

LIVING IN THE FRINGE OF SOCIETY: AN AUTO/ETHNOGRAPHY OF
CHEPANG YOUTHS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Biswash Chepang

A Dissertation

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School of Education

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Master of Philosophy in Development Studies Education

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AN ABSTRACT

of the dissertation of *Biswash Praja* for the degree of *Master of Philosophy in Development Studies* presented on *18 January 2026*, entitled *Living in the Fringe of Society: An Auto/Ethnography of Chepang Youths in Higher Education*.

APPROVED BY

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Asst. Prof. Lina Gurung, PhD

Dissertation Supervisor

Education has helped me see the world through others' eyes. This has greatly benefited my family and me by providing me with the qualifications to compete in the neoliberal-led employment market. However, the other Chepang graduates may not have had the same experience. Growing up as an Indigenous Chepang community member has its own set of hardships and struggles, with disability and gender adding another degree of marginalization.

An Auto/Ethnographic approach is used to inquire oneself on our journey of higher education, questioning ourselves on how do Chepang graduates describe experiences of accessing, pursuing, and continuing higher education. The main research questions here is what social and socio-economic hardships faced and what it means "to be educated" for being a Chepang youths in accessing and continuing higher education, and how do these challenges shape their educational choices and aspirations and how higher education practices influence Chepang students' learning experiences. I have interviewed seven graduates and inquired myself as a main informant for the dissertation research.

I examined the narratives through the lens of transformative learning theory, Marxian perspective on education for interpreting education, curriculum and pedagogy related issues, and Bourdieu cultural reproduction and production theory for interpreting the knowing, reasoning and understanding of the educated participants life style and their transformative role in transforming to them self, their community

and society. Together, these theoretical perspectives illuminate how higher education functions simultaneously as a site of reproduction and possible transformation for Chepang youths, perpetuating marginalization through cultural and epistemic exclusion while potentially offering tools for understanding and challenging that marginalization, a paradox that can only be understood through careful attention to Chepang graduates' own narratives of their educational experiences and aspirations. To conclude, although education plays both the role of fostering critical consciousness, liberation or maintaining the status quo of oppression and several studies mentions that higher education has the potential to raise critical consciousness among Chepang youths, but it has not really been the case in reality. Education has not really encouraged critical thinking and advocate to challenge the systemic forces of marginalization. This study advocates for decolonized education that embraces Indigenous knowledge and supports Indigenous Peoples' self-determined development in Nepal.

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18 January 2026

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शोध सार

विकास अध्ययन दर्शनशास्त्रको स्नातकोत्तर डिग्रीको लागि विश्वास प्रजाको शोध प्रबन्धको शिर्षक “सीमान्त समुदायका अनुभवहरू: उच्च शिक्षामा चेपाङ युवाहरूको अटो/इथ्नोग्राफि” ४ माघ २०८२ मा प्रस्तुत गरिएको थियो ।

.....
उप. प्रा. लिना गुरुङ, पीएचडी
शोध निर्देशक

यस अध्ययनमा स्नातकोत्तर तह उत्तीर्ण गरेका चेपाङ साथीहरू र आफ्ना भोगाइहरू, अनुभव र कथाहरूलाई समेटिएको छ। यस अध्ययनमा म र अन्य सात जना विश्वविद्यालयमा अध्ययनरत युवाहरूको व्यक्तिगत भोगाइ र आख्यानमार्फत उच्च शिक्षामा उनीहरूको पहुँच र अध्ययनका क्रममा भोगेका अनुभवहरूलाई समेटिएको छ। हामी चेपाङहरू बीच पनि विभिन्न किसिमका कठिनाइ र संघर्षहरू छन्स विशेष गरी अपाङ्गता भएका र फरक लैङ्गिकता भएका साथीहरूको अनुभवलाई मैले फरक ढंगले विश्लेषण गरेको छु। साथै, चेपाङ युवाहरूमा शिक्षित हुनुको बुझाइ र उच्च शिक्षा हासिल गर्ने क्रममा उनीहरूले सामना गर्ने सामाजिक तथा आर्थिक कठिनाइहरूमाथि पनि यस अध्ययनले प्रकाश पारेको छ।

विभिन्न चुनौतीका बावजुद उनीहरूको शैक्षिक यात्रा र सिकाइ अनुभव कसरी प्रभावित हुन्छन् भन्ने विषयलाई मैले रूपान्तरणकारी सिकाइ सिद्धान्त, मार्क्सवाद र बोर्डुको सांस्कृतिक पुनरुत्पादनु को लेन्सबाट विश्लेषण गरिएको छ । यी सैद्धान्तिक दृष्टिकोणहरूले उच्च शिक्षा कसरी चेपाङ युवाहरूका लागि एकैसाथ उत्पादनु र पुनरुत्पादनु को स्थल बनिरहेको छ भन्ने कुरा उजागर गर्छन्। अहिलेको शिक्षाले झन् सीमान्तकरणलाई नै प्रश्रय दिइरहेको तथ्य यस थिसिसमा उल्लेख गरिएको छ।

निष्कर्षमा, पढेर ठूलो बनूँला र राम्रो कमाउँला भन्ने आशैआशमा हुर्केको म विश्वास चेपाङ, आज एउटा ठूलो खाडलमा गडेको अनुभव गरिरहेको छु। हुन त म चेपाङ समुदायको त्यो भ्यागुता हुँ, जो कुवाबाट भर्खर बाहिर निस्किएको छु। यसले मलाई नव-उदारवादी रोजगार बजारमा प्रतिस्पर्धा गर्ने योग्यता दिएर मेरो परिवार र मलाई आर्थिक रूपमा भने टेवा पुऱ्याएको छ। शिक्षाले आलोचनात्मक चेतना जगाएर मुक्ति दिलाउने वा उत्पीडनको यथास्थितिलाई कायम राख्ने दुवै भूमिका खेल्न सक्छ। तर यस अध्ययनहरूले देखाए अनुसार उच्च शिक्षाले चेपाङ युवाहरूमा आलोचनात्मक सोच र सीमान्तकरणका संरचनागत शक्तिहरूलाई चुनौती दिने सामर्थ्य विकास गर्न सकेको छैन। शिक्षाले न त रुचिपूर्ण सिकाइ दियो, न त हाम्रो आस्था, मूल्यमान्यता र अस्तित्वको कदर नै गऱ्यो। न त यसले आदिवासी हुनुमा गर्व गर्न सिकायो, न पश्चिमी विकासको मोडेल बुझेकोमा नै गर्व गर्ने ठाउँ राख्यो। यसले अन्यायमाथि प्रश्न उठाउन प्रेरित गर्नुको सट्टा केवल असफल संरचना र बहुसंख्यक समाजले लादेका विचारहरूलाई स्वीकार गर्न सिकायो। बहुसंख्यक

समाजको कामलाई चुनौती दिनुको सट्टा झन् संस्थागत गर्न सिकाउने यो शिक्षा केवल सत्ता टिकाउने, शक्ति सञ्चय गर्ने र अन्य समुदाय, जाति वा राष्ट्रलाई उपनिवेश बनाउने हतियार मात्र बन्यो। संछेपमा, यो अध्ययनले नेपालमा आदिवासी ज्ञानलाई आत्मसात गर्ने र आदिवासी जनजातिहरूको स्वनिर्धारित विकासलाई समर्थन गर्ने उपनिवेशमुक्त शिक्षाको वकालत गर्दछ।

.....

विश्वास प्रजा

उपाधि उम्मेदवार

४ माघ २०८२

This dissertation entitled *Living in the Fringe of Society: An Auto/Ethnography of Chepang Youths in Higher Education*, presented by *Biswash Praja* on 18 January 2026

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I understand that my dissertation will become a part of the permanent collection of the library of Kathmandu University. My signature below authorizes the release of my dissertation to any reader upon request for scholarly purposes.

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is my original work, and it has not been submitted for candidature for any other degree at any other university.

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DEDICATION

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My family members from *Taluke Mijhar and Bhara Khalak*

Nepal Chepang Association/ Nepal Chepang Women Association

To my entire Chepang Community from Nepal.

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Life has been a wonderful journey for me where I have had the chance to sit in a warm and cozy room and summarize the final comments, feedback, and suggestions received from the external supervisor. Although there was delay in bringing out this autoethnography, I have managed to complete it with support, encouragement and motivations from many of my colleagues, family members and after a constant push from my Professors and Supervisor. I mentioned this as wonderful journey as I vividly reflect my day to day routines growing up in a Chepang family where deprivations was common. Deprivation ranged from social, economic and other aspects. We were aloof from other community members. The so-called “nutritious food” mentioned by development practitioners was new to us. Our life was going well with whatever we had, whatever we possessed, whatever we ate, whatever we wore, but contrasts arose after the mushrooming of NGOs and INGOs generally started categorizing us as poor, uneducated, lifeless, and so-called “below poverty line”. The knowledge we possessed was considered useless. We were categorized as an uneducated. The indigenous knowledge we had was not counted. I still consider my life journey wonderful despite the hurdles, and struggles that I am still facing in current societal structures, institutions and surroundings.

This dissertation, "Living in the Fringe of Society: An Auto/Ethnography of Chepang Youths in Higher Education," is more than just the results of research; it is a reflection of my very personal experiences and those of my colleagues who graduated. This dissertation portrays stories, hardships and narratives of accessing higher education. Bringing out this dissertation would not have been possible without the encouragement, support, and leadership of numerous individuals and communities who have made significant contributions to this academic work. I am thankful to my friends, colleagues, family members, and members of Chepang association for all the necessary information, logistical supports, referral of participants for interviews. It would not have been possible without your different kinds of support.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	i
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iii
ABBREVIATIONS	vi
LIST OF FIGURES	vii
LIST OF TABLES	viii
CHAPTER I.....	1
INTRODUCTION	1
Background of Study.....	1
Problem Statement	3
Research Purpose	4
Research Questions	4
Significance of the Study	4
Delimitation of the Study	5
Structure of the Dissertation.....	6
CHAPTER II.....	7
LITERATURE REVIEW	7
Thematic Review.....	7
Chepang Community and Access to Higher Education	7
Indigenous Peoples and Higher Education.....	10
School Education, Local Curriculum and MTB-MLE	11
Socioeconomic Conditions of Chepangs.....	12
Chiuri Tree and Khoriya (Shifting Cultivation Practice)	12
Impacts of Protected Areas on Chepang Community	13
Puja/ Ceremonies and Rituals in Chepang Community	14
Religion Conversion	15
Education and Policy Review	15
Education Act of 2028 BS (1971 AD).....	16
Constitution of Nepal, 2015.....	16
The Act on Compulsory and Free Education, 2075 (2018).....	17
Theoretical Insights of the Dissertation	18
Theoretical Gap	20

Empirical Review	21
Empirical Gaps in Research	22
CHAPTER III	24
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	24
Research Design: An Auto/Ethnographic Inquiry	24
Philosophical Orientation and Ontology	26
Methods of Auto/Ethnographic Research	26
Reflecting on Self/Others	27
Reviewing Word Press Blog: A Digital Narrative Archive	28
Relational Storying	28
Epistemology of the Research.....	29
Axiology.....	29
Participant Selection and Biography	30
Collecting Lived Experiences, Meanings and Social Contexts.....	31
Authenticity, Credibility and Cultural Consideration	32
Emic Perspectives	33
Ethical Consideration	34
CHAPTER IV	35
SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC BARRIERS	35
Material Deprivation	35
Remote Geography.....	41
The Feeling of Inferiority	42
Stereotyping, Domination and Oppression	43
Cultural Hegemony	44
INGOs Contributions in Higher Education.....	46
Diversity Within Chepang and its Implications in Higher Education.....	48
Chapter Summary.....	52
CHAPTER V	54
CHEPANG'S EXPERIENCES OF BEING EDUCATED AND TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING.....	54
Chepang Youth Perspective on "Being Educated"	54
Social Capital in Educational Journey	58
Prescribed Curriculum and Loss of Freedom of Expression.....	59
English as Medium of Instructions.....	60

Rat Race: Chasing the Needs of Modern Market.....	62
CHAPTER VI.....	66
JOURNEYS OF EXPERIENCING, AND NEGOTIATING HIGHER EDUCATION	
.....	66
Transformative Learning or Further Marginalization	66
Education as Reproduction of Inequality and Cultural Disassociation.....	68
An Epistemic Injustice for Chepang Community	69
Language Hierarchy and Exclusion	71
Power Authenticates Knowledge	72
Theorization and Strategic Explanations.....	73
CHAPTER VII.....	76
CONVERGENT REALIZATION, CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS	76
Convergent Realization	76
Transformative Role of the Educated Chepang Youths.....	79
Labour Market Driven Curricula.....	79
Transformative Learning and Critical Pedagogy	80
Recognizing the Complexity and Addressing Educational Inequality.....	81
Chepang Student’s Agency and Determination	82
Conclusion.....	84
REFERENCES	86
ANNEXES	100

ABBREVIATIONS

ANSAB	Asia Network for Sustainable Agriculture and Bioresources
BSc	Bachelors in Science
CBS	Central Bureau of Statistics
FORWARD	Forum for Rural Welfare and Agricultural Reform for Development
ILO	International Labour Organization
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
KG	Kilo Gram
MSc	Masters in Science
MTB-MLE	Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education
NCA	Nepal Chepang Association
NFDIN	National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities
NGO	Non-Government Organizations
NRM	Natural Resource Management
NTFPs	Non-Timber Forest Products
RR	Ratna Rajya
SEE	Secondary Level Examination
SLC	School Leaving Certificate

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 Theorization of Transformative Learning Theory for Chepang Students in Higher Education	75
Figure 2 Theorizing Chepang Students Agency and Determination	84

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 Literacy Status of Chepang Community Extracted from Indigenous Nationalities Commission Annual Report	9
Table 2 Brief Biography of Participants	30

CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

This dissertation entitled “Living in the Fringe of Society: An Auto/Ethnography of Chepang Youths in Higher Education” brings out an experience, and narratives of researcher through an auto/ethnographic methodological approach. In an autoethnographic study ‘I’ myself is at the center for source of data, whereas ethnographic approach includes views and their stories of participants. I have recollected moments of hardships, struggles from growing up in a single-parent family, economic challenges and other adjoining vicious cycle of poverty, structural marginalization and exclusion. This personal journey helps the researcher to rediscover their experiences, contributing to personal growth (Hamdan, 2012). I have used an autoethnographic approach as it enabled me to look, reflect inward from my social identity being a Chepang. I have collected lived experiences, self-reflection, and narratives of seven Chepang Master’s Degree graduates’ stories linking with how it transformed in individual, family’s knowledge, perceptions and attitudes in their lives. This involves a mix of thoughts, feelings, and experiences related to people’s perception, communities and cultures. I have reviewed the WordPress blog, I wrote for 13 years as a means of self-discovery; a place to gather ideas, feelings, and observations about my experiences. I have incorporated conversational interactions with fellow Chepang graduates to uncover their narratives, lived realities of accessing higher education.

Background of Study

According to the National Population and Housing Census of 2021, there are 84,364 Chepang people scattered across five major districts; Dhading, Chitwan, Gorkha, Makawanpur, and Tanahun districts of Nepal and few of them are scattered to different district (Subba et al., 2014). As per an official conversation with members of Nepal Chepang Association (NCA), Chepang people has now spread over 26 districts. The Chepang community was named as Praja by King Mahendra during the Panchyat regime. King Mahendra renamed Chepangs as “Praja”, literally meaning ‘subjects’, as their last name (Pons, 2022). The National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN) Act, 2002 has classified Indigenous Chepang community as one of the highly marginalised indigenous groups. This categorization

is based on multiple socio-economic indicators such as below poverty line status, per capita income, sources of income, access to education, population size, language status, literacy rate, housing types, land ownership certificates, occupation status and access to education (Subba et al., 2014).

Chepang communities have been historically unheard, as institutions failed to listen. Chepang's are only being presented through poverty porn, marginalization, romanticism portraying hunger, and malnutrition (Piya et al., 2019). Some of the characteristics portrayed for the Chepang community people are illiterate, abject poverty, poor access to health care system and major livelihood is through agrarian community land. The issues were stereotyped as people living in the jungle and eating 'insects' for survival are some of them to present as examples. The majority of population perceives Chepangs being portrayed as weak, vulnerable, marginalised and mentioned disadvantaged throughout media, publications and visual stories. There are several issues and problems faced by the community and which are interconnected and have gradually worsened the situation of the Chepangs depriving from access to basic needs. All these associated issues tangle, suffocating Chepang individuals and making it difficult to break out of the vicious circle.

Shyangtan (2020) states that schools shapes the students embedded identities, power and the community people's historicity. Similarly application of knowledge, curriculum, and course structure has taught me to streamline my thought process in a certain that the larger society accepts. The education that Chepang youths received in their remote villages, with several challenges, difficulties in each step has different story then the ones from an affluent family coming from a higher social strata of the society. The quality of education, materials, infrastructures and other components they received, in accessing education is different that is received by Chepangs and other groups in urban areas.

The educational journey of hardships, struggles, stories and their narratives varies according to the family's socioeconomic background, socialization patterns, their upbringing and the peer circle that they made. Each participant has their own way of upbringing, socialization and understandings.

This research fills a knowledge gap in including Chepang voices and creates space for future Chepang scholars to see themselves represented. This contributes to indigenous scholarship, decolonial methodologies, and social justice education.

Problem Statement

Higher education in Nepal typically operates by dominant national and Western epistemological frameworks that prioritize market-oriented knowledge, standardized curricula, and uniform measurements of success. Modern education systems teach students to participate in the global economy rather than addressing local concerns (Tolu et al., 2022). Similarly, Magni (2016) contends that education organized around Western national norms prioritizes homogenization over cultural diversity. The sociocultural structures acts as hurdles to higher education. Instead of empowering and contributing to transformative learning, higher education tends to perpetuate prevailing beliefs and exacerbate existing inequities.

The current model of education just promotes prescriptive forms of learning that restrict freedom of expression, along with additional layers of exclusion due to inbuilt discrepancies in social and economic structures. Acquiring education being away from family and society for years and years gradually disconnects them from the societal traditions, practices and cultures. The learning environment injects the dominant socio-economic structures educational models particularly through prescribed curriculum. The current education system often fails to see students as epistemic subject beings capable of producing and validating their own knowledge. Instead, students are treated as passive recipients of pre-approved information.

The research problem here is not only about access to schools, colleges and universities, but also about the outcomes of educational degrees after completion, enrollment in job markets, and the implications of obtaining mainstream education for Chepang community. Low affordability, and lack of fulfilment of basic needs within the family members obstructs the children's schooling specially girls' educational advancement, long walking distances to reach schools in rugged terrain that takes a lot of time (Nowak et al., 2023). The findings mentioned in this research are relevant to see through the transformative learning approach, questioning the implications of this modern days education through the lens of transformation. Transformative learning theory stresses worldview modifications that result in increased autonomy, agency, and social action. While transformative learning seeks to cultivate critical consciousness and inclusive meaning-making, the existing higher education framework may limit Chepang students' ability to critically interact with, reinterpret, and legitimate their own cultural knowledge within academic settings.

