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NEPALESE CHILDREN'S CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITIES IN AND AROUND FORMAL SCHOOLING[1]

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Formal education has rapidly expanded in Nepal since the 1951 overthrow of the Rana regime. In 1950 there were only 8,500 students enrolled in primary schools and only 1% of these were female. By 1990, there were well over one million students enrolled in primary schools, 28% of whom were female. The number of schools has also increased dramatically, from 332 primary and secondary schools in 1950 to 14,1416 in 1980 (CERID 1984:11).[2]

The purpose of expanding formal primary schooling to the rural population has been to provide a basic education that would enable all of Nepal's people to participate in the economic and social development programs promoted by the government. Schools, through prepared curriculum, textbooks, and teachings, have been designed to this end. They have fostered a sense of national unity and purpose as youth are exhorted to develop the country. In their roles of providing education and thereby new opportunities for youth, of promoting modernization and nationalization, and of providing a new arena for interaction, schools are promoting and enabling social change and are having major influences on children and their families, especially in those rural areas where no schools existed in the parental generation.

In this paper I will examine only one of these influences, that is, the way in which children and adolescents from one rural community are constructing their identities in and around the formal school setting. Identities that are being created and negotiated in this context are the student identity, more nontraditional gender and caste identities, and a view of self that is conceived as more modern and less conservative than traditional notions.

Here I define identity to mean a self-understanding or self-conception to which one is emotionally attached. It is an affectively charged understanding of a (possible) self in the world.[3] In school and because of school, many children come to views of self to which they are emotionally attached. These identities are significant in that they are motivating; they guide children's ways of acting and thinking.[4] The ways in which children are constructing their identities have implications not only for their continued educational participation and future goals, but also for potential changes in traditional ideologies and structures. After a few general theoretical points, I will illustrate children's construction of identities with excerpts from case-studies.

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[1]This article is a revision of a paper presented in the session "Education and Social Change in Nepal" at the 42nd Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, Chicago, Illinois, April 5-8, 1990.

[2]These statistics varied somewhat in different sources.

[3]This notion of identity is greatly expanded and elaborated in Holland et al. (in preparation) and Skinner (in preparation).

[4]For identity as a construct that includes motivation, see Burke and Reitzes (1981), Holland et al. (in preparation), McCall and Simmons (1978), Skinner (in preparation).

In 1982 and again in 1985-86, I conducted anthropological fieldwork in Naudada in a mixed caste community, which is located in the southern part of Gorkha District. I focused primarily on children's developing views of themselves and their social world -- how they were recreating and producing their understanding of self within a culturally constructed framework for socialization and with the aid of symbols. To get at this complex process of identity formation, I followed a group of thirty-two children, both males and females aged 8-17, from both high and low castes. I observed their activities in many different settings and also interviewed them more formally over the fieldwork period. The literate members of this focal group and other schoolchildren also provided much written material about their lives and thoughts.

From these sources emerges a picture of children that is seldom portrayed in most anthropological studies on socialization or education, that is, a picture of children as actively forming notions of themselves and struggling to make sense of their world. The culture of children -- the world of children as seen through their eyes and as expressed in their voices -- has not been a traditional area of research in anthropology.[5] As a result, we know relatively little of the child's perspective and the degree to which children are recreating meanings in ways that differ from adult notions. The emphasis in traditional socialization studies has been on cultural consensus in and between generations. The implicit assumption common to these studies is that -- barring extensive disruption -- a culturally intact code is replicated between generations, passed unchanged from an adult sender to a passive child receiver (Holland and Eisenhart 1983).[6] Intergenerational conflict and intracultural variation in beliefs and practices have been left out and, hence, the potential for creativity that opposition and difference bring about is also lost (Connell 1983:195).

