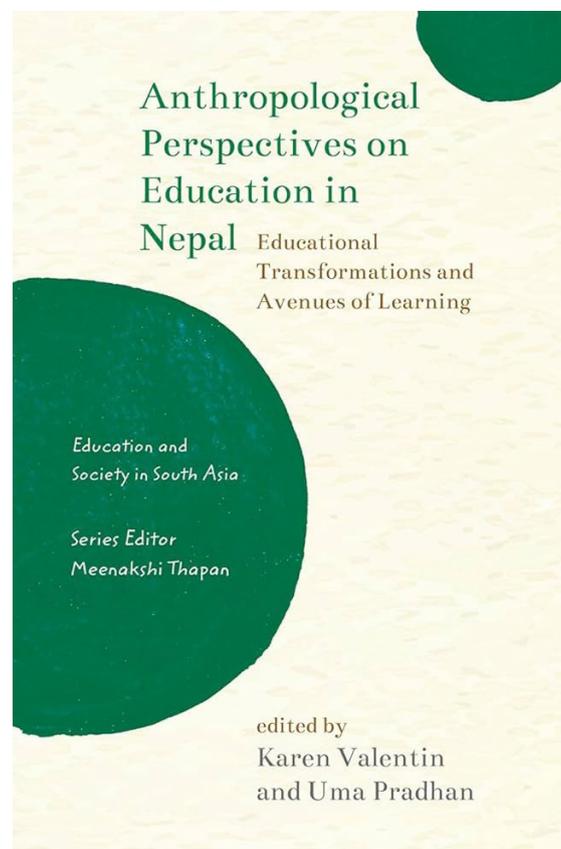
**Review of *Anthropological Perspectives on Education in Nepal: Educational Transformations and Avenues of Learning* edited by Karen Valentin and Uma Pradhan**

*Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. 336 p. ISBN: 9780192884756*

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This collection of essays marks a new beginning for anthropological studies of education in Nepal. While there have been, and will continue to be, many studies on education in Nepal, this book establishes the ethnographic scholarship of education in Nepal as a coherent field. It is part of a book series on education and society in South Asia that seeks to further understand how education is socially produced. The book is co-edited by Karen Valentin and Uma Pradhan who are known scholars of education practices in Nepal. The introduction offers an overview of the discipline of educational anthropology and outlines the contributions such an approach will bring to the understanding of education in Nepal, followed by ten chapters illustrating the social construct of education in Nepal.

The book is organized under three sections: (1) Inequalities and processes of social differentiation, (2) Mobilities and expanding educational landscapes, (3) Institutions and transformation of education sites. While chapters are arranged according to these broad themes, the essays expand beyond their subsections, mutually reinforcing each other to contribute to a deeper understanding of the social construction of education in Nepal. The authors offer a collection of ethnographies of Nepali education that they believe will provide copious opportunities for comparison, such as “competing sites of mass socialization, education-related migration, privatization and commodification of education, the changing role of religious education, educational infrastructures, and intergenerational transfer of skills and knowledge” (p. 12).

While not all of the authors are trained anthropologists, they all employ field-based ethnographic research methods. A few of the studies integrate the use of large-scale surveys, and some utilize methods, such as intergenerational analysis, participatory drawing, longitudinal studies, and a focus on emotions. There is a keen integration of theories from different disciplines investigating inequalities, social boundaries and belonging, and the study of global childhoods. The application of these methods

and theories unveils new perspectives and new voices. The most remarkable of these voices are those of children, Dalits, and the *sukambasi* (landless squatters). One particularly novel research method is participatory drawing, by which children draw out their experiences of migration and discuss them. This provides new insight on the perspective of children that has been absent in previous studies. While the majority of the researchers that contribute to this collection come from outside of Nepal, each section has at least one chapter either authored or co-authored by a Nepalese scholar. The inclusion of these Nepalese authors, and the new voices that they eloquently illustrate, provides a much-needed insider’s view.

The book’s research sites are located in accessible regions in or around Kathmandu, and the Kaski, Jhapa, and Morang districts. Research locations include public schools, private schools, and universities, with special attention given to the wider socially imagined contexts to reveal the overarching features that influence education. While Kathmandu and Pokhara can rightly be said to be the centers for education in the country, other notable areas such as the Mid-Western and Far Western Development Regions and much of the Mountain Region of Nepal are unaccounted for in this collection.

The first section of the book consists of four chapters that present ethnologies of inequalities and social differentiation in education. The first chapter provides an inside look into an elite private school to demonstrate how new economic capital has reshaped Nepal’s elite class and how that class consumes private education to self-construct their identity. The following two chapters illustrate the ways that the poor are navigating education. First of all, the poor also view and use education as a way to increase one’s economic and social standing. Rather than seeing education as inherently good, the poor especially view it as having a “positional good” with the means to increase economic gain and social status. The studies in this section reveal the difficulty and harm that accompanies

this view of education. As more people gain education only those with powerful social connections are likely to gain any economic advantage. The fourth chapter in this section presents the Dalits as vivid examples of a section of society that has not had their knowledge production sanctioned as legitimate and, consequently, remain without any forms of capital.

The second section of the book provides cases of educational migration and change. It begins with the case of a Buddhist monastery's dilemma to adapt curriculum to Nepal's current socio-political context and, in the process, merged "modern education" with traditional Tibetan Buddhist education. The next chapter presents tender insights on the understudied and underappreciated perspective of children who are experiencing a sense of abandonment when migrating to cities for education. This is followed by an ethnography of young, Kathmandu adults navigating social and geographical routes to fulfill their aspirations of gaining higher social standing through education. These studies emphasize how Nepal's existential uncertainty and socio-economic instability have pushed institutions and families to attain status through education. However, they also confront development discourses that promise national employment as the goal of education.

The final section of the book examines socio-political influences in education settings and the effect they have on community identity construction. It presents the attempts of Dalits to enter careers in academia amongst social forces that support and oppress them. Another ethnography demonstrates the construction of student and community aspirations through material infrastructure and how unequal provision of infrastructure perpetuates unequal education. The final chapter contributes to understanding the way geographical localities of languages contribute to arguments of mother tongue based

multilingual language education and language planning and policy. Narratives of local and global influences are ubiquitous in this book, but this section provides examples of their aftermath inside educational institutions. The diversity of caste, the appearance of buildings, and the choice of language instruction both shape and are shaped by student identities.

This collection of essays does indeed meet the intended mark of the editors. By expounding on inequalities in education, narratives of education migration, and the influence of socio-politics in education, this volume contributes to understanding the social practice of education and the cultural production of the educated person. As a comparative

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**- Mark Condra on *Anthropological Perspectives on Education in Nepal***

anthropology, the book largely succeeds in presenting studies within the conceptual categories of the Nepalese people. These remarks withstanding, there do remain a few blemishes in the book. In the forward to the series by Meenakshi Thapan, the emphasis on the perspective of children felt overpromised. While more than half of the articles did include the voices of children, with one exception, children's voices were only a small part of the overall contributions. Additionally, some of the ethnographic presentations felt disconnected, as if they were cut down for space. This resulted in truncated presentations of the situations they were depicting. Also, while Dalits were significantly represented in this series, there were only cursory mentions of gender studies among lower castes. Lastly, current literature on education in Nepal has emphasized the role of School Management Committees, but their presence was never acknowledged as playing a socio-political role in these studies.

This book will become a useful resource for all those engaging in education in Nepal. Through the emphasis on rich and thick description, it communicates the depth of social production of education at work in Nepal.

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