Much research carried out by outsiders other than the Indigenous community who belong to that specific community has been characterized by practices that are inappropriate, exploitative, and disempowering (Smith, 1999; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). Such histories have further developed mistrust and skepticism among Indigenous communities toward conventional Western research methodologies, which predominantly follow a top-down, expert-driven paradigm that marginalizes Indigenous Peoples. Lack of research that does not bring out voices of Indigenous communities such as the Chepangs, will consequently marginalize them as their issues are not brought forward. When reality is not brought into the higher educational policy making process, these groups remain pushed to the back. For instance, this federal structure of Nepal has not addressed the issues of the Indigenous Chepang people.

Research Purpose

This research focuses on how higher education in Nepal can be reimagined using a transformative learning framework to move beyond homogenization and assimilation and instead create dialogical, reflexive, and culturally responsive spaces that enable Chepang students to affirm their identities, critically engage with dominant knowledge systems, and contribute meaningfully to both community and broader societal transformation. The main purpose of this dissertation is to explore multiple realities of experiences, issues and challenges faced by Chepang community graduates in pursuing higher education. Through auto/ethnographic reflections of the Master's Degree graduates of Chepang community.

Research Questions

1. How do Chepang graduates describe their experiences of accessing, pursuing, and continuing higher education?
2. What social and socio-economic hardships do Chepang youth face in accessing and continuing higher education, and how do these challenges shape their educational choices and aspirations?
3. What does “being educated” mean to Chepang youths?
4. In what ways does higher education enable or constrain transformative learning among Chepang students?

Significance of the Study

The issues faced by Chepangs in accessing higher education are not the same as those faced by others. Though, the article 31 of the Constitution of Nepal, 2015

talks about access to education as a fundamental right but it has not been same for Chepangs. Carrying out research on issues faced by Chepang community is significant as this can be powerful tools for creating awareness, empathy, and understanding about their unique struggles, cultures, and aspirations. This can bring out the injustices of the past and present by Chepang graduates (Turin & Awasthi, 2025; Wilson, 2001). This dissertation can be a strong documentation showcasing the narratives of Chepang graduates and their resilience despite several systemic challenges.

This research kept the “researcher” itself at the center along with documenting the voices of handful of graduates. This will highlight how the other Chepang youth have experienced their educational journey which has shaped their worldview and survival. Autoethnography emphasizes the researcher's role as both as participant and an observer enabling to recognize the subjective nature of research (Bloor & Wood, 2006). Overall, this research is relevant for bringing to light the issues and challenges faced at the individual and personal level, combining experiences from the professional level recommending them to the policy level.

I believe, I have the responsibility to educate, aware make people feel believe that we can bring our self-determined development. It brings out the voices the people, the structural challenges that people faced and bring the agenda of reform. This study is relevant because this method does not generalize the information to larger population but uncovers the gap of a small section of community voices. It is also important to emphasizes the narratives are important too by listening and documenting researcher and people’s voices.

Delimitation of the Study

The delimitation of this autoethnographic research is that participants have been limited to those attended formal education on Chepangs who completed Master’s Degree. Although the research applies an inclusive approach to respondents in terms of gender, only one female participants was identified who completed Master’s Degree, which might not be relevant to the gendered aspects of analysis. The scope of this research has been deliberately narrowed to Chepang participants who had completed a Master’s Degree. This delimitation was necessary to explore lived experiences of the highly educated members of a community where access to formal education remains limited. Similarly, the time frame of my research was between February 2023 and August 2025, after I initiated writing research proposal and

dissertation which delimits the lived experience and observation between this time periods.

This research uncovers the complex social, cultural, and economic barriers such as material deprivation, remote geography, and language use that shape the educational experiences, which continue to marginalize Chepang learners. This has explored Chepang perceptions and lived experiences revealing recurring themes of inferiority, stereotyping, domination, and oppression.

Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation is composed of seven chapters. The first chapter provides an introductory background on the Chepang community and the issues it faces in higher education. This also explains the problem statement, followed by research objectives and questions. The second chapter presents a literature review that covers empirical research, empirical gaps in research, Indigenous Peoples in higher education, a policy review and an illustration of theoretical framework for the research. The dissertation uses transformative learning as a theoretical framework to analyse the overall context of higher education for the Chepang community people and its implications for them. Chapter three covers the methodological section on the research design, philosophical orientation, epistemology, axiology and participant selection, authenticity and credibility of the information along with emic perspective and ethical considerations in the research. Chapter four highlights the findings section after interviewing, observing and narrating the stories, struggles and lived experiences of Chepang people who pursued university level education. I have thematized the findings into different categories; social, cultural and economic challenges that reveal material deprivation, remote geography, being a Chepang and their perceptions as a looking glass self. Chapter five analyses the findings, through transformative learning theory, Marxian perspective and the lens of colonality of being where the higher education is further reproducing inequality and leading to epistemic injustice for Chepangs, through language hierarchy, and authenticating power. Finally, chapter six wraps up with a conclusion and possible implications of the research.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review section covers thematic, empirical and theoretical reviews relevant to this dissertation. Both empirical and policy reviews have been substantiated by Chepang people's access to education, as documented in secondary literatures.

Thematic Review

This chapter covers a review of different thematic papers review of Chepang community in national, international journal articles. This section covers the thematic review of Chepang community and access to higher education, overall education status of Indigenous Chepang communities in Nepal and broader information on Indigenous Peoples and higher education. This also uncovers government initiative to implement an inclusive education policy that incorporates Mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) in primary schools. Similarly, this section covers socioeconomic information including cultural practices, livelihoods, Puja/ Ceremonies and rituals in Chepang community, religion conversion and agroforestry practice in hills. Finally, this thematic review also captures the impacts of conservation and national park areas faced by the Chepang community living in and around protected areas.

Chepang Community and Access to Higher Education

According to annual report of the Indigenous Nationalities Commission, 2021 the literacy rate of Chepang community is 48.80 percent. The education attainment of Chepangs remain slow. Though literacy rate has almost reached half of the population, the persisting problem is that more number of Chepang students discontinue their education after grade 5 (Tryndyuk, 2013) and only appears for secondary level examination. Hence only few youths attend colleges every year as the high school dropout rate is high. According to a telephone conversation with Mr. Govinda Ram Chepang, Chairperson of Nepal Chepang Association and Member of Parliament, there are only 8 Master's Degree graduates from Chepang community till date. It was found that one MPhil Scholar from Tribhuvan University recently graduated in December 2025.

Chepangs now have greater access to education compared to the past (Karki, 2011; Nowak et al., 2023). However, the quality of education received by students from the Chepang community is below average. Karki (2011) claimed that the quality of education that Chepang students received was below average compared to that of larger group of Nepali student. Although there is multiple layers of problems, the researcher focused on the challenges faced by Chepang youths in the education sector. Along with increase in enrolment, the importance of education has been recognized by most of the parents' generations (Karki, 2011; Tryndyuk, 2013). This shows that the number of Chepang people who can sign, read, and write have increased. Although the student's enrolment number is increasing in schools, the focus appears to be counting number of enrolment only rather than active learning and preparing students for a secure future (Karki, 2011). Nowak et al. (2023) in their report prepared by *Sansthaगत Bikas Sanjal* (NGO), found out the influencing factors behind achieving their education, such as dire condition of households in relation to materials possessions, agricultural resources which made Chepang students to focus more on household matters than their own schooling. These eventually also contributed to lack of success during their educational career. Additionally, the research found out that irregular school attendance and the lack of opportunities to attend further education institutions were influencing factors (Nowak et al., 2023).

The major reason behind low literacy is due to extreme poverty and remoteness of their habitat, lack of proper infrastructure and accessibility to nearest schools (UNRCHCO, 2012). Major constraints behind on pursuing higher education is economic issue, food insecurity, where most of the Chepang depends on subsistence agriculture which is not enough for them to feed their families for whole year (Kunwar & Dhakal, 2025). In addition to this, geographical distance, untimely arrival of teachers in classes, negligence of teachers are among the reasons behind poor quality of education in schools (Shrestha, 2018) in Chepang villages. There were cases reported by mainstream media outlets in which grade 4 and grade 5 students were compelled to study in one classroom in Chepang village because there were not enough classrooms (Shrestha, 2018). Overcoming all forms of challenges there is a handful of high school graduates of Chepang community who completed their higher secondary (+2) level education. There is an increasing number of Chepang community youths gradually starting to enroll in schools and colleges (Tryndyuk, 2013). They have however managed to complete higher secondary level education in

Nepal, this research explored what hinders them from advancing to higher education. Hence, this now tries to extract further information beyond the affordability issues in pursuing higher education.

Constitution of Nepal provides access to education as a fundamental human right (Constituent Assembly Secretariat [CAS], 2015). However, education has not been easily accessible to everyone, and it has primarily benefited people from upper castes, while lower-caste people have been deprived of educational opportunities (Shyangtan, 2020). Despite several commitments on education sector such as education for all, universal primary education, and the provision of free and mandatory education in Nepal, the majority of marginalized people are still unable to complete their education (Shyangtan, 2020).

According to the Indigenous Nationalities Commission's updated annual report 2078/79, around 48.88 percent of Chepangs are literate. The data above shows that 94.percent are enrolled in basic schooling from grade 1-8 whereas, only 5.29% of Chepangs are enrolled in grade 9-12. This shows the highest dropout rate from grade 8 to grade 9. The pertinent issue here is access to higher education where there is only 0.16% of people are enrolled in higher education.

Table 1

Literacy Status of Chepang Community Extracted from Indigenous Nationalities Commission Annual Report

Indigenous community	Literacy rate	Primary Class 1-8 (In %)	Secondary Class 9-12 (In %)	Higher education Bachelors and above (In %)
Chepang (Prajā)	48.88	94.55	5.29	0.16 (44)

(Indigenous Nationalities Commission [INC], 2021)

As per the report published by the National Human Rights Commission of Nepal, 2025, the first arrangement for Chepang student residential accommodation (commonly known as a hostel) was made for Chepang children in Shaktikhor, Chitwan district, since 2057 B.S. (2000 A. D.). Chepang students have been given the opportunity to continue their education after passing grade 5 Similarly, a residential accommodation was built in Gajuri of Dhading where some boys and girls from the Chepang community have lived since 2060 B.S. (2003 A.D.). Likewise, Chepang hostel has also been formally registered and is currently in operation in Ward No. 10

of Kalika Municipality in Chitwan district since 2066 B.S. (2009 A.D.). Children aged 5–18, studying from grade 1 to grade 12, are found to be residing in this hostel. The current crisis here is, meeting the demand of Chepang children willing to stay in residential accommodation where foods and accommodations are arranged as their home is far from school, but limited resources and funding and support from government.

A study conducted with grade 9 and 10 Chepang and other community students by Adhikari (2024) found out that education contributes to the ability to promote health and sanitation, gender equality, and create awareness to address the social issues within their society (Adhikari, 2024). Education and skills are essential in mitigating poverty through empowering individual to take advantage of the opportunities available to improve their lives either economically or the other ways (Adhikari, 2024). Education drives youths to be empowered but the pertinent question that remains is individuals gain knowledge, skills and positive change in their lives, which denotes self-empowered only, hence it raises the question where is it contributing to the community in transformation of themselves as individual or society.

Indigenous Peoples and Higher Education

Globally and across regions and income groups, educational attainment among Indigenous Peoples remains well below that of the non-indigenous population (Subba et al., 2014). Limited access to quality education further deprives Indigenous Peoples of opportunities in the labor market and hinders their progress within it (Subba et al., 2014). Some of the significant challenges indigenous communities face in accessing education includes geographical remoteness, inadequate transportation options, socioeconomic deprivation, insufficient provision of education in mother tongue, the precariousness of school infrastructure, and a lack of parental involvement (The International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs [IWGIA], 2020).

Andersen et al., (2008) states that that participation of Indigenous Peoples in higher education is comparatively low across all sectors, which is less than half of that of the non-Indigenous population in all aspects of higher education; undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate programs. Similarly, it has also been found that Indigenous People tend to have fewer opportunities for tertiary education than their mainstream counterparts (Kippen et al., 2006). Indigenous Tamang girls face educational barriers and discrimination both in school and at home, influenced by historical oppression

and their families' economic challenges (Syangtan, 2020). Though there could be several barriers behind this, some of the barriers that Indigenous communities living in certain areas face in accessing education such as distance, family commitments and finance are widely recognized one (Kippen et al., 2006). Study carried out by Khadka et al. (2022) on learning performances of 'Indigenous' (*Janajati*) students in Nepal's private secondary schools found out that, Indigenous students performed lower academic performance as compared to their non- indigenous colleagues. In the study that categorized findings into two sections; home-related and school-related themes, it was found out that home-related barriers were more prevalent than the school-related factors in the students with lower academic and learning performances. This shows that family's socio-economic backgrounds, parents' education, cultural factors played crucial roles influencing lower learning performance.

School Education, Local Curriculum and MTB-MLE

Although Article 31 of the Constitution of Nepal promulgated in 2015 guarantees the right to education. The local government operation act of 2017 of Nepal also has the provision to teach and learn in mother tongue of indigenous nationalities. However, it has been found that education in the mother tongue has not been provided. The teaching and learning practice at schools, was not in mother-tongue (Pherali, 2011). These forms of language based exclusion remarkably grew during Panchayat era (Pherali, 2011). Mother tongue or native language as medium of instructions plays important role in teaching and learning. The current model of pedagogy is unwilling to use their local language, as most of the teachers promotes monolingual top down policy and minority languages are not recognized (Phyak, 2015). To promote indigenous language and culture there were considerable efforts by the international donor agencies for production of 'mother-tongue instruction materials' during 1990s as a process of democratizing educational policy (Pherali, 2011).

The government of Nepal has developed number of policies and initiatives to make it more inclusive education for Indigenous Peoples and marginalized communities. Inclusive education policy is important in order to address these issues and ensure that all children have equal access to education. The government has taken initiatives to make inclusive education policy incorporating Mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) in primary schools. Despite these efforts of the government, mother tongue teaching and learning practice has still been challenging.

Socioeconomic Conditions of Chepangs

Chepangs live closer to forests and have close attachment with land, resource and territories and the livelihood mostly depends upon forest resources to a large extent (Piya et al., 2013). Lamichhane (2015) claims that since Chepangs' survival was mostly dependent on forest and its products, and Chepangs have in-depth knowledge about the forest. The sources of income for Chepang people are livestock rearing, day to day wage labors, selling of non-timber forest products (NTFPs), and very less number of Chepang people engaged in salaried jobs, and remittance for cash income (Piya et al., 2019). Chepang livelihood is following agroforestry practice in mid hills which is the perfect livelihood sustainable activity for Chepang (Piya et al., 2013). Hence there is strong cultural, spiritual and emotional connection of Chepangs with the forest.

The majority of Chepang people do not have land ownership certificates and depend on foraging for food. The land that community members own is mostly unregistered land patches which are gradually being encroached upon in the name of development, conservation and other projects. According to United Nations Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator's Office (UNRCHCO) report (2012) more than 80 percent of Chepang people still falls behind in human development index, and categorized below the poverty line based on different indicators such as access to education, housing structure, food sufficiency, maternal mortality rate and so on.

Chiuri Tree and Khoriya (Shifting Cultivation Practice)

In ancient days, the Chiuri tree is a source of livelihood for Chepang community. Many Chepang people used to sell Chiuri ghee for their income (Golay et al., 2021). Chiuri trees hold significant social and cultural value in the Chepang community. The practice of giving Chiuri trees to daughters as dowry instills the species in kinship systems, property relations, and intergenerational continuity (Golay et al., 2021). Chepang uses a variety of processing procedures to extract and use Chiuri products. Oil is typically extracted from seeds by drying and pressing them, although mechanical oil expellers are rapidly replacing this approach. This technique provides economic security for women while also encouraging long-term tree conservation.

Khoriya plays crucial role in food security, especially in the months when there is no enough food productions of crops (Sharma, 2011). Sharma, (2011) mentions "If the Chepang household that doesn't have Khoriya, it is considered as

incomplete.” This means, a Chepang household must have Khoriya land and Khoriya is the identity of Chepang community and deities reside in and around this land (Sharma, 2011). In this practice, a patch of forest is cleared, burnt, and cultivated (Pokharel, 2023). Farmers shift in certain intervals to a new area and repeat the same process, which enables vegetation to regenerate, while other patches are cleared, letting it dry and burning them off (Dhakal, 2000). Chepang people’s nature of practicing Khoriya digging and slash-and-burn agricultural practices are intricately linked to their culture.

Forest Act 1993 introduced community forest and leasehold forestry which banned access to resources, controlled hunting and cultivation activities in and around these forest area (Piya et al., 2019). The Chepangs had no legal ownership of land where they practiced Khoriya, and unregistered lands such as Khoriya was failed to recognize by the government (Pokharel, 2023). Most of the Chepangs still depends on wild roots, such as *Gita*, *Vyakur*, *Tarul*, *Pidalu*, *Gava*, *Nyuro*, *Chyau*, *Siplegaan*, and *Kaguno* in Khoriya (Piya et al., 2011). These foods were one of the means to ensure food security of Chepang people especially during food deficit season. Nowadays the livelihoods of the Chepangs have transitioned over the last one-and-a-half century from a nomadic group to shifting cultivation and further to subsistence agriculture (Piya et al., 2019).

Impacts of Protected Areas on Chepang Community

A 2017 report prepared by the Madi municipality states that 160 landless families had informally settled in Kusum Khola. In 2018 and 2019 the municipality resettled most of them in a new housing site in *Raidanda*, *Gairigau*, *Shivadwar* and *Pyauli*, of Madi municipality (Amnesty International Nepal, 2021; Sunuwar, 2020). However, the resettled areas in Rapti and Madi municipality for Chepang community settlement lie in flood prone areas and the people are not legally placed in the land, hence, are without legal land rights certificates. Furthermore, due to lack of land ownership certificate many of the victims from wildlife attacks are deprived from government services and facilities, including wildlife damage compensation schemes and citizenship certificates. Chepangs day to day livelihoods depend on livestock farming, wage labor, selling mushrooms, ferns, woods, and non-timber forest products (Piya et al., 2019). There are very few individuals who are engaged in salaried jobs. In recent days Chepang youths have also started going to gulf countries for job opportunities

Puja/ Ceremonies and Rituals in Chepang Community

Chepangs are considered *Prakriti Pujak*, which means worshiper of nature (Sharma, 2011). Chepang worships land, and forests. Worshiping of land (*Bhumipooja*) is carried out once a year on the month of *Bhadra*. Chepang people carry out *Bhumipooja* (worshiping of land) annually in order to make their ancestors and gods happy (Chepang, 2025). *Nwagi* is the only festival that is currently celebrated by Chepangs in individual households and also celebrated collectively as an occasion of first harvest offering (Chepang, 2025). First harvesting offerings of wild fruits, roots, or honey, offered to ensure harmony and express gratitude reflecting a worldview of reciprocity and balance. For Chepangs the forest is considered as god, which is considered as spirits of ancestors who must be respected and protected (Chepang, 2025). The worship is led by the oldest person and Shaman of this community. The *Pande* takes a leadership role in almost all the religious and social activities of the Chepang society (Adhikari, 2010; Pokharel, 2023). Community people reach out to *Pande's* to cure sickness and illness in the village. *Pande's* uses *Dhyangro*, a traditional musical instrument during treatment (Adhikari, 2010). Worshiping the ancestors is done as *Kulpuja* on December and *Bayu puja* is carried out for eternal peace. Collective worships is carried out during certain ceremonies and festivals. These offerings is for wellbeing of the people and pray to the forest to support the community people by providing all the required materials (Pokharel, 2023).