Child development and socialization take on new relevance when viewed from a theoretical perspective that combines neo-Vygotskian theories of child development (e.g., Rogoff and Lave 1984, Valsiner 1987, Vygotsky 1987/1934, Wertsch 1985) with theories of cultural production (e.g., Willis 1977, 1981, 1983; Giroux 1983). This perspective emphasizes the active participation of individuals and groups in recreating cultural knowledge and social structures in contexts of everyday life. Using this approach, the researcher can examine practices and productions as these are guided and constrained by socio-historical contexts and culturally constructed sites of (re)production. Individuals are viewed as sometimes contesting and opposing dominant values and relations. These moments of creation and opposition become important because they offer the possibility of change, not only in the individual's understanding of self, but also in ideologies and structures. Toulmin (1978:55) has noted that this type of approach ties studies of child development and socialization into larger issues for the individual child can be seen as the historical union and embodiment of the world of "ideas" and "material conditions." From this perspective, children do not just reproduce structures and ideologies, but they also co-construct and co-create them.[7]

Obviously, there are limits to what children can create and renegotiate, especially in rural Nepal. Negotiations are not equal between child and adult. Children are often heavily encouraged by the culturally structured framework which guides them toward traditional roles and embeds them in family relations and responsibilities. They want to be seen as good children and are influenced emotionally by the evaluative judgments of others to conform to socially appropriate roles, and they are constrained by

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[5]Certain psychoanalytic or psychohistorial approaches in anthropology are exempt from this criticism (for example, see Poole 1987).

[6]For other critiques of socialization theory, see Bourguigon (1973) and Connell (1987).

[7]Talking about individuals as creative agents may seem to be an imposition of Western conceptions on what many have claimed to be a very different notion of the individual in the South Asian context, one as embedded in kin and caste relations (e.g., Dumont 1980, Ostor et al. (1982), but as both Mines (1988) and McHugh (1989) have recently pointed out, South Asians, when actually talking about their lives, present themselves as having personal plans, goals, and desires. The children of Naudada talked about their lives in this way, but, like the adults in Mines' and McHugh's studies, strongly felt the tensions between their own desires and the demands and expectations of the larger kin network.

material conditions or coerced by power relations which limit certain attempts, so it often happens that children do reproduce dominant cultural ideas and social positions, and do come to understand themselves, at least in part, in terms of these traditions. But not all children follow the expectations easily or without a struggle to make sense of what is being imposed upon them. It is here that schools enter in as one arena in which children's identity formulations and struggles are centered. The examples that follow should do away with notions of children as passive and totally determined by or embedded in family and wider social relations.

One of the more obvious identities that schools have fostered is that of "student." Not all children who attend school have this identity. Only some children are emotionally attached to a view of self as a learner and a student, but the ones who are struggle and strategize to remain in school in spite of the opposition or the lack of support from parents and others that they sometimes face.[8] The following excerpts from case studies will illustrate this process (all proper names are pseudonyms) .

Sunita is a ten year old Brahman girl who, like most other girls in Naudada, is an important source of labor for her household, but she feels she is different from many other girls she knows because she studies. She is in the fifth grade and is the youngest member of her class. Four other girls are enrolled in the fifth grade, but there are many days when Sunita is the only girl who actually attends class.[9]

Sunita told me several times she had a strong desire to go to school. She loves to learn new things and wants to become a teacher, but her parents tell her they can only afford to educate her brother up to that level. Sunita sometimes challenges her parents' stance by saying, "You are sending boys (to school), why not girls?" She has had to argue with her mother to be allowed to go to school at all. Her mother, who manages the household in the absence of the father who works elsewhere, has finally agreed that Sunita can attend if she works hard before and after school, cutting the large amounts of fodder necessary for the livestock and helping her sister cook and clean. There are many times when Sunita's older sister, who has never gone to school, helps her, taking on the extra chores so that Sunita can attend class. Her sister wants Sunita to be free of domestic tasks so that she can study as much as her brother. She scolds Sunita when she sees her playing because she wants her to study instead.

Sunita has been successful, at least for a time, at strategically redefining her position. According to Lacey

> Strategic redefinition of the situation implies that change is brought about by individuals who do not possess the formal power to do so. They achieve change by causing or enabling those with formal power to change their interpretation of what is happening in the situation (1977:73).

By her own actions and with help from her sister, Sunita has been able to convince her mother that she could be a good daughter, fulfilling her duties at home, and still attend school.

It was not only higher caste girls who were able to convince their parents to allow them to remain in school. Muna, a fourteen year old girl from the damai caste is also experiencing difficulty continuing her education. She lives in Damai *gaon* with her father, her mother and her mother's co-wife. The

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[8]Studies of education in Nepal have provided a thorough account of most of the reasons that encourage or constrain children's participation in schools, citing determinants such as parents' attitudes to education, a tradition of not sending girls to school, the need for the child's labor at home, inability to pay for books and fees, father's educational attainment, distance to school, and so forth (see CERID 1982, 1984). However, the child's active role in school attendance and the importance of the child's identity as a student as a motivating factor in his or her struggles to attend and remain in school have not been recognized to my knowledge.