The Chepang community's practices, rituals is deeply connected with nature. The beliefs, rituals and death cremation are connected with the nature too. This belief reflects their strong spiritual relationship with nature, spirits, and ancestral deities (Riboli, 2000). As the Chepang community becomes more diverse in terms of religious beliefs, changes in funeral practices have emerged. Due to the influence of different religion, cremation process, family rituals, purification rituals are mixed up. Christian Chepang families generally follow burial customs in accordance with their faith, while Hindu-influenced families are more inclined toward Hindu-style cremation (Chepang, 2024). Urbanization, migration, and increased contact with other ethnic groups have also brought new influences, blending or modifying traditional practices.

Religion Conversion

Chepangs are one of the Indigenous community group in Nepal, where most of the individuals has changed their religion to Christianity (Adhikari, 2023; Pokharel, 2023). This conversion is through different means such as offering humanitarian aid, education, and medical care and so on (Chepang, 2024; Nowak et al., 2023). These kind of external influence from the missionary based organization becomes powerful when the government of Nepal is not able to provide basic facilities, basic fundamental rights to community living in marginal strata of the society. Christianity is spreading in Chepang territories not due to geopolitical confrontation but through humanitarian networks and socioeconomic incentives (Pokharel, 2023). These supports indirectly contributes Chepang community people to transition from their traditional ways to adopting new lifestyles through events carried out in Church (Adhikari, 2023). For Chepang people conversing their religion, it is not only about the belief but also for access to resources and dignity.

Some of the reason behind conversion is to overcome discrimination, accessing education, and achieving social justice, particularly for younger generations (Adhikari, 2023; Chepang, 2024; Riboli, 2000). This conversion is reshaping the cultural and spiritual identity of Chepangs. As most of the Chepangs are now avoiding the traditional rituals, ancestral worships, collective rituals and nature based spiritual practices. This interlinks with the Huntington's idea of interaction between cultural and religious system, which is due to influence of powerful external factors invading Indigenous cultures (Huntington, 1993). The culture, practice, spiritual beliefs, worshipping nature, and sustainable ways of living are gradually disappearing (Chepang, 2024). The conversion of religion has diluted cultural practice, identity, leading to the decline of traditional knowledge (Adhikari, 2023; Chepang, 2024; Riboli, 2000) along with declining shamanism. These conversion has caused social divisions among Chepangs; Christians and non-Christians.

Education and Policy Review

The Panchayat regime slogan had that main aim of creating national unity through “एक भाषा, एक भेष र एक देश” through a common language, and a common culture (Sutherland, 2009). Although the Panchayat regime had motive of using common language, culture for day to day communication, official use, day to day transactional use, the attempt went far beyond where Whelpton (2005) mentioned the

impose of high caste elite language all over Nepal. Sutherland (2009) quotes the recognition of local language where each community in Nepal shall have right to preserve and promote its language, culture and script as mentioned in constitution of Nepal. This section reviews existing policies such as Education Act 2028, Constitution of Nepal, 2072 and The Act on Compulsory and Free Education, 2075.

Education Act of 2028 BS (1971 AD)

The Education Act of 2028 BS, had divided schools into three tyres; primary education (grades 1-5), lower secondary (grades 6-8), and secondary (grades 9-10). The School Leaving Certificate (SLC) examination was conducted in Grade 10 until 2071 BS. The marking system were based on percentage. Grades 11 and 12 were placed under higher secondary education.

In 1971, massive literacy campaigns began through the National Education System Plan to expand citizens' access to education. This brought national-level awareness and consciousness of the importance of education (Mishra, 2011). A centralized education system to promote national unity and loyalty to the Panchayat system through a uniform curriculum for all was implemented; however, it did not reach the grassroots level. Mishra (2011) notes that the Panchayat system sought to make everything in its favor.

Similarly in his book Mishra (2011) notes that, these initiatives included the establishment of primary schools, a major leap on education structures and literacy across Nepal. This contributed to more informed and aware citizens. However, the labor generated from this model of education was not relevant for the market. This led to more educated unemployed youths which proved that education policy could not meet the demand of modern economy.

After the establishment of the Multiparty system, the private education system further increased the rise of private investors. These private models of education further contributed to increased class inequality. There was no critical thinking only rote learning and tuition based learning (Mishra, 2011).

Constitution of Nepal, 2015

Nepal's Constitution recognizes free and compulsory education as a fundamental right. Article 31 ensures that every person has access to school education, putting the state under a clear commitment to offer free education up to the secondary level, as well as compulsory, free basic education for all children. In effect,

this implies that children have the right to free and compulsory education up to grade eight, as well as free education from grades nine to twelve in government schools.

The education policy of Nepal is guided by the Constitution of 2015, recognizes education as a fundamental right and requires the state to provide free and compulsory basic education to all citizens. As per recent change in the federal system of Nepal, School-level education is now under the jurisdiction of local government authorities which is governed by Municipalities, and Rural Municipalities. Involvement of local government authorities can monitor, track the education practices in their territories in close coordination with school management committee (K. C., 2023). The 753 local government bodies/municipalities manages basic and secondary education. These local government bodies are given authority to develop necessary education policies and plans to the local levels (K. C., 2023).

The constitution is epitome as inclusive one as it guarantees several educational rights such as every citizen has right to access to basic education, compulsory and free education up to the secondary level. The constitutions also ensures people with disabilities and economically disadvantaged community to have right to education including visually impaired individuals to be supported through Braille, and those with hearing or speaking disabilities have the right to free education through sign language, right to receive education in their mother tongue and to establish and operate schools accordingly under law (Dhungana et al., 2021).

Act on Compulsory and Free Education, 2075 (2018)

The Government of Nepal published the act relating to compulsory and free education, 2075 in 2018. It was developed with the aim of equal access to education for all citizens. The chapter two of this act mentions about access to quality education, without any discrimination along with acquiring education in mother tongue. Each subsection of this chapter two discusses inclusivity in education sector ranging from right to become literate, right to education in mother tongue, access to education from early age, rights of people with disability in accessing education and so on. Chapter discusses compulsory and free education, this aims to transform the education system into an inclusive, equitable, and quality-driven, and act urges to invest in people with disability, and marginalized communities, and ensure that all children, including those with disabilities and those from disadvantaged backgrounds, have equal access to education.

There are several initiatives taken by the government of Nepal to implement the act, including increasing public spending on education by providing scholarships and financial assistance to students, implementing mid-day meal program to marginalized communities, and launching programs to improve the quality of teacher training and professional development. However, there are still several challenges in Nepal's education sector, including limited access to quality education in rural areas, poor infrastructure and inadequate teaching resources, and low levels of student achievement. The Act of 2018 advances the right to education as a fundamental rights which is under the legislation incorporated in the Constitution of Nepal. The Act of 2018 is a guarantee in the sense that the state is responsible for ensuring free and compulsory education.

Theoretical Insights of the Dissertation

I have examined the narratives through the lens of transformative learning theory, Marxian perspective on education for interpreting education, curriculum and pedagogy related issues, and Bourdieu cultural reproduction and production theory for interpreting the knowing, reasoning and understanding of the educated participants life style and their transformative role in transforming to them self, their community and society. "Transformative learning is learning that transforms problematic frames of reference with the sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets) by making them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change" (Mezirow, 2000). Christie et al. (2015) mentions that Jack Mezirow's theory is much more focused on individual transformation. They further claims that the aim of transformative learning is to help individuals challenge the current assumptions on which they act and, if they find them wanting, to change them. This includes both mental and behavioral shift. The hope of transformative learning is that better individuals will build a better world (Christie et al., 2015).

Transformative learning theory coined by Mezirow emphasizes cognitive, emotional and social dimensions in adult learning process (Dirkx, 1998), which contributes to free thinking, liberation, and focus on self-directed learning (Mezirow, 1997). Transformative learning enables to examine deep seated values, assumptions, and beliefs and develop their self-perspectives (Mezirow, 1990). It is essential to examine oneself' deep seated values, assumptions, and beliefs and develop one's self-perspectives (Mezirow, 1990). For Taylor and Luitel (2012) transformative learning is

exploration of sociocultural norms and how it shapes personal and professional values along with educational practices. The process includes critical reflection, rational discourse, more reflective, free-thinking mindset and the integration of new perspectives (Mezirow, 1997). Transformative learning theory stresses on change in beliefs, attitudes, and emotional responses during learning process (Biasin, 2018). This involves a process of deep critical reflection of one's experiences, which is also termed as "perspective transformation" where individuals critically examines their assumptions and worldview (Dirkx, 1998; Mezirow, 1991). Taylor and Luitel (2012) emphasizes on incorporating epistemological pluralism, through integrating multiple research paradigms such as interpretivism, criticalism, and postmodernism. This inclusive perspective, also known as the integral perspective, fosters a holistic understanding of transformative learning.

A catalyst for learning and change can result from regularly disrupted change in lives, which is termed as disorientation dilemma which further leads to transformative learning, for instance relationship change, job loss, and any other life events disruptions (Mezirow, 1991). However, transformation can also result less dramatically from the accumulation of smaller shifts in perspective over time (Mezirow, 1991).

Adult education should enable learners to question, expand their frames of reference, and foster independence of interpretation, which are shaped by sociocultural backgrounds and socialization processes (Mezirow, 1997). Adults use their past experiences, and prior knowledge to process their thinking and interpret reality including values and behaviour. This theory is increasingly relevant to understand how adults make sense of their experiences (Biasin, 2018; Mezirow, 1991) in today's complex, rapidly changing social environments. However, universities and departments may vary greatly on to what extent do they involve students on critical reflection in the process of transformative learning process as this may also be affected by biological and mental factors on an individual (Holdo, 2023).

Transformation is required to meet the changing assumptions, contributing to broader societal change and it should consider ethnicity, class, gender and sexual orientation to further foster inclusive educational practices (Christie et al., 2015). Additionally Luitel and Wagley (2017) coins need for paradigm shifts by integrating arts-based, multi-paradigmatic approaches, which emphasizes developing emerging leaders across various domains through the role of transformative education.

Transformative learning can be achieved through a more engaged, dialogic process shifting away from the traditional, one-way transfer of information and knowledge from experts to novices (Chowdhury, 2018). On the other hand, Barker (2020) states that transformative education can be effective if it connects local and global issues, and embraces indigenous values, which contributes in fostering learners' perspectives. However, DiMaggio (1982) claimed that the socioeconomic backgrounds of family members, cultures, gender determines grades and participation. It is argued that conventional measures of family background fail to capture cultural elements of status that make a difference in school interactions (DiMaggio, 1982). Cultural capital has a significant impact on grades, controlling for family background and measured ability. Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch (1995) derived from the research carried out with Mexican-origin high school students that an individual is potentially able to derive various types of institutional resources, support, socioeconomic status, language measures, bilinguals may have special advantages in acquiring the institutional support through the social capital that they possess, along with this educational and occupational expectations is directly related to the social capital that an individual possess as they are closely tied to the institutional agents, such as teachers and guidance counsellors (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995).

Theoretical Gap

Most research on the Chepang community is interpreted through the lens of the Marxist perspective, Bourdieu's cultural reproduction, and more descriptive research. This research interprets the findings through the transformative lens of the educated Chepang participants' knowledge, reasoning, and understanding, and their role in transforming themselves, their community, and society.

I became interested in transformative learning before I even knew what it was. As I intend to question myself 'What does it means to be educated?' Is it about obtaining formal degrees only? Have I been able to address the need of my community that I belong to? Is education only about self-fulfillment and supporting own family members? What is the purpose of education if it is not useful in day to day life? Have I transformed myself or have I contributed something to community where I belong? Or am I just living in a society as it should be in the feudalistic society. I wonder how the other Chepang youth must have experienced their educational journey which have shaped their worldview and the survival status. Hence, as per definition of Mezirow on transformative learning as 'learning that

transforms problematic frames of references with the sets of fixed assumptions and expectations through changing habits of mind, meaning perspectives, and mindsets. This make individuals more open, reflective, and inclusive (Mezirow, 2000).

This theory has articulated the journey of education how it has shaped their life? Have these education really transformed by providing skills, fostering self-determination, and helping one know oneself or did they create an identity crisis? These reflections guided me to apply transformative learning theory as a framework for seeking answers to these questions. Hence, I realized that transformative learning would be an analytical theoretical framework for studying Chepang graduates experiences reflecting on my and some other Chepang youths who graduated.

Reflecting through transformative lenses in modern education in this autoethnographic study enabled the researcher to examine how the researcher have undergone transformative learning experiences through their own self-reflection and analysis. This can involve examining their own cultural background, beliefs, and assumptions, and how those have changed over time. This further helps to identify experiences that have contributed to their learning journey along with how these experiences have impacted life course in understanding themselves, society and the world around them.

The theory of transformative learning concepts applies in understanding how Chepang youths living on the societal fringes can critically engage with their educational experiences, overcome barriers, and achieve personal and intellectual growth. This theoretical lens highlights the importance of fostering reflective culturally sensitive educational environments that support marginalized students in higher education.

Empirical Review

Brian Hodgson was the first researcher to document the Chepangs back in 1848 (Maharjan et al., 2010). Over the past thirty years, numerous anthropological and sociological studies have been conducted on the Chepang community. However, only a limited number of quantitative studies have examined their socio-economic conditions. Most of the research has focused on topics such as language, cultural customs, agriculture and livelihoods, and social issues.

The Chepang language research was carried out by Pons (2022) which also documents day to day life, cultural practices, spiritual beliefs, history, and other knowledge of the Chepang people. The initial research were carried out on different

themes such as syntax, morphology, and the numeral system, with notable work by Ross Caughley during the 1980s and 2000s. Riboli (2000) studied shamanism, Chepangs' shamanistic rituals, healing practices, and use of traditional medicinal plants. Rijal (2011) researched on community's medicinal plant knowledge. Piya et al. (2019) has also highlighted food security, agriculture and livelihoods, dependence on subsistence farming, shifting cultivation, and the collection of non-timber forest products and issues faced by Chepangs. Karki (2011) and Tryndyuk (2013) have highlighted barriers to education among Chepang children, gender disparities, health practices and particularly girls. There are research carried out on themes related to health, maternal health care practices, and climate change. The reason behind drop out from schools by Chepang girls is due to household chores, like cooking, cleaning cow dung, kitchen works, agriculture works in the farm, early marriage (Budhathoki, 2024). This is also closely linked with Chepang children to get marry at an early age, which disrupts the educational pathways. When Chepang girls marry at an early age this gives rise to other problem led by teenage pregnancies, child mortality, premature deaths of children and also birth giving mother (Budhathoki, 2024). This will consequently lead to deprivation from opportunities to gain essential life skills, knowledge from formal schooling and disconnects from society which ultimately perpetuates cycles of poverty and gender disparity within the community (Budhathoki, 2024).

While reviewing grey reports produced by Non-government organizations (NGOs), International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) reports, carried out by Nowak et al. (2023) from *Sansthaगत विकास संजाल* on the educational situation of Chepang children in Thakre Rural Municipality (Dhading, Nepal): Status and possibilities for improvement can be a present scenario information for this dissertation. There are only a handful of studies on the education status of Chepang community and there is barely any studies on higher education. One of the recent study

Empirical Gaps in Research

Growing up in the Chepang community, and acquiring education was not basic fundamental rights but a privilege. The lack of schools in remote areas, cultural stigmas, and financial barriers were significant hurdles for my community. The roller coaster bumpy ride from a deprived family leading to being financially independent, possessing certain technical skills, able to support family when needed, and at least be

able to live a simple and decent life in expensive city like Kathmandu has been portrayed in the flow of writing of dissertation. This auto/ethnographic study not only fulfills the partial requirement of MPhil dissertation but also motivate the upcoming younger generations from Chepang community to think, analyze and internalize from experiences of Chepang graduates in pursuing higher education.

The findings from this detailed qualitative auto/ethnographic research can be disseminated to Chepang youths which can be inspirations, motivations and also learn from mistakes that I made through put this educational journey. I am self-motivated to reflect my personal stories, narratives of my bumpy roller coaster journey on education in this dissertation. As the first and the only MPhil candidate from Chepang community, I am sharing my educational journey to a wider readership through this dissertation. This dissertation has uncovered my lived experiences of growing up in indigenous Chepang community, my academic journey and my professional achievements through experiences, narrative, critical reflection and lived experience. I have unpacked and interpreted the different life stories, journeys and experiences of my stories through an insider perspective.

This auto/ethnographic inquiry also highlights the resilience and potential within Indigenous communities by shedding light on systemic gaps that still exist, urging stakeholders to invest in inclusive policies and culturally sensitive educational initiatives. These journey of different individuals who have had access to higher education exemplifies how access to education can empower individuals to advocate for their communities, preserve their heritage, and create a ripple effect of change.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In the dissertation “Living in the Fringe of Society: An Auto/Ethnography of Chepang Youths in Higher Education”, the researcher applied a critical approach as both a philosophical stance and methodological framework. The research design here involves two approaches: autoethnography and ethnography. Both approaches autoethnography and ethnography is relevant for exploring and reflecting on the challenges and issues that Chepang youths faced in their educational journey. From an ethnographic point of view, this dissertation integrates an ethnographic approach comprising interviews, observations, informal conversations, and online communications with Chepang youths who are either currently enrolled in higher education or have graduated.

As an auto-ethnographer, I have critically reflected on my own subjectivity, and possible biasness recognizing my positionality as privilege within unprivileged group and have interpreted the self-reflections being self-aware of personal experiences and perspectives. This dissertation investigates the educational journey of Chepang youths who have completed a Master’s Degree in different subjects. The researcher has differentiated the researcher’s space and the participant’s exposure.

Research Design: An Auto/Ethnographic Inquiry

“Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom, Aristotle says.” I apply this quotation to reflect myself in this auto-ethnographic inquiry. This enables me to develop critical self-awareness via comparing and contrasting old Indigenous knowledge and new knowledge. This also provides opportunities for cultural self-knowing.

Yazan (2019) notes that autoethnography is a powerful tool to practice self-reflexivity as this gives space to share and negotiate identity. However, self-reflexive mode of expressing the opinions in autoethnography can also have the risk of becoming vulnerable as our personal stories are shared for public reading (Yazan, 2019). Hence, bringing out auto narratives might also lead to an overflow of personal bias, which could impact the research process and needs to be minimized.

Autoethnography is a unique methodology in social science research that can be drawn through narrative research, autobiography, ethnography, and arts-based

research (Cooper & Liliyea, 2022; Keleş 2022). An autoethnographic approach can be an entry point in this educational research by inquiring into gaps through personal experiences within their communities. This could effectively help to dive deeper into the challenges faced by Chepang students in pursuing higher-level formal education. Hamdan (2012) also claims that autoethnography is best suited for education related research, however it can also serve as a privileged source of knowledge, fostering a deeper understanding of his or her own life.

Autoethnography brings my life's history, and learning from my own life experience as a conceptual lens in my narrative to interpret my research theme. Autoethnography can be an organic and subjective effort to inquire into the experiences of graduates of Master's degree from the Chepang community in pursuing higher level education (Yazan, 2019). Autoethnography is one of the new tools in social science for research. Auto/ethnography, which was coined by Reed-Danahay in 1997, challenges old approaches to doing research and takes a strong position against the resistance from 'colonialist, sterile research impulses' (Qutoshi, 2015).

Auto/ethnography involves self-reflection and self-examination, gaining insight into one's own experiences and cultural background, and ethnography involves sharing their lived realities, challenges, and other obstacles during the higher education journey. This is entirely a process of observing and reflecting oneself by contrasting and comparing (Cooper & Liliyea, 2022). Autoethnography is the merging of the techniques, theories and practices found in ethnography with those of autobiography and memoir (Chang, 2008; Hughes, 2018). Autoethnography involves compilation of internal thoughts, memories from past notes, facts and external behaviors (Cooper & Liliyea, 2022). Auto/ethnographic approach engages critical reflection and analysis of journey towards higher education of Chepangs.

Autoethnographic inquiry enables the researcher to portray their experiential learnings by understanding, negotiating and constructing the meanings based on personal understanding and reflections (Yazan, 2019). The stories, anecdotes, and experiences compiled in autoethnography will be more autobiographical, narrative, dialogic, and self-analytical, constructing stories from their own experiences (Cooper & Liliyea, 2022). These components will enable the researcher to reflect on and critically analyze, from an individual perspective, changes in understanding of the self, belief systems, and behavioral changes. Keleş (2022) suggests auto

ethnographers familiarize themselves with and differentiate epistemological foundations, and methodological approach of autoethnography to ensure that researcher uses the most appropriate approach to tell their stories in their own way. Hence it is necessary to be clear on the philosophical consideration, axiology and epistemology of the research.

Philosophical Orientation and Ontology

The philosophical consideration for this research is a critical approach to uncover social inequalities and power dynamics by examining the underlying structures and systems that perpetuate them through the interpretation of context. The information received from respondents was subjective, reflecting multiple realities constructed by different individuals. Hence, the knowledge is context-specific and based on subjective meanings of the respondents. This dissertation is an innovative way of understanding and knowing, through interpreting and constructing meaning from it (Qutoshi, 2015). This can be a powerful way of learning, understanding myself and other Chepang graduates within the context, and creating meaning that helps me understand my own situation (Qutoshi, 2015). This approach can be a tool for decolonizing research by challenging dominant narratives (Houston, 2007). Autoethnographic methodology can empower marginalized voices and challenge dominant narratives, allowing for a more inclusive and diverse representation of knowledge through research (Houston, 2007). Bloor and Wood (2006) noted that autoethnography provides rich, detailed insights into lived experiences through personal narratives, observations, and reflections to explore larger societal themes. This research will contribute to promoting social justice and transformative change by exploring the current model of educational quality that Chepang students are receiving, which is leading them nowhere.

Methods of Auto/Ethnographic Research

The auto/ethnographic methodology used in this work highlights my lived experience as a Chepang person as an important point of inquiry. My autobiography, reflections as narratives in this methodological space needs to delve deeper through self-exploration and other Chepang colleagues through deeper level of consciousness (Qutoshi, 2015).

I re/reviewed, re/read, re/write and critically reflected on self and others to delve deeper into the journey as vital sources of information for auto ethnography. This has potential to critically question, raise deeper level of consciousness, and

contribute to reform existing unequal social structures, dominations (O'Sullivan, 2012). Four interrelated and iterative methods are used here; personal narratives, reflexive digital archive through wordpress and, relational storytelling.

Autoethnography combines these approaches by encouraging researchers to reflect on and document their own personal experiences within specific cultural, social, or historical contexts.

Reflecting on Self/Others

In an autoethnographic study 'I' myself is at the center for source of data whereas ethnographic approach includes views and their stories from participants. I start the investigation by delving deeply into my own life narrative. I have thoroughly reflected, self-reflected and critically reflected important life movements specially related to educational journey, from my early years of attending schools, campus, and my ongoing journey through higher education. sometimes the information tends to mix up bringing sociocultural circumstances that influence educational journey. Personal narratives brings my narratives, and my community. The narratives intertwines with cultural identity, poverty, prejudice, and the journey of education and it ensures the information comes from of grounded story rather than articulating new one. The auto ethnographic methodology brings out the voices the people, the structural challenges that people faced while accessing higher education from the community representatives who have been marginalized from historical time through their stories, narratives and lived experiences by listening and documenting their voices. This autoethnography thus, involves self-reflection and self-examination gaining insight into one's own experiences and cultural background and ethnography involves sharing their lived realities, challenges and other obstacles faced during the higher education journey.

I have critically interpreted findings by cross questioning myself on the prevailing assumptions related to different themes such as education and social status. Critical reflections have enabled the narration of existing power structures and the confrontation of systemic inequalities that restrict Chepang access to higher education, thereby preventing it from discussing and serving the vested interests of dominant social groups and further perpetuating exclusion for communities like Chepang (Cooper & White, 2012). Examining these dynamics through a holistic lens contributes to a deeper understanding, awareness, and suggests potential structural reforms that can enhance equity in educational opportunities.

Reviewing Word Press Blog: A Digital Narrative Archive

One of my strength for rewinding memories, stories, experiences, and achievements for the analysis of autoethnographic inquiry is looking back at the WordPress information, collections that I have jotted down in my blog. My journey of writing blog for more than thirteen years is one way to self-discover myself, and a digital notebook to gather ideas, feelings, and observations of my three decade journey. I have been writing about my engagement, advocacy campaigns for Chepang identity, and self-sustaining initiatives for Chepang community in this digital archive. This documents not only highlights significant achievements but also the challenges and struggles that came up throughout the way.

Relational Storying

The auto/ethnographic approach in this research, not only of the researcher but also of other Chepang youths educational trajectory by recollecting their journey, memories and interpreting the experiences with critical reflection and learning through personal story sharing along with few youths. I have conceptualized and analyzed my lived experiences and participants journey of growing up in the Chepang community, educational journey, how it contributed to professional life and critically reflect through neoliberal lens. Specific educational journey memoirs includes experiences of attending school away from home, deprivation of basic needs fulfilment in the family and achieving higher education from European countries. I derived my stories as data for autoethnography along with the additional seven graduate's stories and experiences.

I include conversational and interpersonal interactions with other Chepang graduates because I understand that knowledge is co-constructed. Informal conversations, regular exchanges, and impromptu discussions in public settings all contribute to the formation of these relationships. Instead of doing formal interviews, I focus on relational narratives that naturally arise from stories told during family get-togethers, communal meals, or peer-to-peer personal reflections. This helps bring together multiple realities from auto/ethnographic inquiry and other Chepang youths who have achieved higher education. This also highlights the different contexts of researcher and the Chepang youths looking through multiple lenses as the reality faced by them are different. These dialogical interactions provide layered viewpoints on identity, aspiration, struggle, and cultural belonging. They shed light on how cultural meanings are collectively negotiated and how my experiences relate to those

of others who are subject to comparable structural limitations. Because the tales that emerge are co-constructed, the research includes numerous Chepang voices in addition to my own.

Epistemology of the Research

This research dissects inequality, oppression, injustice, exclusion, and dominance (Vaditya, 2018), which is an epistemological consideration of this research among Chepangs in higher education. This research holds a critical epistemology by critically reflecting on the issues faced by Chepangs through an/auto-ethnographic study. For me, education has been a way to see the world differently. Hence, I want to unveil Chepang's ground realities, experiences, upbringing, and how education contributes to personal transformation, knowledge, family, and society as a whole. I have unwrapped the stories of disparities, hardships, and challenges so a wider audience can listen to them. I believe it is my responsibility to tell my community's story rather than citing others' literature and references written about our community. This uncovers the narratives of accessing higher education and assesses the individual or structural factors that are pushing the Chepang community further behind. This provides a platform for the voiceless Chepangs to raise their voices, whose rights have been denied by the state.

Axiology

Though access to education for citizens in a country is a fundamental human right, it was a luxury for the Chepang community, where not everyone had access to basic education. The logic behind telling my story is the stories of struggle and pain, and connecting with community members from past and present generations. This will also keep a record for younger generations from the Chepang community to learn and reflect on these journeys.

Being defined as 'educated' and giving back to the community where my roots are attached is my core value. Hence, this research offers an insider perspective, along with additional voices from community members. This may or may not apply to other individuals, but for me, I now have a communal obligation, and I feel obligated to raise the voices of community people for collective wellbeing. Auto/ethnography will uncover reflexive emotions, which includes social realities and reflections of the participants; this will shape the researchers own philosophical assumptions (Bloor & Wood, 2006). I reviewed significant events from my early years, schooling, family life, community expectations, and my ongoing journey through higher education.

Participant Selection and Biography

The participants for the ethnographic inquiry have been selected from the Dhading, Chitwan, and Makawanpur districts who have completed higher education. The participants have been selected using a purposive sampling method, which fulfils the requirement of people who have completed higher education. A total of 7 Chepang youths who completed their university-level education (completed Bachelor's degrees and pursuing Master's Degrees) have been interviewed.

The initial gatekeeping for this research was through Nepal Chepang Association executive committee members. I reached out to the Chairperson of the Nepal Chepang Association to know the details of graduates from Chepang community all over Nepal. It was noted that only 8 of them had graduated. I took contact details including phone number, Facebook contacts. I initially scrolled down their social media profiles, news publications about them, and reached out to them over phone call taking reference of Chairperson of Nepal Chepang Association.

One of the limitation for myself was, I studying in residential school had limited my networks and connections with the community people. Hence this was one of the point to track the roots of community people was through the association. It was not that challenging for me to build rapport as I had known them before as well one or the other way. As the population of Chepang community people is less I did not face any issue in connecting with the graduates.

Table 2
Brief Biography of Participants

Education level	Pseudo name	Basic biography
Masters	Tirtha	Tirtha is from Dhading District. He is the first Master's Degree holder of Chepang community. He completed Masters in Education from Tribhuvan University.
MPhil	Aanand	Aanand is from Makawanpur district. He is currently studying MPhil in Tribhuvan University under culture department.
Masters Ongoing	Chiran	Chiran is currently a government school teacher in secondary school in Handikhola. He has

		completed regular exams of Master's degree in Education and he is currently writing thesis.
Masters in Forestry	Kam Bahadur	Kam Bahadur is from western Chitwan side. He is currently government Ranger at Chitwan National Park. He completed Master's Degree in Forestry from AFU and he is from Chitwan district.
Masters ongoing	Man Bahadur	Man Bahadur is Civil Engineer from and he is currently pursuing Master's Degree in Kathmandu University. He is from Dhading district.
Masters	Siru	Siru is first Chepang women to complete Master's Degree. She is from Chitwan district. She completed Master's Degree in Education from Tribhuvan University.
Masters	Raj Bahadur	Raj Bahadur is from Dhading and he is currently working as project coordinator in Dhading district.
MPhil	I	As a researcher myself have kept "I" as center for information. I am from Chitwan and I have been writing this dissertation as a part of partial fulfilment of MPhil Degree at Kathmandu University School of Education.

Collecting Lived Experiences, Meanings and Social Contexts

Autoethnographic data analysis was designed as a self-reflective meaning-making process that uncovered emotions, thoughts, and beliefs by remembering, revisiting, and recreating past experiences. The data analysis was conducted based on multiple genres, narratives, and logics brought into the discussion, reflexive journals, and monologues.

The information obtained from interviews was transcribed and processed through a meaning-making process by coding similar thoughts, stories, reflections, and experiences derived from autoethnography and from other participants. This

meaning-making procedure enabled the researcher to revisit and refine interpretations based on ongoing analysis, reflection, and engagement with the research data. This process involves collecting, compiling experiences, stories of success and downfall, emotions, and every journey connecting with the theoretical implications co-constructing meaning out of the collected data. I have remained unbiased and neutral in interpretation by removing all the positions that I have personally and professionally.

I considered the influence of my positionality in this research and also acknowledged the potential impact on the interpretation and meaning-making process. However, coding was also a relevant method for this research, serving as a basic means of identifying segments of meaning in data and labeling them with codes. This process enabled the researcher to acquire deep, comprehensive, and thorough insights from the data (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019), which were relevant to the analysis.

Authenticity, Credibility and Cultural Consideration

Autoethnography involves rigorous approach that brings personal experiences, documents notable life events, including noticed or unnoticed and identifying underlying power dynamics to understand their inner feelings (Hughes, 2018; Keleş 2022). To ensure authenticity I have deeply reflected on my personal experiences, and emotions, and revisited past events. Autoethnography uncovers emotions, thoughts, and beliefs by remembering, revisiting, and recreating past experiences in order to understand and theorize the connections among the self, power, and culture (Keleş 2022). Throughout the research, I have adhered to cultural norms, practice and respected the culture of the community. I have followed participant's time. I have respected participant's time and carried out interviews during their convenient time.

I have critically reflected on the overall journey and avoided bias in the research. I have engaged in deeper reflection by revisiting personal memories, going back to my blog writing in WordPress, which I have been compiling for 13 years, that captures significant life events, and moments that have shaped my identity, beliefs, and worldviews. I have referred to the diaries I kept while pursuing my Master's Degree. Both ethnography and autoethnography enable the researcher to understand the perspectives of graduates of the Chepang community through their experiences and narratives of their educational journey in accessing higher education. Overall, the theory of transformation is a significant framework for analyzing auto/ethnographic

data, as it helps to explain the processes by which individuals can undergo significant personal and intellectual growth through self-reflection and analysis.

One way to evaluate the social and qualitative research is to use the concept of trustworthiness. Tracy (2010) presents eight key markers of quality in qualitative research such as worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethics, and meaningful coherence. It is challenging to validate subjective research and ensure reliability and trustworthiness especially when the language barriers are present (Bang, 2024). Therefore it is necessary to ensure reflexivity and to follow ethical research practices. Lack of understanding of cultural, historical circumstances could influence authenticity, and not recognizing divergent viewpoints which is important to ensure bring true to oneself (Jokilehto, 2016). Hence it is necessary to look through the lens of multifaceted concept while interpreting the research, this enables to see through the different paradigms of disciplines and contexts (Hill & Cable, 2006).

Emic Perspectives

The study situates the researcher both as participant and observer within the Chepang community. Hence, I offer an insider perspective as my positionality in this research which is also called emic perspective. This approach enables the research to be more in-depth and relevant reducing potential misunderstandings and miscommunications that could arise when researchers approach the topic from an outsider perspective (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). The researcher remains critically self-aware about the risks of assuming similarity or allowing personal experience to overshadow objective analysis. An emic perspective allows a comparative advantage to conduct research in natural settings, which could ease the process of rapport building, developing trust, and interpreting nuanced cultural meanings which would facilitate more authentic data collection (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Engaging in critical self-reflexivity is crucial to navigate the paradigm through which the researcher interprets data and to recognize personal biases (Cooper & White, 2012). Moreover, this autoethnographic positionality demands the blending of personal and emotional life with sociological introspection informed by social science theories, thereby enriching the critical understanding of marginalization and education. I have avoided biasness knowing my own positionality and reducing the ethnocentric focus further contributing to the overall discourse through local ground reality. Hughes, (2018) has warned the researcher to be careful on falling into pitfalls

ending up as autobiographic memoir in the research work. Hence researcher needs to be aware of the overall flow, approach and the meaning making process adapted.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical considerations pertain to the morality of the research, how the research affects the participants and how to conduct the research in a morally responsible way. For example, the researcher should consider the impact of the research on participants' privacy and well-being, as well as any potential risks or harms. Bloor and Wood (2006) claims that the autoethnographic writer is freed from the ethical dilemmas implicit in the attempt to represent any experience other than his or her own. However, this has been criticized as a new form of colonialism which may just characterize or expropriate cultures and the experiences of marginalized groups only. Hence the researcher is liable for misrepresented while capturing autobiographical narrative.

To ensure the quality of research in the research process it ensures confidentiality of information of the participants, which ultimately contributes to rigor of the research along with systematic knowledge production beginning from initial self-reflective experiences of educational journey to design of a study of credibility of the researcher taking account of applicability of research methods used (Tracy, 2010). This research has maintained confidentiality by giving pseudonyms for this research. However, there tends to be difficulty in maintaining anonymity as there are very few samples who have pursued higher education and specific subject from that specific place is represented by single person in that entire district. For instance, Esping (2018) raises the ethical dilemmas that may arise in conducting autoethnography. Such as when personal experiences may not match with the existing data, disclosing emotional vulnerability, and trustworthiness in research and so on. Some of the significant considerations that was taken into account while carrying out auto ethnographic research as per Cooper and Lilyea in 2022, includes obtaining consent, maintaining confidentiality and protecting privacy throughout the research.

CHAPTER IV

SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC BARRIERS

This chapter addressed first and second research questions: 1) how do Chepang graduates describe their experiences of accessing, pursuing, and continuing higher education? And 2) what social and socio-economic hardships do Chepang youth face in accessing and continuing higher education, and how do these challenges shape their educational choices and aspirations? Chapter overview focus on reflections of others participants through different themes; first is life trajectory from personal life to attending education. Second, it covers about the challenges during obtaining higher education. I have presented economic hardship and familial burden faced by Chepang youths. Thirdly, it covers labelling, stereotyping, discrimination, biasness and different forms of deprivations such as material deprivation, guidance, parental support and so on. Fourth, it covers roles of language, curriculum, and pedagogical practices in Chepang community's educational advancement. Fifth component in findings covers the how education contributes to changes in the mindset, behaviors, lifestyle, reasoning and aspiration.

Material Deprivation

I grew up in a Jimling village of the former Korak Village Development Committee; a village where 99 percent Chepangs people live, which is 30 KM far from nearest highway, which is now Rapti Municipality. My academic journey began in a government school where I had to walk 2 hours to reach school from home. Generally attending school in my community starts at late childhood as it was far away from home. However, I used to go to school with my friends at the age of 5. I only realize where I had full set of clothes at the age of 6, after I was taken to residential school to study. The period from February to April was a time of acute food crisis in Chepang settlements. During this period Chepang people including my family had to survive through forest based edible products.

I was selected to attend a residential school established for the Chepang community only. Hence, I had to leave my home and parents at the age of 6 after being selected to study. This school was located in the central part of Chitwan which took half a day to walk home because there were no vehicles for transportation.

Learning in a different language than the native language was a bit challenging. However, I managed to secure good marks and a good position.

After securing an excellent position among my friends, who appeared for entrance examination I was selected to study in full scholarship at Budhanilkantha School, Kathmandu. Though I secured good positions in community school, scoring same range of marks in Budhanilkantha School was a challenging task as I had to struggle with the language and different cultures in new environment. Learning English was 'third language' for me and competing with my friends in Budhanilkantha School was a tough journey. I became a slow learner, coping up in a new environment and third language in school. However, through continuous effort I managed to at least achieve average scores during schooling. Despite several challenges and deprivations such as being unable to purchase stationaries, not having pocket money, lack of family guidance and support, and economic constraints on purchasing at least a pair of new clothes during festivals, I managed to complete my A levels in Budhanilkantha School. Kam Bahadur shares his Significance of social capital support,

I along with my mother stayed with mother's siblings. However it was difficult to get support from siblings support once married and with children. I and my mother had to stay in upper deck of cow shed. My father was always drunk and was not supportive, hence mother had to struggle a lot to feed the family members on daily basis. My mother used to go to labor exchange (Parma), meelaa paat, and it was even difficult to feed the family. I even had the incidence of staying hungry somedays.