[9]In her school in 1986, there were 225 students enrolled in grades 1-5. Of these, 79 (35%) were girls, most of whom (87%) were concentrated in grades 1-3.

adults work as tailors, sitting all day on their front porch, sewing clothes for people from other *gaons*. Muna is enrolled in fifth grade at a different primary school from the one Sunita attends.[10]

Like many girls in Naudada, Muna emphatically states she does not want to get married. In reply to a question about her future, Muna told me

> In the future, now when I see others get married and have fights in their new house, um... why do we give these daughters to another's house? These thoughts play in my mind. I think about it... If I am not able to study and unable to work, um, if I am not treated well after I am married in my new house. When I think that this may happen to me in the future, I fear it and am very worried.

Like Sunita, Muna is hoping to continue school, both because she enjoys learning and because she hopes to avoid marriage by doing so. She told me, "I won't marry. I want to study." Muna has devised a plan to this end. She believes that if she can get a good education and become employed, her parents will not require her to marry, but will allow her to remain with them as a *buri kanya* ("spinster," literally "old virgin") who will take care of them in their old age. There are two women in Naudada who have follwed this path, and Muna and several other girls hope to emulate them. However, Muna faces opposition to her plan from some of her relatives and friends who scold her for attending school. She told me:

> Some tell me not to study, but I like studying. They say "Don't study," but I keep on going to school... My older sister tells me not to study. They say my mother will have a hard time if I study. Um, my father also says this. Even then I keep on studying and I will study. I say I will do housework and also study, and I keep on studying.

Some of her relatives tell her she is selfish for going to school and should remain home instead, helping her parents do housework and sewing. Muna struggles with her own desires to continue school and with her guilt at neglecting her responsibilities to her parents. She feels overwhelmed by trying to do both her housework and schoolwork. She is torn over whether to simply accept her duties to her parents, staying at home until they arrange her marriage, or to continue negotiating with them to remain in school, hoping to alter her future by doing so.

The student identity is a strong one for many boys as well and results in similar conflicts with their families. Boys who seek to be good students worry about failing exams and not being promoted to the next grade level. They equate school success with later happiness in life. For instance, a fifteen year old Chetri boy expressed this concern by stating, "Right now I am studying in ninth grade. I am very afraid of failing... I am trying very hard now so I will have happiness in the future."

Boys blame their school failures on absenteeism due to illness or injuries, bad luck, or lack of support from their parents who may demand they neglect their studies to fulfill work responsibilities at home. Although parents expect that sons, more than daughters, should go to school, most of them still require their sons to work hard at home. As in the girls' accounts, the pull of both home and school creates conflicts for many boys who want to be viewed as both good sons and good students.

This tension is especially evident in Shiva Ram's life story. He wrote an extensive diary for me in which he detailed the tensions between himself and his father. Even though Shiva Ram is Bahun, his father does not want him to go to school; he wants him to stay at home and be a farmer. This had been a source of continuing frustration for Shiva Ram until at one point he told me he thought he would go mad. In his life story, he wrote:

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[10]In Muna's school, a primary cum secondary school, 515 students were enrolled in grades 1-10 in 1986. Of these, 171 (33%) were female. In her fifth grade class, there was an equal number of boys and girls enrolled (16 each).

> Some of my thoughts are different from my parents. Sometimes my father orders me to cut the grass, but because of my need to study, I do reading and writing. My father is a farmer, but I want to work in an office... So if we devote our time at school, the work at home is undone, and if we don't think about school, then our studies are unfinished... If I sit and study, my parents would really scold me for not working. So it becomes very difficult for me, whether to work or study.

When he was twelve, Shiva Ram's conflict with his father became so intense that he ran away from home to Kathmandu where he hoped to find work that would allow him to continue his studies. He stole one of his father's chickens to pay for his busfare. For a year he worked, cleaning out buses, but was unable to go to school. Finally his father found out where he was and came for him, promising that if he returned home, he could continue school. The situation has remained tense, however, with Shiva Ram's father scolding him daily for his lack of attention to his household chores and for being a bad son. Shiva Ram struggles to continue his education in spite of these difficulties, hoping to obtain the School Leaving Certificate and gain employment as a government official.