The participant here explains the narratives of struggle, hardships in his educational journey where he was responsible for supporting his family members at an early age. He used to earn based on daily wages activities and support mother by purchasing day to day vegetables and other required utensils.

Education has opened doors for me to view my own world through the lenses of how others perceive it to be. This has supported my family to large extent as it has given me a qualification to fight in the job market. However, it has not been the same for the other Chepang graduates. Every individual might have had different experiences in their learning trajectory undergoing through significant changes in their beliefs, attitudes, decision making and perspectives thorough achieving higher education in Nepal. Both auto/ethnographic methodological approaches contributed to

raising awareness of the issues and challenges faced by Chepangs in their higher education journey, which can serve as a form of support for social justice for these marginalized and impoverished communities. Two quotes from Siru and Aanand are similar which says “*Chepang people have to commit more time for food security, Tarul, Gittha, traditional life, so they have less time for education, on top of that what should they do after studying only?*” This remains a reality in family where, fulfilling basic needs on day to day is important than the education. Participant Anand mentions the reasons behind underperforming in School Leaving Certificate (SLC) examination. He says,

I had to stay alone. My father and mother were in Dhading. I was all alone at home with my wife. Hence, I had to manage everything by myself. I had to manage foods, clothing, and house rents. To manage the expenses I purchased a fishing net and used to carry fishing net in my bags and I used to go fishing on Friday after school and on Saturday. The fish that I bought was enough to cover my expenses for whole week. The room rent during that time was NRs. 500. I used to go for fishing and used to bring 2-3 KG per day, where one kilogram of fish was Nepali rupees 50 per kilogram. I was aware that I did not want to show my friends that I was going weekly for fishing to support myself. I used to think that it would be awkward if my friends see me going fishing. Hence I used to go in the evening. Hence I had less commitment towards study that impacted my academic scores.

Family background, socioeconomic environment plays significant role in shaping and reshaping the children’s future. Siru mentions that,

Our community is not talented because, our parents did not used do anchoring in the village or community? If our parents has those exposures, I could have learned from the early childhood we could have learned from family. We were oppressed from the beginning, we were economically weak, there was no one to push and motivate, we could not get any support to move forward and finally there was no one to guide. Hence there is significant role of network.

Socioeconomic conditions of family, ability to afford the education fees determines the youths’ ability to attend higher education and also to select which subject to choose. In this line, another participant Anand mentions,

Actually I was interested to study Architect Engineer. I had also scored more than 50% in entrance examination. As it was communicated that, students

could be selected if we score more than 50%. But had to deposit advance amount of NRs.20,000. During that time I did not have even 20 rupees how can I have 20,000? I felt bit harassed when I could not pursue this course although I had scored the minimum criteria required by the admission department. I realized that this was not for the lower socioeconomic strata like ours but only for the rich people who can afford. I did not have my own earning, neither could I get support from my family back home, hence could not study what I wished to. This discouraged me. Then I joined night college in Ratna Rajya Campus.

Pin pointing the statements and texts mentioned by respondents gives ample evidence to deduce that, it was a difficult journey in accessing education as they had to come across issues of economic difficulty, harassment, inferiority complex, sense of doubt among oneself. These issues would impact accessibility and affordability of technical subjects to the poor students in higher education.

The case was similar for another participant Siru where the implication of Cultural deprivation and material deprivation was found having a profound impact on the educational journey throughout. She mentions that,

My father passed away when I was at the age of 4. We had 4 elder brothers, 1 elder sister. My second brother passed away. There was no opportunity to study as the schools were far and even the absence of father was a loss of breadwinner in the family. During that time, it was only up to grade three that we could study. Now they have improved till grade 5. But to continue after grade 5 one needs to come down to Yaulitar area which is very far from home. There was no school in that time when my father passed away. I was interested to study but there was no environment to study. My senior most elder brother worked as Son-in-law (Gharjwoi). We had only mother as head of family to look after everything as senior brother had gone to his wives' home to look after their family. My second elder brother used to go to school. I used to sometimes steal his book when he is not around and I used to see pictures. I had to look after the goats and cow."

Growing up in a social, economic and cultural deprivation further pushed the Chepang youths to the margins not being able to communicate, express and openly network with their social networks in their surrounding environment. Aanand mentioned that,

I was working in the road construction site – laying pipelines in the drainage system. I worked as labour, Sikarmi, Dakarmi. I knew I had to study but it could not cover the education expenses. I had NRs. 2600 salary. I used to feel awkward in front of friends hence I used to work during day time and study during night time.

Participant Siru mentions that,

There are hardly any schools after grade 5th. Even my brother repeated schooling at grade 5 as there was no school nearby after grade 5. Even in my case I had to stay with the family member (dai bhauju) in a single room. Later when dai bhauju moved from that place it was even challenging because there was no school bus. Now I had to walk, get on to the public bus. For me once my left hand was amputated, I had another struggle in school and day to day life. Evening going to school – though there was school bus, I was the first one to get on the bus and the last one to drop off the bus after school.

This shows multiples hardship for Chepang youths to pursue higher education and it is even more challenging for people with disability and women. She mentions,

I reached out to many colleges in Kathmandu for scholarship for my higher education, but most of the colleges gave only 70percent-80percent scholarship in tuition fees. But I could not afford that remaining 30 percent too. However, I was suggested by my sister to pursue in nearby college with 100 percent.”

Tirtha mentions that,

The challenge for him was to support his family in agriculture farms, livestock grazing along with simultaneously attending schools. Due to which sometimes he had to miss school and was late regularly to reach school. Despite engagement in household chores and supporting his family, he was able to perform good average in his studies. Involving in household chores along, supporting family was found in every respondents.

It has been noted that all the respondents belong to agriculture family background and were engaged in supporting their family members that also influenced schooling routines and remote location was major hindrances for attending higher education. Siru highlighted her narratives how an individual having disability will suffer more than other students. Having disability would further marginalize that in accessing higher education, due to inaccessible physical infrastructures. Her narratives illustrates that having only a strong interest in education was not enough,

environmental constraints overruled personal motivation. Siru's narrative reflects how systemic neglect of indigenous regions can suppress educational attainment and life opportunities from an early age. Participant Kam Bahadur shares his difficult journey of obtaining Education,

I started going to school at the age of 8 years in Shree Chandramukhi Madhyamik Vidhayalaya. I was active in fishing, after schools and during holidays. As my mother could not afford me proper dress, she cut the cousions sisters half of her clothes and made it as shorts for me. I used to exchange with Amalaa, and other fruits he collected from nearby jungle with few pages of the copy. I used to compile the pages and made it as notebook to write. He did this till grade 1st to 4th. I was good in studies. Girl classmates used to learn from me and they also used to give the sheets of paper. They even offered me snacks during school time. I was school first, sometimes board first. This is how I spent is schooling days. Our family moved to Padampur in unregistered land where it was open space. Staying in unregistered land was still challenging as we were chased away multiple times, but again stayed managed to come back. I was even working on stones breaking (Gitti Kutne) works in Bungkhola early morning. It was not enough to fulfil basic needs even after moving to Padampur. I along with my family had a tough journey mostly with financial hardships, hence I spent most of my after campus hour time in agriculture field, harvesting maize, paddy, plough filed and so on.”

The narratives shared by Kam Bahadur shows the resilience of growing in Chepang community and supporting his family in agriculture lands and graduating from Forestry University. Most of the Chepangs are marked by struggles, hardships, poverty and a reflection of the deeper inequalities. The narrative of familial duty and sacrifice is deeply embedded in all the participants' narratives. The participant repeatedly put family needs above personal comfort, reflecting the intergenerational responsibilities common in low-income households.

Kam Bahadur shares the expectation from family that also shapes, delineates focus on educational journey.

I was the eldest son and the family had more expectations from me so it was even pressurizing. I sold my mom's Dhungri and made passport to go abroad, now mom did not had any gold in her body. I came to Kathmandu for processing my passport for jobs in manpower. I also took security guard

training in Bharatpur. After interview I was asked to deposit 2,00,000 (2 lakhs) to go abroad. People knew that my family was poor and no one provided me loan too. So my dream to go abroad was also cancelled. After few years of gap, I was selected to work in REDD+ after I was supported by Asia Network for Sustainable Agriculture and Bioresources (ANSAB) to measure carbon footprint as technician. I had an opportunity to work in 3-4 villages of Chitwan. I worked as technician in REDD+ program in Dolakha collecting NTFP inventory, mapping community forestry boundary. I also appeared for civil service (Lok Sewa) exam multiple times. I was selected until interview stage and I was thrown away. I travelled to Dhankuta, Dipayal and Dang Tulsipur for different exams interview. I had a dream to fly my father and mother through airplane after I secure my name in civil service organization. I also appeared for Assistant Professor in Nepali year 2079/80 but I was thrown out in interview. It was politicized. There was so much power and politics. There was so much political pressure. Hence my dream of improving merit and fair based recruitment policies in Nepal's University remained incomplete. Then I moved to wetland section Divisional forestry office in Chitwan.”

This shows that, even when scholarships were offered, hidden costs and associated living expenses made it nearly impossible for poor youth to continue formal education revealing that ‘free education’ often isn’t free for the poor. To sum up the findings, children are expected to contribute to subsistence farming or household work from a young age.

Remote Geography

Although Chitwan, and Makawanpur districts are in southern plain of Nepal, the location of Chepang community settlements is in ‘inner terai’ region. Distance wise these districts are nearby capital city Kathmandu of Nepal but due to lack of basic infrastructures such as roadways, it is difficult for Chepang people to get access to schools, college and university degrees. The remoteness of Chepang settlements, lack of schools after primary education, lack of financial means to support education after primary level education are some of the reasons behind these low literacy rates in the Chepang community. Residing in geographical isolation is one of the major challenges for Chepang community which hinders in development process. Leaving in isolated place is associated with costly access to resources and other necessary

goods. For participant Tirtha it took extra additional years for him to complete Bachelor's Degree. As he was residing in village, continuing teaching profession, he did not know when his exam would be scheduled by Tribhuvan University. There was no means to access the news, neither through newspaper nor any other postal information. Access to electricity is still a pertinent issue in Chepang village, so it was a dream during that period when he was in village during 1992.

It was not about exam schedule notice but where to stay in Kathmandu after routine was published was an issue. Staying in Kathmandu to attend exams and managing expenses for guest houses in Kathmandu or renting was an economic burden too. He shared, how he managed to continue his Master's Degree education working as a cook in residential organization for People with Disability in Kathmandu. Kam Bahadur mentioned,

After class 6, I was selected to study in hostel support and I was supported by Gopi Shrestha (ward chair) and I and my mother stayed in nearest health post. Later I studied in hostel for grade 8 to 10. In hostel, I supported my mother through the resources I received from hostel. I still remember few weeks that I used to cut soap into two half that I used to receive from hostel warden and I used to compile it and gave it to my mother once in a month.

The experience shared by Kam Bahadur depicts the need for social capital, social networks and community support in guiding the path to access higher education, which would not have been possible without support from Ward Chairperson, Warden, Hotel Incharge and influential person in the community. These moments of support reveal just how much of a difference targeted help can make in the lives of those who need it most.

The Feeling of Inferiority

The value of education has been recognized even by segments of society who are excluded, disadvantaged, and disconnected from mainstream culture. Similarly, the relevance of education for economic and personal development realized by the Chepang community people which has contributed to high enrollment in schools (Nowak et al., 2023). Education has been a platform to fight for job, self-awareness and compete in the local market (Pherali, 2011).

I sensed the, state of inferiority while competing in the job market and acquired a certain job position in the institutions. I have heard the social gossips during casual time in work place mentioning "I was offered that specific job for

representing Chepang community that I belong.” This shows that though I feel competent with each other in the job market after acquiring good schooling and graduate degree from internationally recognized Universities, the social stigma tagged on me is coming from “Chepang community.” This tends to sometimes demoralize the motivations and aspirations to work. I also reflect that though the community where I belong might have influenced to some extent, the current position that I hold and experiences that I possess makes me feel competent enough to compete in the job market.

The concept of reservation or the quota system is ingrained among my colleagues. However, the positive aspect is while competing for job market in government jobs, there is reservation for “Indigenous communities, people with disability, Dalit community and from geographically remote areas.” However, the reservation labelled in the government job itself is unfair as the category of Indigenous people are also in different stages. Such as some Indigenous groups falls under advanced developed category whereas some falls under highly marginalized groups struggling to fulfill daily basic needs. But the reservation marked for Indigenous groups are enjoyed by all the Indigenous Communities whichever group do they belong to.

Stereotyping, Domination and Oppression

The Chepang community has been historically marginalized (Chepang, 2025). Tirtha was a first Master Degree graduate from Chepang community. He mentioned that he was often stereotyped as *Brahmin* among Chepangs. Though his father was Chepang and mother was from Brahmin Family, the person was recognized as clever, smart, falling in the high rank hierarchy, and being able to take various positions of power and influence in various aspects of society. This also depicts the social strata presented in Nepali society. Hence my first participant was portrayed as *Bahun* by other non Chepangs. *Bahunbaad* is a term used to describe the dominance of the Brahmin caste in Nepalese society.

Furthermore participant Man Bahadur mentioned that, while mentioning my caste as “Chepang” friends looked at me as alien, poor, marginalized but now it is not the same. I completed my SLC in 2015. When I interacted with friends after I completed SLC, most of them whom I met mentioned that “I had also worked with Chepang, shared the cases of displacement in conservation areas and so on.”

Tirtha had shared the real life experience that he faced due to his mother being a Brahmin and marrying to Chepang family. His mother was not allowed to come to her birth home (*Maiti*) because she married to a Chepang guy. The only source of livelihood was through *Parma*, share cropping. Father used to work as man-servant in Brahmins family. Coming from poor, disadvantaged family background, where they had no lands during 2046.

Chepang faced significant barriers during the course of higher education journey which further entrenched social inequalities. This has a negative impacts on Chepang youths in campus life. Majority populations had maintained control over resources, educational institutions leading to systemic neglect of Chepangs. The entire cycle influenced access to quality education further reinforcing social hierarchies that devalue Chepang cultural identity and contributions. Aanand mentioned that,

The school he studied both in Dhading and Makawanpur both did not had adequate teachers, and teacher used to hardly teach in school days. Similar to school days attending government campus was same. Most of the part of reading and passing the exam was at the cost of our own. It was not like private institutions who push students to attend tuitions, extra coaching class, and attend support centres.” Similarity the experience shared by

Aanand is similar to experience of Tirtha

I had difficulty in purchasing basic stationaries for my schools and these limited resources, limited textbooks, and basic facilities was not a new thing in Chepang community. Along with this travelling long distance to attend schools was another challenge for small childrens in Chepang villlage

Participant Aanand, again mentioned that “*economic factor plays crucial role in labelling, discriminating, and portraying someone as more vulnerable and situating in difficult situation*”. Most of the Chepangs falling behind socioeconomic strata, the comparison is made between each other based on the economic possession and sometimes on caste based issues.

Cultural Hegemony

Huntington (1993) asserts that cultural factors such as history, religion, language, and customs will be the main causes of conflict in the post-Cold War world rather than ideological or economic ones. The theory mentioned here aligns with the case of Chepang community too where, as per experiences of participants throughout the interviews, the Chepang are still underrepresented in many fronts such as

decision-making processes. All these procedures limits the ability to advocate for equitable opportunities in all aspects along with education sector. This has arisen because of the cultural differences which is deeply ingrained and this gives rise to conflicts between ethnic groups in upcoming years (Huntington, 1993). The Indigenous ways of life and the state structure although it claims to be federal structure is still centralized that can further give rise to conflicts (Huntington, 1993). To give specific real life example of Chepang community, there is clash with state narratives of state defined "development, conservation regulations, and modernity." The Indigenous identity is undervalued where the cultures, spiritual practices, shifting cultivation practices, sustainable forest based livelihood practices are demotivated by the government resulting in displacement and cultural degradation.

Similar to cultural identity, practices and spiritual practices along with maintaining indignity, the issues of imposing dominant society's curriculum and teaching methods is still prevalent. The values and perspectives of the dominant *Bahun* caste, marginalizing the Chepang culture and worldview is leading to cultural assimilation where Chepang students are pressured to conform to *Bahun* norms and values. For participant Tirtha where he grew up,

Handikhola was a mixed culture place. Chepangs were however portrayed as nomadic, non-permanent tribes in Nepal. The overall portrayal of friends and circle towards Chepang depends on how mixed community is living in a specific area. If the same group of community people lives in a area they considers each other same, but living with larger groups will lead to stereotyping and discrimination.

The dominant socio-economic class shapes the education system, particularly in terms of curriculum, language, and access. Middle class children are more likely to succeed because of the privilege, benefits, family environment, social supports, social structures and their family's social capital and the network in the education (Devkota, 2021). Such as, a middle class family has good family environment, family support and other supports that contributes in educational achievement than the lower class family members (Devkota, 2021). My participant Siru mentioned that "*One of my challenge during college life was, I studied in Nepali medium school. And I was admitted to private college with English medium of instructions and teaching. It was challenging for me.*" Language acts as power in acquiring education and skills. This determines the level of information that a student can grasp when it is not their mother

tongue. Mother tongue plays a crucial role in acquiring education. In interviews, I observed that Chepang students' engagement in the learning process often dwindled due to the gap between their home language and the language used in the classroom in early schooling, which also influences the understanding level, analysis level and interpretation of the subject matter in higher education. This disconnect not only affected their confidence but also limited their ability to fully participate and excel in their studies. To promote "Mother tongue" *Gorkha Patra* been supporting to publish news in Chepang language once in a month. However, this has not become sustainable as the income generated by writer is very much minimal.

I/NGOs Contributions in Higher Education

Majority of participants in this research mentioned the significance of NGOs that has benefitted significantly in someone's life in educational achievement. Siru mentions contributions of multiple NGOs that supported their community with basic livelihood activities, and basic necessities such as drinking water, education and so on. It was fortunate to have that project for her and her family and community. She mentions that,

I do not remember about the dates but there was a year where we had a consecutive tragic incident. My elder sister, and the newly born baby and my elder brother passed on the same day. There was no one to support financially during that time as all of our society members are equal in socioeconomic status. There was time where one organization had established school for Chepang community people in that time.

The project supported her during emergency case while my hand was broken, she mentions that,

My hand broke when I was going to graze the cow and goats. Villagers said I did not have to go to hospital, they said, if you are taken to hospital, they will cut your hand so they wrapped my hand with Khanayo and Bamboo. Villagers checked after 11 days, but the fracture was not joined. Again they wrapped it. On 21th day they opened the fracture, it was not getting improved, rather the broken bones started smelling. It was in critical condition. However, the villagers, Shamans wanted to cut the hand in the village itself. Immediately organization took an initiative to take me to hospital. Growing in a broken family, everyone perceived me that I won't be able to do anything in life, neither carry heavy loads nor look after goats and cows grazing. So I had

nothing to do except to continue my schooling. Then I studied till grade 2 in village. One supporter from Belgium supported me to continue my schooling after grade 2 through the connections of that organization. I stayed with my relatives in the Kathmandu and continued by schooling from 3 to 10.

Siru's life story is a vivid representation of the Chepang community's generational struggle against structural neglect, cultural invisibility, and economic marginalization. Yet within her narrative is also a voice of strength, one that refuses to surrender to circumstance. Her experience is not an isolated one, it mirrors the reality of many Chepang youths. Despite several supports from government, I/NGOs and community-based organizations in improving access to education in Chepang community, it still continues to remain a challenge for Chepangs to get access to education. Amid all obstacles, challenges road ahead few Chepang members have managed to complete higher education such as Master's Degree. Contrastingly, Aanand mentions that the programs carried out in Chepang community is not for *Chepangs empowerment* but for project implementers "own" empowerment. If you visit to around 100 places where these plans and programs has been carried out, you don't see any changes. Aanand mentions that,

All the organizations (I/NGOs) have not empowered nothing. There needs to be clear indicators for the empowerment of Chepangs. When the programs has been planned for Chepang community, the outcome has to be seen, the planned activities needs to be based on research. It should not be like pouring water on the sand. The elements used in it, programs planned for it, needs to be thoroughly planned. The activities needs to be carried out on needs based. The real need of Chepang people needs to be identified.

Aanand gives different opinion on issues that lies within Chepang community itself rather than blaming the structural constructs of society. Such as,

When we visit to area, the other community maintains hygiene, cleanliness and are clean. But when we go to our community areas Our Chepang villages and community has not developed the basics of cleanliness, hygiene. This should have come from our own initiatives. We Chepang have not developed basic civilization, Chepang community are not interested to learn the global knowledges too. Education plays a role in this too. This will contribute to change in patterns. Only university and colleges education cannot play these roles. This should come from the schooling and the learnings within school.

There were several non-formal education programs promoted by NGOs that has enabled Chepangs to acquire some forms of skills, technical knowledge, so that they can support themselves by engaging in income generation. Above quotes and narratives were few examples shared by respondents during the research and interview processes. In my case too, I was supported by a Guthi Owned school that supported my education from the age of 4 or 5. I along with 50 Chepang (tentatively) were supported with accommodations, day to day meal, school dress and other residential support. The Guthi system contributed to my schooling that became a ladder to my higher education.

Critically examining the current context, the current need for increasing literacy and educational attainment rate among Chepangs has been more of an interest of I/NGOs rather than the Chepang people itself. Chepangs are neither aware, nor have been fruitful for completing Secondary Education Examination (SEE). NGOs has been carrying out several awareness activity such as financial literacy, revolving funds creation, mothers group formation, consumers group formation, individual level household income generational activities planning, using contraceptives, donations of sack of rice, blankets, hybrid seeds, using pit latrine, growing cash crops, adult literacy programs and so on (Ghimire, 2009). Despite the continuous flow of aid, there has been no desired socio-economic transformation in Chepang community (Ghimire, 2009). I/NGOs initiation to make people able to sign and considering them literate is debatable issue in today's era.

Diversity Within Chepang and its Implications in Higher Education

There is differences within the participant's in terms of gender, disability, and power, economic and social differences. These components plays crucial role in access and continuation of education in secondary level and higher secondary level. These power and privilege comes into play in every stage of the accessing higher education.

The first and foremost challenge in accessing higher education is the costs associated with economic hardships related to education and other costs attached with it such as room rents, stationaries, dress, family support, societal support, family level guidance also plays a crucial role in selecting subject for the students. Participant, Tirtha mentioned that Chepang students are found to be taking 'Education' and 'Management' as subjects by most of the student as this is the inexpensive course as compared to other courses.

The quota that does not explicitly mentions for 'Chepang' in academic institutions, job recruitments and other sectors still lacks to ensure that Chepang are selected in these procedures. Because the same examination where indigenous ethnic groups from other communities and Chepangs compete tends to be higher benchmark for Chepangs. The selection procedures, questions asked for Chepang is still beyond their understanding level. Participant Tirtha mentions that before there were separate quota for Chepang only, now it has mixed with indigenous groups. This makes it difficult for Chepangs to compete in same level who had access to proper education, facilities and other supports. Tirtha mentions that,

The enrollment rate of Chepang children has reached to 90 percent but the issue is dropout rate. Continuity of schooling has become an issue for Chepangs. Although government declared free education till high school, schools take several fees in the name of dress, visits, computer fee, and exam fees, maintain and repairing fees, support fees, and teaching in English medium fees. The school administration is smart enough to not to take the fees from students as admission but naming it as other titles. As the entire generation is competing with each other in job markets, the demand for English language is high too. So schools has started to teach the curriculum in English by raising certain fees with students. He mentions that many schools has now both English and Nepali medium.

People have realized that education is important hence, they have started to enroll their children in schools. Hence enrollment in schools is higher. However, the dropout rate after reaching certain grades are also high too. There could be many factor but one of the reason is due to age factor. According to participants, Chepang children starts schooling at late age such as 8 or 9. The age difference with the classmate is one of the factor that pushes them in not attending school with other classmates who seems to be younger than them as their classmate from urban areas tend to start their schooling at the age of 3 years. The age difference will be visible in their physical appearance and Chepang students seems to be more mature than other school friends. Chepang children tend to find difficult to adjust in the surrounding which leads them to drop out from school education.

Though recent initiatives of education policies and strategies has increased the enrollment in formal schools, increased the number of graduates but it has consequently led to increasing unemployed youths too. This clearly shows that the

current education system has been disconnecting to route that they belong largely affecting marginalized and disadvantaged communities. The growing trend of educational credentialism has reinforced hierarchy in terms of social class, structure, and caste by perpetuating and legitimizing inequalities (Subba et al., 2014). Aanand mentioned that,

The society is divided due to caste and systems that is set by the societal perceptions. These perceptions and labelling based on economic possessions, educational achievements, power, property they possess in society. One of the participants named 'Aanand' grew up in a mixed community, where Chepang, Bhramin, Chhetri, Gurung and Tamang were sharing their each other's culture and traditions and celebrating each other ceremonies together. He mentions that there was no feelings of dominations if all the households residing in that area were Chepang people but if it was mixed culture there was sense of dominations by one and another. The participant shared the experience of growing up in different areas as his family had to shift to multiple locations for different reasons.

Participant Aanand mentioned that his parents were from Chiurikharka of Dhading District, they shifted to Makawanpur district, Aanand village later, where the participants was born. Chepang were considered as nomadic tribe. The social domination towards Chepang community was labelled as normal.

We lived in a mixed culture with Brahmin, Chhetri, Gurung, Tamang and Chepang. Hence living in a mixed culture due to migrating from one place to another, people had different perspective of looking at us. I initially started my schooling in Dhading. My father was a Ghatware who operates watermill in the village. This was passed from grandfather. Hence we had a good source of income for the family.

The quote also deduces that having someone to guide in the family is also required to motivate in education. However, these are all influenced by socioeconomic circumstances in the family. Continuous movement of family from one district to another in search of place to live and adjust will have some implications in Children who are pursuing education. The participant had to move from one district to another as his father had 3 wives and his father had to manage their costs of living in different locations. Aanand shares his experiences of starting an education;

It was difficult to continue education after grade 5 as it was difficult to rent a room and continue education. Hence again we moved to Makawanpur. After completing grade 5. Similarly, after grade 8, I had to change school for grade 9 and 10. I changed 5 schools during my school years. There are different impacts both; positive and negative impacts of changing schools frequently. Firstly, changing school is due to our own weakness. The negative impact is that student won't get change to be familiar with the schooling environment. As kept migrating. We migrated to Dhading as my family had to leave separately due to separate family.

Aanand mentioned that,

My father learned to read and write from one Tamang colleague who was involved in clerical works with Panchayat. As it was during Panchayat regime, reading and writing was not open for common citizens like us. My father had an understanding that, the one who can read and write can have more knowledge and skills. Hence all sibblings were sent to school.

These societal structure determined the condition of the public citizens to pursue education during current respondent's parent's generations two to three decades ago. Such as authoritarian Panchayat system had completely controlled the access to education for common citizens. Aanand mentions that,

My grandfather was ward Panchayat Chair during that time. He started school named Praja Prathamik Vidhayalaya. He built small cottage as a school for the community people to attend in school. The emphasizes on education from grandparents and my parents became good for me. I had a good academic scores. I was always first in school. However, I had to move from this school to another school as there was no school to continue. Hence moved to another school after grade 5. I was board top but second in entire district.

The participant shares the positive aspects of mixing up with all the community people, and he says,

I had a chance to interact with diverse community people. I never had chance to meeting with Chepang colleagues to discuss. I had no friends. This was one of the opportunity to grow up in mixed society environment. But the sad part is that, I am disassociated with the cultures. But I will take it in both ways,

because growing up in diverse environment gives an opportunity to increase the level of understanding of different sectors.

The participant shared his experiences of cultural reproduction on how education perpetuates social inequalities by reinforcing the dominant culture's values. During Rana Regime, the common citizens were not allowed to study. So was the participant's father, he learned basic reading and writing from one of the local government staff in village. Hence realizing the importance of education, his father motivated him to study. The difficulty in educational achievement is highly impacted by the family factor and cultural deprivation where participant explains the challenge which he faced as he had to keep moving because of father who had to resettle in different locations due to segregated family in Makawanpur and Dhading districts. He mentions that,

We could not share our Chepang cultures because we are not close to authority. The culture of dominant society does not give space to perform minority people's cultures in mainstream society. Neither the community people could promote our culture as our people are neither in power, position nor do we have budget.

He emphasizes on culture and its importance, and mentions society won't develop without cultures and suggests to share culture with wider society. Man Bahadur shares a case of transformative achievement for him. He mentions that,

I studied in Malekhu till grade 1 to 2 . I grew up in Bahun Tole where I did my primary education and the medium of instruction was in English. I was selected for scholarship program initiated by PABSON / NPABSON in Kathmandu. The scholarship was dedicated to marginalized communities such as Chepang community. So I studied in Kathmandu from grade 3-10. I had a good academic score, hence I was awarded full scholarship based on merit.

This quote also reflects that if everyone is given opportunity, the children from diverse community can succeed in their own fronts. He mentioned with pride that, if Chepangs also get opportunity to study, Chepangs can do well. In this conversation, he was also recommending to remove the quota and reservation system.

Chapter Summary

Chepang students who attend university frequently face epistemic marginalization, cultural alienation, language barriers, and inadequate recognition of their Indigenous knowledge systems. I now reflect myself with 'colony of being'

how I and other Chepangs are injected with colonialist mindset blaming the Chepang children itself responsible for the poor academic grades and performance, school dropout. We adhere to prescriptivism, which prevents us from thinking creatively. We are also used to learning knowledge created in the west because of the system's victimization caused by the school system's monolingual policy.

CHAPTER V

CHEPANG'S EXPERIENCES OF BEING EDUCATED AND TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Chapter overview focus on Chepang youths' perspective on "Being Educated" and transformative learning experiences. This chapter addressed third and fourth research questions: what does "being educated" mean to Chepang youths? And in what ways does higher education enable or constrain transformative learning among Chepang students? The perception of Chepang graduates are reflected in this chapter where the sense of inferiority while acquiring higher education, competing in the job market are reflected. The narratives of stereotyping, domination and oppression along with due to power dynamics, stratified socio-political structure further exacerbate several challenges faced by Chepang youths. These are illustrated in the findings section. Participants realized that prescriptive forms of schooling that restrict freedom of expression, while the dominance of English as a medium of instruction creates additional layers of exclusion. The use of dominant language such as English as official means for official work, teaching and learning in schools tends to impact the children coming from minority communities. These perpetuates cultural hegemony where the curriculum and teaching methods reflects the values and perspectives of the dominant Bahun caste, marginalizing the Chepang culture and worldview. This can lead to a form of cultural assimilation where Chepang students are pressured to conform to Bahun norms and values. Overall, this chapter unveils that the higher education for Chepangs was also a rat race which consists of chasing the needs of modern market.

Chepang Youth Perspective on "Being Educated"

The question of what "being educated" means to Chepang youths cannot be answered through a single theoretical lens, as the meaning of education is negotiated at the intersection of personal, structural constraints and cultural identity. Three interconnected theoretical perspectives; Transformative learning theory of Mezirow, Marxian Perspective on education and Bourdieu's sociology of culture provides analytical tool to interpret how Chepang graduates constructs and understand the meaning of being educated.

For Chepang students, “being educated” signifies how they see themselves and their position in the society. Christie et al. (2015) emphasize that this transformation encompasses both mental and behavioral shifts, enabling individuals to challenge the assumptions on which they have been acting and to change them when found wanting. Thus, from this perspective, "being educated" means developing autonomous thinking rather than passively adopting externally imposed meanings (Mezirow, 1997), and potentially becoming the kind of "better individuals" who might "build a better world" (Christie et al., 2015). The meaning of being educated is not solely individual phenomena, but shaped by structural forces, how community perceives it. From this perspective, what "being educated" means is mediated by whether education enables critical consciousness of social, economic, and political forces that perpetuate marginalization, or whether it simply inserts Chepang individuals into existing beliefs and interpretations widely accepted by dominant society (Freire, 2000).

Being educated means to have a secured job, contribute to the community, and lead the community and of course society. My participants connects being educated with economic terms where earning will contribute to support his family. Some of the tangible aspect of being educated were shared by Tirtha. He shares that,

As a first Chepang to pursue Masters, he shared his achievement that his name was listed in general knowledge books, I also became the one to motivate others in Chepang community. He was also awarded district and national level educator by the government. Being educated means people perceives that we know at least few things more than common people in the society hence, the demand is high. This will contribute to play a good role to lead the family, tole, community and the nation ultimately.

For Chepang students, "being educated" involves acquiring forms of cultural capital that are recognized and rewarded within educational institutions and professional fields, even as their indigenous cultural capital remains devalued. Thus, "being educated" for Chepang youths also means developing social networks that provide access to resources, support, and opportunities previously unavailable to their communities.

He took an initiative to educate Chepangs in Kathmandu in 2055. He worked in Chepang Association central committee also as an Education Coordinator in Nepal Chepang Association. He also motivated his siblings to study but they did not.

Similarly, participant Man Bahadur mentioned that, *“for any community to move forward with developmental process, the first thing is education and second is infrastructure. For any raw materials or products produced in village, it needs to be connected to market.*

For myself, being educated means supporting members of family, community and also umbrella organization in reporting, translating the Nepali texts to English, reaching out to foreign donors and writing project proposals. Being educated means a person can read and write in English and communicate with people outside their society too. For the participant Kam Bahadur,

After completing my MSC and also having a secured government job, they see me as SMART and I do not drinks nor smoke. Society perceives me well.

Community people thinks that I can contribute to community and they think me that I have power, can work well along with mobilizing military. The respect, love affection that I receive from community is great.

These expressions of words and also his emotions while conducting interview was clearly visible. He seem to be proud of being a government officer which was as a result of his hard work and dedications. His tone of speech while answering was also in jolly mood that reflected his proud moments that he is facing. He also mentioned that he would reach senior position if he continued this career. This shows that the journey of beginning his education was tough and difficult but his achievement shows the positive impacts of transformative education in his thoughtful life.

When asking what does it mean to be educated how community people perceives you during the interview with participants Man Bahadur mentions that,

For me if I cannot implement what I learned or studied in the course, I am not educated. The course that we are pursuing is only emphasizing on getting good academic scores. Whether it be pursuing 11-12, Bachelor’s Degree, the ultimate outcome is to go abroad. The curriculum, skills and technology needs to match and it needs to go simultaneously. They are not going in parallel way. For example China uses modern equipment’s and completes the assigned task in short time, but Nepal uses, drilling and blasting – it takes too long time and there was no learning. Hence technology is crucial. There is skill gap hence people are unemployed. To add more example, to operate electrometrical equipment, we need to invite Indians as we cannot operate it.

I wanted to work in my community. After I graduated. I am not fortunate to work as I did not get job not any other ting. People know me that I am engineer, but I have not contributed to community. I wanted to give back to community.

The interpretation of Man Bahadur was different then the Kam Bahadur. Man Bahadur expressed his feelings of dissatisfaction, when the course he pursued did not really made him able to implement it in the practical work. The learning methods that he had was not helpful in his professional journey. He tend to describe the journey of education as just for certificate but not really helpful while applying in the field. The gap between academia and industry is portrayed by the experience of Man Bahadur. This does not reflect the story of Man Bahadur Chepang but reflects the entire story of youths all over Nepal. This is not only reflecting job market but also the practical skills that he is not being to take it into implementation in his engineering profession. This interview with the participant brings the serious disconnect between classroom learning and professional work setting making fresher graduates more vulnerable. Man Bahadur mentions that,

There is gap in education and industry. We were supposed to understand the basics, technical aspects in engineering. There is large skill gap. I cannot even make gabbin walls. I do not have skills. Fresher's get pressurized. Even when I was in Rasuwa - I worked for 12 hours every days. There are no rules and regulations. The course that I studied in my engineering did not relate anything with Chepang community. The engineering course that I studied is just opposite of Indigenous values. Such as for any development works engineering is about destroying and building again. But our community value is different, where our community is nature dependent and community is conscious of ecological conservation. For Chepang we only did 30 percent and remaining will regenerate. For engineering – we destroy everything and start constructing. Social aspect is not considered in engineering – indigenous knowledge. There is bio engineering as electives, as I am nature lover. This also taught me to minimize risks and damages. Indigenous knowledge and engineering can be a good combination to work further.

The narrative of the participant also clearly illustrates the professionalism of workplaces in engineering sector. He mentions the pressure of working for long working day for 12 hours. He mentioned that there was no clear regulations and

instructions too in Rasuwa. In addition to this, there was no worker safety and protections. Although he benefited from a scholarship, the participant felt that his community's worldview and identity were absent from the engineering curriculum. The system neither reflects indigenous values nor includes their voices in development discourse.

Some of the challenges faced by youths are reluctance to change by senior citizens, lack of priority to the training that didn't provide allowances, the voices of youths are unheard, remote geographical location, lack of access to transportation, lacks appropriate resources and migration (Adhikari, 2024).

Social Capital in Educational Journey

Social capital plays an important role for social mobility. Participant Siru "received support from Nepal Chepang Association" during undergraduate course. Got support to work as an employee and support her living cost in Kathmandu. *"Although we have reach to this level, this was either through crawling or slithering. These impacts the upbringing, social lives. The family background, socioeconomic environment and network matters a lot."* Participant Siru "received support from Nepal Chepang Association" during undergraduate course got support to work as an employee and support her living cost in Kathmandu. As per participant, exposures event and the interaction of children with different social economic status was also necessary to have exposure with external peoples other than the community people. Such as communication within the community people tend to limit the conversation, nature and discussion remains within the domains of the community conversation such as siblings and basic updates of day to day livelihood. It was necessary to have an external network to talk, gossip, chat and at least expose in different environment. This was crucial factor for maintaining social connectedness with diverse groups of people from different social strata's. This would also broaden the horizon of networks of peers and their family members.