Govinda, a Damai boy of fourteen, also has a strong identity as a student. He sees education as a way of obtaining a political position, so he resists learning his trade as a tailor, and strives to stay in school. I once asked if he liked to stitch clothes. He answered:

> I don't. I like to study. My father and all have taught me (to sew) but I don't pay any attention. Stitching and staying (in one place), one becomes old, and if we study, we can eat. If we stitch and stay and grow old, we won't see and how will we be able to stitch and sew. (This) keeps on worrying me.

Govinda does not want to learn the traditional occupation of his caste. He perceives tailoring as limiting and believes that education is an escape from this path. Like the girls who saw education as a possible escape from marriage, some lower caste boys also view education as an escape from traditional occupations. They are actively strategizing to remain students.[11]

These concepts I have been using -- strategizing, negotiation, opposition, and so forth -- provide a way of understanding individuals' actions as purposive. They avoid the more static, unilinear model of socialization theory that assumes cultural meanings are passed unchanged from adult to child. Work by Lacey (1977) and Valli (1986) suggests that the notion of purpose is critical because it implies that individuals select certain strategies, or ideas or action, for particular situations, and that these strategies need not remain consistent across contexts (Lacey 1977:68). The individual may purposefully select actions or ideas that comply with constraining social pressures, but may also introduce new strategies, some of which will be accepted and some of which will be rejected (Lacey 1977:71).

It so happens that many children do comply with their parents' demands that they quit school, and so replicate traditional gender and caste life-paths (see Skinner in preparation). There are also many cases where parents wanted their child to continue school, but the child himself did not have the motivation to do so; he did not see himself as a student and preferred to stay at home, playing and working there. In the cases mentioned above, the child's parents would not have minded if their son or daughter had dropped out of school. In fact, many parents reprimanded and scolded the child for

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[11]There is little awareness among these boys of limited opportunities for educated people in Nepal. Some Damai parents, however, believe good jobs are not available for their sons, so they are reluctant to commit their limited resources toward an eduction for which they believe there is no payoff. For example, Kaali, a Damai mother, asked me how a son of a Damai could get a salaried job. She stated, "Small castes have small knowledge. We can't let our oldest son study and spend all that money just to open his eyes. If he sews, he can easily rear a family... This is all we ask of our children in the hills. What else do we know than this? How can one milk and keep the milk in a bamboo basket even if he has the fate to do so?" In spite of these beliefs, however, some Damai boys are succeeding in convincing their parents to allow them to continue school, at least for a time. Kaali's own son was "first boy" in grade six and very proud of his academic achievements. He was hoping to one day become a teacher.

going to school and wanting to study when there were so many daily chores to be done. But these children and young adolescents did not simply acquiesce to their parents' demands, but attempted to negotiate their position with their parents to be allowed to continue school.

The cases of Muna, Sunita, Shiva Ram, Govinda and others, can be seen as attempts to strategically redefine their parents' ideas of what to do with them. The girls are trying to convince their parents that the best future for all concerned would be to allow them to continue school, live at home as a buri kanya, get a job that would bring in cash income, and care for the parents. The boys are attempting to convince their parents to allow them to continue in school so they can follow occupations other than farming or traditional caste occupations. Drawing from these and other examples too numerous to mention here, it seems that a child's view of self as a student can be an important motivating factor in his or her school attendance and performance.

Another identity that is being constructed in part around the school setting is a view of self that is in opposition to village traditions, including less traditional caste and gender identities. Schools promote a mixture of both traditional and modern ideas. Many of the stories children read in their schoolbooks are folktales that have moral lessons which they also learn at home such as "Don't be foolish," "Listen to your parents' advice," "Be wise, brave, and honest." Children also encounter dominant or valued notions of how they should be and act. But they also encounter ideas and alternatives in school that differ from traditional notions of gender and caste-related life-paths fostered in other arenas of social life. Certain teachers and books promote ideas of equality that are not generally present in the village (e.g., more equality for women and lower castes). They also urge students to be good citizens who will work for the development of Nepal.