Reflecting on myself auto ethnography of social capital and networks: The narrative below illustrates the enduring bonds facilitated by SEBS, which highlights bonding through SEBS: Budhanilkantha School Alumni connection through the ways in which shared educational backgrounds and mutual support foster lasting connections among alumni, transcending geographical and generational divides.

I visited the residence of Swindon, United Kingdom who is Alumni of Budhanilkantha School, supported me in every logistics and other support due

to the bond formed through our shared membership in the Society of Ex-Budhanilkantha School Students (SEBS). He had supported on our poultry farming project that aimed to support Chepang community.

The social networks, and social capital plays significant role in job referrals and land in better jobs. Some supports were received from Nepal Chepang Association among Chepang youths too. Based on the interviews and responses from the participants, only the ones who could not afford only goes to public schools and the ones who could afford private education was from the ones who could afford. The limited government spending, and politicization on public education has been further creating inequality, differences and hierarchy among students based on the socio economic possession. Creating hierarchy among students does not have social and public spaces to learn from each other for social connections.

Prescribed Curriculum and Loss of Freedom of Expression

Kandel, (2021) mentions that English language policy has now appeared as a ‘black hole’, which is gradually swallowing other local and indigenous languages. The day to day use of dominant languages schools, universities curricula further victimizes students, particularly those from Indigenous and multilingual backgrounds. Lack of appropriate textbooks and reading materials that incorporates local cultures and local knowledge embodied in community contextualized contents language, lack of trained and motivated teachers, programs consequently leads to additional issues in implementing local curriculum (Regmi, 2021). There is hegemony in curriculum and its content, where curricula were guided by the western ideas and promotes centrally designed curricula which gives emphasis to specific and compartmentalized western knowledge and skills in order to serve state needs of modern development. This focus on rigid and structured curricula ignored the knowledge that fulfill the lived requirements of lives (Kandel, 2021). This restricts students to discuss the alternative thoughts i.e. indigenous and knowledge (Kandel, 2021).

The lecture based, rote memorization teaching practice in Nepal (Ghimire, 2024) persuades “banking model of education” as coined by Frerie in 1970 where teachers and lecturers depicts the information only does not prioritizes active co-creation of knowledge. The current model of education prioritizes teacher at center rather than keeping students at centre and positions students as recipients only (Aryal, 2023). This approach of teaching and learning further deteriorates and disengages learning process from students (Sunar, 2024).

Consequently, this approach reinforces rote memorization, undermining educational values by disregarding inquiry-based and meaning-making pedagogical approaches (Aryal, 2023; Luitel, 2009). These knowledge are less usable in everyday life and decontextual (Luitel, 2009) that further marginalizes corpus of local/indigenous knowledge heritage consequently leading to indigenous knowledge remained unused and devalued.

English as Medium of Instructions

The current model of where pupils are compared and labelled based on standardized testing, language tests, pressurizing them to compete in the global market. The use of dominant language such as English as official means for official work, teaching and learning in schools tends to impact the children coming from minority communities. The dominant groups' language to minority indigenous ethnic group which is portrayal of hegemonic idea. This shows the dominance of one group over another, often supported by legitimating norms and ideas.

Use of English language in schools as a medium of instructions and communication has become a demand of every parent wanting their children to learn. The use of English language has been identified as the indicator of 'Intellectual', 'affluent character.' This tends to benefit elite groups in society as they reinforce their languages as official ones at the cost of minority ethnic/Indigenous languages (Poudel et al., 2022). Nepal's private institutions first promotes English as the primary medium of instruction, and later the Nepali language in teaching and communication in schools and colleges.

Private schools use English language as means of communication, instructions, and teaching pedagogy. This is also demand of every parent to learn English, as use of English is portrayed as affluent character in the society. Not only language, but the curriculum in the textbooks of school going children embraces dominant values and practices. Expansion of English has pressurized the growth of indigenous languages further leading to loss of indigenous properties including languages, cultures and values (Khanal, 2022). However, this entire phenomena is not only in Nepal but practiced globally where less economically developed countries are imposed to adapt dominant culture (Olaniran & Agnello, 2008). These procedures on schools education system does not address the needs of all groups in the society which consequently affects minority communities. The research findings of Koirala (2010) mentions that fragmentary view of linguists and the language activists may do

injustice to the children who studies in multilingual classroom setting. It must consider language, culture, identity, and politics simultaneously while assessing the classroom setting. Though these issues may be considered as trifle matter but this has direct implication on community such as Chepangs resulting in school drop outs.

Tirtha raised the issues for Chepang children in struggling to understand Nepali language and learning in English is additional challenge they face in schooling. He mentioned that,

Though this issue may not only be for Chepangs community but also for other indigenous groups and other ethnic groups having different mother tongue.

Tirtha shared the initiatives of teaching in Chepang mother tongue in 3 districts of Nepal. Chainpur / Raksirang Rural Municipality in Makawanpur district, Siddhi/ Korak in Chitwan district and one in Gorkha district. If there are 100 percent Chepangs residing in that area, Chepang language are taught in these schools. Chepang language are taught up to grade 3rd in some schools whereas some teaches up to grade 5

Participant Tirtha suggested to conduct intense training to Chepang language instructors, appear for license examinations. He also suggested to maintain uniformity of teaching Chepang languages as the language slightly differs district wise; such as Gorkha, Makawanpur, Chitwan and Dhading district.

There was a moment where I had attended an anthropology colloquium organized at Tribhuvan University, and my Chepang colleague mentioned how lack of understanding English led her to frustration despite she wanted to learn the content. She mentioned that she was understanding bits and pieces after reading the presentation slides but could not understand what foreigner is presenting. Although she is not a participant for the research, the observations and the reflections received from the community people on importance of English language is visible everywhere.

Nepali as medium of instructions where policy makers perceiving it as one size fits for all approach is not relevant. This becomes non contextual for Indigenous people who have their different mother tongue. The school administration views Chepang students through the lens of deficit ideology. Students of the current generation sometimes feel embarrassed to use their mother tongues, especially Nepali, because of the outdated educational model in Nepal, which frequently fosters a deficiency perspective of regional languages and cultures. Because they believe their history is inferior or unrelated to modern education, many Indigenous Chepang

children in rural Nepal may avoid speaking their own tongue in schools where Nepali or English is the predominant language. This does not let these children to feel the sense of belongingness, their voices won't be heard, and nothing will help. This colonial legacy continues to influence socio economic relations and power dynamics.

Rat Race: Chasing the Needs of Modern Market

The formal schooling starts at an early age in recent days. It starts from the age of 2 and above for pre play group, play group, nursery, and kinder garden. These begins from Montessori education where children learn to eat, play, sleep and communicate basic initial words. Even for Chepang families who have started to live in urban setting has begun to enroll their children in Montessori education. This is of course for the ones who can afford only. Generally, children growing in Chepang family used to attend schools at the age of 9 as the schools are far from their home. According to Tirtha,

The only push factor for motivating to start schooling was my father. My father was the one to push me to go to school as he did not want his child to spend life similar to him as servant. Hence, my father used to always motivate me to go school, I started my schooling at the age of 9. I used to graze livestock early in the morning, sell wild fruits (Bair) for income to purchase stationaries.

The present generations has shaped a structure where emphasis on private education are considered as better, so was the case for Chepang families. Most of the Chepang family who are struggling to feed their family hand to mouth are now made to enroll their children in expensive Montessori schools at the cost of fulfilling day to day basic needs. This illustrates how the current education systems increasingly leaning towards privatization, turning education into a commodity rather than a public good. This shows how knowledge is constructed and whose knowledge is represented. For most of the Chepang people, this can mean less access to affordable.

The challenge is that each participants finds difficult to compete in the market because of the quality of education that they received, skills acquired, and additional knowledge required as per the job market. This makes participant rely on the job market that was achieved without tough competition. Participant Aanand mentioned that the government job he got was through the personal network as it was not necessary to go into open competition for government job during that time. Similarly, participant Tirtha, mentioned about the job he got through voluntary teaching and

later got involved in teaching as government teacher. Similarly, Symrang, mentions on her engagement in a NGO as Chepang language translator limiting her qualifications within translations, not being able to utilize her skills and knowledge in job market. This consequently push Chepangs to margins as the way education is designed in the form of schooling is not transformative. Man Bahadur mentions that,

To my knowledge, higher the education level, those are more captured by corporates. Education sector is monopolized by private sector. The lecturers teach both in government campus and private campus, they are the shareholders and they open private schools and colleges and even in engineering sector. I realized how privatization in education has influenced heavily on the quality of education for technical education such as engineering too. For example, I was there for technical education but the computer programming was also taught by handwritten method in copy. There was no labs, there was no field visits. Everyone was forced to achieve good academic scores only. However the corporate influenced education sector is more directed towards going abroad especially western countries.

Escobar (2007) criticizes the dominant ideas of development on how it influences through increasing private sectors engagement in health, education, infrastructure is impacting Indigenous communities. These private sector has the resources, power which consequently legitimizes knowledge. Kam Bahadur mentions that “*Not to name it specifically, working in private sector power and politics influences too much. The struggle for promotions, job placement is so much draining.*” Institutions such as universities, governments, and media are imbued with the authority to produce and validate knowledge. Indigenous Peoples are made more vulnerable because of the post development ideas further creating unfavorable policies and giving rise to neoliberalism and capitalism. These are the western model of development which is gradually leading to exclusion of vulnerable communities. Kam Bahadur further shares his academic journey,

I was studying in private college, and I had to struggle for managing logistics such as cycle, college dress, and coat. I had to drop the college as my family could not cover the expensive tuition costs, and other associated costs. During free time after School Leaving Certificate (SLC) I worked as marketing of Ayurveda products. I was selected to study Heatuda again I had to appear for exam in Heatuda. I received 4200 monthly scholarship in

forestry subject. Later after I completed the program I also did a teaching job in Navodaya School, I used to teach math, science, computer for 6 months. Later I was supported to study and appear for entrance and covered all lodgings, food during my undergraduate program. In 2069 B.S. I appeared for BSC forestry entrance examination and my education was supported by ANSAB. I appeared for MSC entrance examination in year 2074 in Agro Forestry University, Rampur in Heatuda. I was able to secure my name in top 15.

Now, Kam Bahadur has built a career rooted in forestry and environmental conservation. His path hasn't been easy, and while he has made steady progress, there remains a sense of dreams only partially fulfilled, blocked not by a lack of effort or talent, but by systems that often fail people like him. His story stands as a quiet yet powerful, which motivates other Chepang youths to pursue government jobs through rigorous efforts and overcoming obstacles that comes within. Graduating from Bachelor's Degree, Master's Degree has opened a door for social mobility too. Good income source is determined by educational attainment hence, those who graduated are connected to income generation sources. Earning is possible only after achieving degree and set of skills as demanded by the market hence this education system is making me to adapt to current existing neoliberal led market. Participant Tirtha mentions that,

Despite attaining a certain level of education, the unemployment rate remains high throughout Nepal, a situation is same in the Chepang community. The current educational system lacks a focus on practical skills, resulting in stiff competition within the job market. This deficiency is particularly evident in Chepang schools, where students in grade 5 struggle to compose a simple sentences.

One of the positive factor for him was he had good academic scores in his schooling. In addition to this, being a Chepang he was further motivated by teachers to continue his education. He did not face any social discrimination for being a Chepang throughout the schooling. He also shared the inverse relationship between academic scores he achieved in schools and its relation with bullying, discrimination from friends. This means as he had good academic scores from the beginning so was not bullied by his friends, rather friends used to come and learn and share assignments when required. So participant Tirtha shares that he did not face any social issues such

as teasing, harassment, and derogatory naming due to academic excellence he achieved throughout the schooling.

CHAPTER VI

JOURNEYS OF EXPERIENCING, AND NEGOTIATING HIGHER EDUCATION

This chapter covers the journey of experiencing, and negotiating in higher education. This chapter highlights overall reflections of the study which are based on four research questions. Although education guides an individual to certain extent in socioeconomic and many other aspect I realized that I have become the silent victim through the mainstream pedagogy that I have experienced with in these 15 years of schooling. It has taught me to accept the failure structure rather than questioning the injustices that has been occurring to Chepangs. This has further reproduced inequality and cultural disassociation. These components are covered in this section.

Transformative Learning or Further Marginalization

Higher education can become a powerful tool for addressing the systemic barriers and fostering an environment of mutual respect and critical engagement, and upliftment of marginalized groups like the Chepangs. But in reality, accessing higher education has rather taught us to accept modern trends, regulations consequently rejecting indignity embracing Chepang lifeways. This approach can neither meet the demand of society's skills or knowledge nor prepare human resources that is relevant for present generation's needs. The course pursued in universities should not only fulfil the educational curriculum requirement but should be encouraging learners to develop autonomous thinking rather than passively adopting externally imposed meanings. The theory of transformative learning says that education should make an individual to transform frames of reference through critical reflection on the assumptions (Mezirow, 2000).

The current modern education modality has rather inserted existing dominant beliefs, thoughts and interpretations process that are widely accepted by the society rather than bringing out the viewpoints of people who are impacted. Hence, the critical point here is does higher education enables the Chepangs to live of life of *Bahun* or as a Chepang? The current education system makes everyone *Bahun*. So the question to myself; is it transformative? Am I contributing anything to the community that I belong? This is just living as it should be in the feudalistic society. There is no option to live of dignified and respectable life a Chepang. The modality of education that encourages critical thinking and awareness of social justice issues can empower

them to understand and challenge the systemic forces that perpetuate their marginalization. This not only gives the opportunity to access job markets, which is linked to financial independence but also contribute to social change by speaking against injustice and oppressive structures. Moving away from oppressive structures and towards a more inclusive, dialogical, and critical pedagogy can help Chepang youths not only succeed academically but also become empowered agents of change within their communities.

This is not teaching to live a dignified life as a Chepang but to accept modern trends, regulations consequently rejecting indignity. This approach can neither meet the demand of society's skills or knowledge nor prepare human resources that is relevant for present generation's needs.

Education can be an asset for a person, one can become smart, capable and knowledgeable and get employment (Parajuli, 2008). Educated person can defend themselves against all sorts of cheating and oppression, it can help to improve their situations making their life easier and as desirable (Parajuli, 2008). But for me, I realized that I have become the silent victim through the mainstream pedagogy that I have experienced with in these 19 years of schooling. It has taught me to accept the failure structure rather than questioning the injustices that has been occurring to Chepangs. My entire educational journey seems to fail as per assumption of Mezirow (2000) which he mentions transformative learning as becoming critically aware of tacit assumptions/expectations and assessing their relevance for making an interpretation. According to Freire (2000) in the book pedagogy of the oppressed, traditional higher education often follows a banking model, where Chepang youths are expected to passively absorb information that may not be relevant to their cultural context or lived experiences. Freire (2000) also criticizes the current model of education and emphasizes education to address the social, economic, and political development of socially oppressed people and groups.

The structure of society has been shaped in such a way that, education is a must to get government jobs or any other private jobs. I have realized that I am running after 'rat race' where everyone runs after getting a good job or secure their future with good source of income. And getting a government job requires certain level of education as per the positions, so is with private companies, I/NGOs job. Safe landing with a good job positions has now been possible only after achieving degree

and set of skills as demanded by the market; such as English-speaking skills, basic to advanced computer skills, and so on.

I have felt the sense of being undervalued or invisible within the education system, which has influenced my self-esteem and identity development. This could be same for my community members too who might come up through this same journey. Though I feel “let down” by my educational experience, this realization could motivate other youths to put efforts into reforming education for future generations of Chepang and other Indigenous communities.

Reflecting on myself, I might have come up to this position which wider society considers it as successful where the education system is making me to adapt to current existing neoliberal led market. I might have succeeded to grasp some of the modern world required skills but it has not been the same journey for other Chepang community graduates. When I reflect on what higher education has truly taught me,

I realize that it has shaped my thinking in ways I did not expect. Instead of encouraging me to question injustices, it has trained me to accept a system built to fail people like me. It has taught me to accept things as they are and even praise society for its tokenistic ideas of inclusion in development. My thoughts have been pushed into a narrow path that aligns with what the larger society approves rather than allowing me to think freely. Education has often been used as a tool to legitimize the actions of powerful agencies, not to challenge them. Instead of uplifting the perspectives of people who are most affected, the current model reinforces the existing beliefs, ideas, and interpretations that society already considers acceptable.

To summarize, most of the information received from the participants tend to depict the oppression, subjugations during schooling. This shows the struggle and how education supported them to climb up the social ladder. It was challenging to articulate education with social justice, equity and rights. The participants may not have realized that but ultimately education has also helped them to get out of mess. However, the entire process of schooling, higher education and other education journey can alienate youths from their cultural roots and force them to adopt values and skills that are not aligned with their community's needs.

Education as Reproduction of Inequality and Cultural Disassociation

Globalization has become the driver of inequality. There is increasing demand for formal educations credentials in job markets, hence our educational institutions

have become nothing more than machines that produce certificates. For Chepangs too ongoing educational model reproduces structural inequalities: those from dominant/elite castes or ethnicities benefit, while indigenous and marginalized people are systematically disadvantaged. It has systematically failed local people through systematic structure through language incompetency. These are neither relevant nor applicable in real life setting.

Research carried out by Parajuli (2008), states that educated person tends to disassociate themselves from village, come out of poverty' and want to see themselves working either in government jobs or projects which also implies to this research. This shift can alienate Chepang students from their cultural roots and force them to adopt values and skills that are not aligned with their community's needs. When students moves to residential schools, this erases their mother tongue, cultural practices during the process of acquiring education. These system alienates indigenous children from their roots, making them strangers in their own lands. Studying in residential schools supported by government, non-government organizations, and missionary organizations has separated Chepang children from their families, cultural ties, and traditions of the community. This becomes the first gateway to learn Nepali language forgetting their own mother tongue. Further continuing higher education also makes them aloof from all the cultural and rituals. The current education system has been disconnecting to route that they belong largely affecting marginalized and disadvantaged communities.

The current model of education and struggle to get enrolled in higher education questions; where is interest based education, where has learning been useful in its proper place? Education has not respected our beliefs, values, or identity. Where is our language, identity? How are we supposed to feel proud? We are now neither Western nor Indigenous. A challenge within higher education is to create meaningful spaces for Indigenous peoples in dominant Eurocentric western model of academic rigor disciplines, policies, and practices.

An Epistemic Injustice for Chepang Community

In order to encourage fairness, inclusiveness, and the acknowledgment of varied knowledge and experiences, Omodan (2023) also suggests that educational procedures and policies be changed. This will motivate stakeholders to actively strive toward achieving epistemic justice for all students. Curriculum contributes to strong skills, academic knowledge, learnings beyond formal schooling: close attachment

with nature, ancestors. For Chepang students the curriculum contents taught in current schools, colleges are still same as our father and grandfather studied. The same curriculum neither brings innovations nor any skills for the current students. This has rather loosen their creativity and skills. Omodan (2023) shared the discourse on epistemic justice where detrimental impacts of epistemic injustice is faced by marginalized students through biased curriculum design, pedagogical approaches, and assessment methods. For Chepang, the knowledge, skills that can be inheritance from ancestors is gradually declining. As the priority to attend schools has increased whatsoever is the curriculum. The dilemma is the upcoming generation of Chepang can neither set an example in traditional indigenous knowledge nor succeed after acquiring modern education. The curriculum that are taught has neither been useful in day to day life for Chepang youths nor their job markets. This has just become a means to learn and construct new texts. The societal perception towards traditional practices and knowledge as orthodox and regressive. This also loses the traditional knowledge, practices and identity of the Indigenous community people.