Classes in moral education, science, the panchayat system, and so forth, have consequences for the way children view themselves and their future. Older children and adolescents incorporate the ideas they encounter in school into their talk about themselves and what they want to do in life. For example, one way students characterize themselves and others in their social world is on the basis of a traditional-modern continuum (see also Pigg 1988). Schools help foster this distinction. For instance, schools introduce western biomedical models of disease causation and prevention and promote them over traditional ideas of health and healing. Many teachers portray western technology and development as beneficial. Many students come to think of or identify themselves as educated people and associate themselves with the modern, developed, scientific world. They disassociate themselves from the more traditional, conservative world that they equate with most of their parents' ways of life -- one oriented toward farming and local affairs. For example, I asked a number of students if they were different from their parents. Ten year old Jit Gurung answered:

> During their (parents') time, education was not important, but now there are many new schools everywhere, and these educated people know a lot more things than do uneducated ones.

Another boy was more specific in his answer:

> There are some differences in my opinions from my parents'. Let me give some examples: I don't agree with them about religious things, about health, about education, and about conservative thinking.

Prajun, a Chetri boy who describes himself as one "who wants to develop the village and who wants to give people their rights and serve them," made the dichotomy between himself and his parents very clear:

> My parents have old ideas, and we search for new things. Yesterday is our parents' time... The world was old yesterday. Now is the new world. That is why there are a lot of differences.

Although these same boys also expressed respect for their parents and said they obeyed them most of the time, they strongly felt they were different from their parents and other adults in the village who had not attended school.

Schools in Naudada provide an arena for negotiation of more nontraditional caste and gender identities. Schools can be a setting in which caste differences can be disregarded or ignored. Cross-caste friendships develop in school that carry over into other settings. At school, there is no official segregation by caste. Most children will eat and drink with members of other castes. Lower caste boys offer water to boys from higher castes who will take it. Some higher caste boys do this to demonstrate their beliefs that all men are alike as did Megh, a Chetri boy who wishes to become a doctor. He explained it to me by saying

> Although people say not to drink water given by Damai, I do drink. All human beings are the same. If we cut a Chetri, blood comes, and in the same way, blood comes if we cut people of other castes.

Many boys share Megh's beliefs, but some drink with lower castes for more practical reasons. As one boy explained, "We are thirsty. What can we do?" Since many of the boys have not gone through their initiation ceremony, they are less compelled to follow proscriptions against intercaste commensality, but even those who have completed their initiation often do share food and drink with others, although they would be scolded at home for doing so. Certainly school is not the only arena where caste or caste identities are being renegotiated, but it is one important context.

Just the fact that girls are attending school and becoming educated is an important part of their recreation of a more nontraditional female identity, but schools in Naudada provide one formal setting significant of this construction: the cultural performances (natak) that students create and perform. These performances of comic skits and dramatic enactments of songs are joint creations by the older students. They devise the skits and choose the songs they want to perform with little guidance from or sometimes in direct opposition to the teachers. Some of the skits and songs remind people of their common identity as hill farmers who share certain problems. However, the drama is not only a stage for portraying traditional social identities. It is also a stage where students may question dominant ideologies, power relations, and traditional identities and roles.

Several songs performed by a group of schoolgirls at one cultural performance I attended were about throwing over traditions. Through a series of songs, they advocated equal rights for women and an end to bad treatment by men and mothers-in-law. One such song, entitled "Our Sister," was sung in front of about 500 villagers from the panchayat. A brief excerpt follows:

> Being enslaved and repressed, don't' remain in isolation.
> We have to tear and throw out this net of exploitation.
> If a husband keeps a co-wife, it is all right.
> But if a woman takes another man, she must pay a price.
>
> Even to eat, you have to fight hard.
> Even to survive, you have to sell you very life.
> Wake up, oh sister, and recognize this sinner man.
> Let's unite together to destroy this tradition.

If the words of this song may be taken as evidence of some of the schoolgirls' thoughts and feelings, at least in some contexts (see Holland and Skinner 1989, Skinner in preparation), then it seems that they are not simply replicating the traditional view of gender relations, but are calling for a transformation or radical change. They are not remaining silent over their fate as some authors suggest Hindu women do (e.g., Dhruvarajan 1988), but are vocally opposing what the traditional ideology of gender relations entails.

The importance of the cultural performance is that it is an arena in which the older children are allowed to be creative, where they can choose to portray traditional identities or to ridicule authority or call for changes in social and political relations and ideologies.

Schools, in their role of promoting nontraditional ways of thinking and acting and in their provision of an arena in which certain identities become constructed and traditions contested, are an important force in social change.

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