Epistemic injustice occurs in different forms where the local and indigenous people are taught to manifest others ways of knowing, thinking and believing, which is clear epistemic injustice, where traditional Indigenous knowledge is undermined (Omodan, 2023). School may have become a battlefield of contradictions with prescribed textbooks, syllabus, curriculum and our preexisting indigenous knowledge (Omodan, 2023). This education has also supported to bring forward our traditional knowledge systems that was marginalized to reclaiming it. This epistemic unfairness and prescriptive learning paradigm can further undermine students' intellectual growth, sense of belonging, and self-confidence, impeding their academic progress and reducing their chances of success (Tanesini, 2018). Coping with present days demand to access education has taken a form of injustice for indigenous Chepang community. With this growing modernization, Chepangs indignity is eroding away too, which shows that modernization has been one of the hurdles for Chepang community

Siru's story also reflects how intersectionality; poverty, geography, disability, and gender intensifies marginalization. These overlapping disadvantages make educational journeys exponentially harder for some in overcoming several barriers, hardships, physical and societal barriers and falsified tokenistic model of participation. There is need for radical adjustment to curriculum design, pedagogical

practices and policies in education to address the problem of epistemic injustice (Omodan, 2023).

This further elaborates on cases of Chepangs on how these ongoing educational model reproduces structural inequalities: those from dominant/elite castes or ethnicities benefit, while indigenous and marginalized people are systematically disadvantaged. It has systematically failed local people through systematic structure through language incompetency. These are neither relevant nor applicable in real life setting. This chapter covers how Chepangs are facing epistemic injustice through biased curriculum design, teaching and learning process, and assessment methods. Epistemic injustice occurs in different forms where students ranging from school to university level degrees are taught through the lens of others ways of knowing, thinking and believing rather than looking through the local peoples and Indigenous Peoples knowing, and analysis which tends to undermine Indigenous knowledge, and practice. It further discusses on how language hierarchies and exclusion are the created as a main ways to maintain colonial legacies affect Chepang's access to education.

Language Hierarchy and Exclusion

Mother tongue can be relevant as well as crucial for educational success along with legitimization of various ethnic and linguistic diversities and embracing a inclusive nation state but exclusive focus on mother tongue may not only be practical at higher levels of education (Sutherland, 2009). However these findings and generalization is still criticized due to limited perspective. Language hierarchies is one way to maintain colonial legacies in education. English as a medium of instructions is still considered than Nepali is the status of "prestige" (Khanal, 2023). Chepang students frequently experience stigma while not being able to pronounce as it should be. Economic hardship has also been exacerbated by these long-standing patterns of exclusion, which have forced many Chepang families into precarious employment and made regular school attendance even more challenging.

Nepal's education policy, planning, implementation by promoting English as the primary medium of instruction enables the ruling elites hagemony to widespread where the ruling class converts their ideologies into common sense, and natural maintain the status quo (Poudel et al., 2022).

Elite groups in society tend to protect and reinforce dominant languages as official ones at the cost of minority ethnic/Indigenous languages which is an internal

approach of colonization and have been victim of an associated hierarchal, colonial mentality since then, as their languages, cultures and value systems have been marginalised (Poudel et al., 2022). One of the challenge in integrating Chepang language in the curriculum is there is no licensing system for Chepang language teachers. The one who can speak Chepang language have not been able to get teaching license. So it has been challenging to continue teaching in Chepang language.

Power Authenticates Knowledge

We have widely accepted the quote that knowledge is power but little attention is given to the power in the knowledge management (Heizmann & Olsson, 2015). Elite groups use to control the thoughts and actions of others through these approach (Heizmann & Olsson, 2015). The Indigenous knowledge system is suppressed by these power structures, controls the ways of thinking, the ways of behaving, influences cultures we practice. Power plays crucial role in day to day life, and it also applied to education sector (Parajuli, 2008). Even particular actions are guided by power, these are the ideas of ideas of governmentality that influences how it is governed using the disciplinary power. These power authenticates knowledge, to give an example, World Bank research and production is considered as universal knowledge and it expands throughout the world in the form of discourse. This illustrates that the knowledge generated or created mostly by dominant groups authenticate knowledge that serves their interests, while alternative perspectives are suppressed or delegitimized. Colonialism subjugated people where the growth model of development has not taken into consideration of right to self-determination for development without taking into account of Indigenous ways of development that promotes Social and ecological resilience. Escobar (2007) presents Post-development ideas through political ecology critiquing western centric ideas. These are the Ideas, policies, practices has expanded throughout the world to shape the third world countries. This is a kind of hegemony is created by development discourses. This is giving rise to cultural imperialism which is domination of elite's culture, where western culture has expanded globally and people and other rest of the world are considered as uncivilized. It is evident that Peoples subjectivity is shaped by discourses of power.

Public policies of government should depict what a country needs and prioritizes and what resources have been invested by a country to achieve set

objectives (Acharya, 2019). Nepal's education sector has been influenced by neoliberal policies that promotes increased competition among educational institutions, primarily influenced by funding and guidelines from the World Bank (Regmi, 2021). If the policies in education sector are not inclusive, it cannot reach out wider communities in equitable and inclusive approach (Acharya, 2019). Hence policies of government play a crucial role in guiding to reach out to all the citizens adapting equitable manner. Donor agencies in Nepal tends to experiment educational institutions as a laboratory where different plans, programs, policies they bring do not meet the needs of the community (Rauniyar, 2024).

Theorization and Strategic Explanations

Mezirow's transformative learning theory implies to journey of Chepang youths for understanding how Chepang youths experience to see if this has brought any changes, or shifts in worldview through higher education. For Chepang students living on the margins of Nepali society, entering higher education creates "disorienting dilemma" neither enables Chepang to live with dignity as Chepang or necessitates becoming culturally "Bahun" through adopting dominant-culture frames of reference.

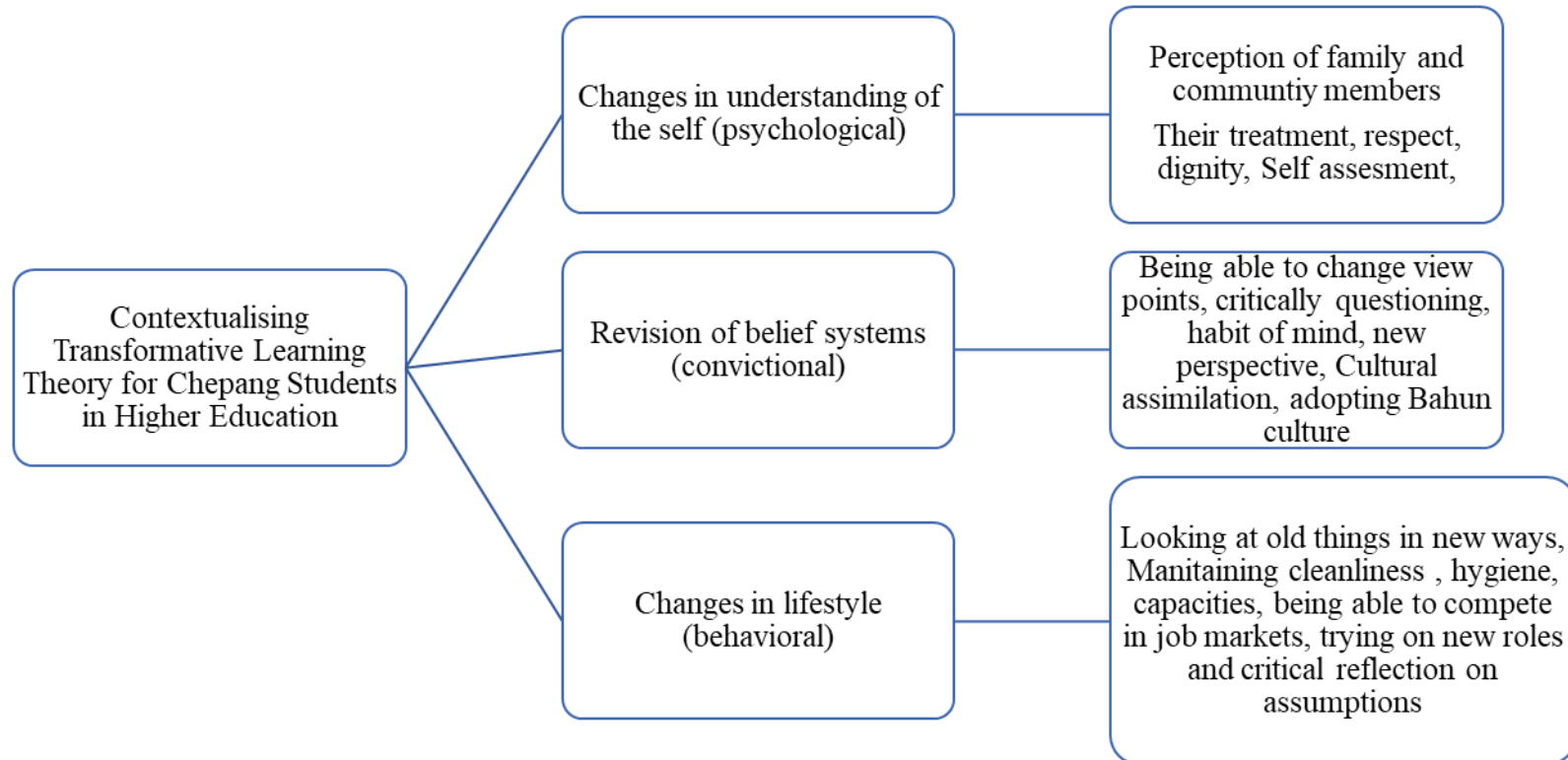
The limited social capital, cultural capital of Chepang interlinks with the theoretical position developed by Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory where educational institutions systematically disadvantage Chepang students through the unequal distribution of cultural capital. The family background, socioeconomic background, status of family, cultural background fails to capture in school's interactions (DiMaggio, 1982).

A Marxian lens for Chepang youth implies on how education differentiates Chepang and pursuing higher education still makes them powerless when they do not have power, networks and possession where they can influence in the society. It still remains a challenge for Chepang to either to get the job or to start their new venture themselves. For Chepang youths who are historically positioned as landless, laborers, education's promise of mobility operates within Nepal's integration into global markets. As Aryal (2023) mentioned the education that Chepang youths are acquiring are "less usable in everyday life" and de-contextual" (Luitel, 2009). This further marginalizes indigenous knowledge, while there is no option for Chepang students to "live a dignified and respectable life as a Chepang" within educational structures that demand cultural assimilation.

Together, these theoretical perspectives illuminate how higher education functions simultaneously as a site of reproduction and possible transformation for Chepang youths, perpetuating marginalization through cultural and epistemic exclusion while potentially offering tools for understanding and challenging that marginalization, a paradox that can only be understood through careful attention to Chepang graduates' own narratives of their educational experiences and aspirations.

Figure 1

Theorization of Transformative Learning Theory for Chepang Students in Higher Education



CHAPTER VII

CONVERGENT REALIZATION, CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter covers the convergent realization within me after accessing higher education degree and what roles it could play in Chepang community. It mentions that access to higher education is important to have access to labor markets, compete with other competitors in job market and so on, but it does not necessarily bring transformation. It brings certain change in the family but not necessarily in the whole community. Educational degrees has however strengthened effectiveness in learning and communicating with the local and global audience. The course pursued outside Nepal might have brought certain analytical frameworks to understand social exclusion, systemic inequality, and community needs not merely at the surface level, but by addressing their root causes. These curriculum and courses of schooling did not really bring real transformation as there was no rise of critical consciousness among ourselves, nor research participants. The transformation has happened in individual level.

Convergent Realization

I have now realized how I contribute is important, rather than what I hold with all degrees, short courses, certificates, fellowships and awards that I have received. A critical consciousness has stroked me after recent social, political changes along with the Gen Z revolution of September 8 and 9, 2025. I have realised that if we do not raise the voice, who will raise for the Chepang community people. I have now realized that the ground level problems and issues cannot be understood by people living in well air conditioned offices. It should be us who have grown up in that specific geographical region, who have come across all those struggles and hardships throughout. It means it does not necessarily have to be accessing higher education has to play role in becoming a change agent and advocating for the community people.

The Government of Nepal's statistics say that 20.3 percent of the country's population is living below the poverty line (Bam, 2026). No one except the poor people knows how difficult it is to live below that poverty line. People living below the poverty line do not know what democracy is. They do not know what a republicans are. None of these systems have any meaning in their lives.

I have reached the limit of frustration that has pushed me to get into politics and be a bridge between the community and the parliament. I have realized that it is necessary to step up to develop a policy that will be adopted to empower the weak and marginalized through opportunity creation, skill development, and self-reliance, rather than relying on charity or grants. I have realized that there is a necessity for collaboration to be established between the state, private sector, and community to create jobs, develop skills, and promote self-employment for Chepang youths. Along with this active and meaningful participation of youth in policy formulation, implementation, and monitoring processes, it is necessary to bring about change that is sustainable and inclusive for Chepang people along with other minority groups.

There is a necessity for all educated, conscious Chepang youths to be aware, organized, and prepared for leadership to complete the transformation that we want to see in the community, whether it be in the education sector, health sector, and environment sector.

So it is not only academic that brings transformation, but it is understanding of the self, belief systems, and behavioral changes as Mezirow has mentioned to bring a transformative approach in all sectors. However, educational degrees have strengthened my effectiveness in learning and communicating with the local and global audience. My Master's degree in Social Work provides me with strong analytical frameworks to understand social exclusion, systemic inequality, and community needs not merely at the surface level, but by addressing their root causes.

Similarly, learning by doing is another fundamental principle that has equipped me with professional skills in community development, including project design, social safeguarding, and participatory approaches. These competencies enhance both my credibility and my practical effectiveness. Education equipped me with the theories and practical tools needed to understand structural inequality, community empowerment, and rights-based approaches to social change. Education helped me critically analyze social problems and strengthened my commitment to uplifting Indigenous Peoples and marginalized communities, particularly my own Chepang community.

I have been raising the community voices and Indigenous Peoples voices by publishing in national and international news portals and also research journal articles. I have also been participating in public discussion forums and recently in podcasts. I have now realized the time to move out from being an observer to the one who really

take it into implementation. I write, share and disseminate the messages to community people during gatherings, formal and informal meetings.

We educated, aware and conscious youths needs to be the pathway to structural reform bridging community empowerment with national policy change. As mentioned by Marxists theories, resource constraints also present a major challenge. Driving social change requires financial, organizational, and institutional support, yet youth-led and community-based movements often operate with very limited resources. This makes sustained advocacy and mobilization particularly difficult. Systemic inequality remains a persistent barrier. Deep-rooted social, economic, and cultural inequalities such as limited access to quality education, infrastructure, and opportunities create additional obstacles for long-term engagement and leadership development.

One of the positive notes for this dissertation relates with the quote mentioned by, The Honourable Justice Murray Sinclair, Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, points to education as *"Education brought us into this mess, but education will bring us out of it."* The same educational journey was a rough ride but the juice extracted after completion of university education has been fruitful at least to some extent. Although the needs, desires and wants may not have been fulfilled but education has at least given a basic means of living. This education has connected to job market, it has made us aware of several issues that one may not learn while staying in isolation. This education also became an armor to protect it.

Higher education contributes to a major role in addressing the societal, contributing to social change, lead the process in meaningful and effective participation and decision making. Completing higher education itself is a daunting task as economic burdens are associated with it. Despite several challenges and Chepang community there are only handful of graduates from Chepang community who have transitioned to different job markets; government jobs, development projects. These handful of formally educated Chepang youths have been able to get good jobs, along with good source of income being able to support their families. This dissertation illustrated that although there are few successful cases, and this does not become transformative as it does not adhered to addressing systemic barriers.

Based on the interviews and transcribed interviews from the participants, the Chepang also competes in "rat race" which encourage to confirm with existing modern, market-driven expectations. This visualizes cultural hegemony, where

dominant worldviews overshadow Indigenous perspectives which push students further away from their own language, culture, and ways of knowing.

Transformative Role of the Educated Chepang Youths

The research brings out experiences, narratives of accessing, pursuing, continuing higher education, social and socio-economic hardships, and in their educational journey. Being PhD scholar, Individual agency and providing advocacy role in Nepal Chepang association and other induced and indigenous institutions working for the betterment of Chepang youths educational life and livelihoods. A tailored support programs along with preparatory bridging courses, mentoring, scholarships, can be made accessible for Chepang youths.

The subjective experiences of Chepang students needs to be acknowledged and guide upcoming educational curriculum and policies that widely reflects narratives of marginalized communities. For Chepang, habitus as mentioned by Bourdieu, (1977) links with the history shaped by subsistence-based livelihoods, historical exclusion from state institutions, and oral knowledge traditions. This study shows the barriers and experiences of Chepang youths, the study provides evidence that can influence policymakers to craft more inclusive educational policies, targeted support programs, and community-based solutions. This also supports the idea of place-based education promoting cross-cultural understanding which contributes towards social and ecological justice (Scully, 2012). Stakeholders such as students, parents, teachers, school management committee, school administrators, and local government authorities from education department must be involved in designing education policies (Dhakal, 2019). Curricula must reflect a variety of perspectives and knowledge systems, necessitating a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Labour Market Driven Curricula

The Chepang children are taught to compete in order to acquire the skills necessary to live a life, including studying English. The narratives of the participants tends to strive to meet the agenda of neoliberalism, where the focus is on getting the job whether it be private or government job, compete with each other on job market, and make a good source of income through educational qualifications that they achieve.

The pressure to engage in the competitive “rat race” of the modern market further distances young Chepang learners from their cultural roots, reinforcing cultural hegemony. The current model of education promotes a subject-centric

pedagogical model where the students are the knowledge receivers rather than knowledge generators (Aryal, 2023). This approach of teaching and learning is promoting 'one size fits all' model (Luitel, 2009) rather than meaningfully engaging in existing pedagogical practice. The traditional model of teaching and learning practices promoted subject-centric memorizing further degrades educational values by ignoring alternative inquiry-based visionaries and meaning-making approaches (Aryal, 2023). Khanal, (2023) mentions that critical pedagogy can be one of the approach to uplift marginalized learners for equity to enhance the quality of education and there is still dominant traditional teaching and learning model in Nepal. Author further mentions that effective teaching can be through contextualization in different ways based on the choices students have and experiential learning processes needs to be adopted.

An integrated approach to curriculum, assessment and teacher education and continuous professional development in pedagogical practices is required to meet the 21st century educational models (Ghimire, 2024). Critical pedagogy can be a transformative approach to enhancer equity and the quality of education in English language teaching to address the ongoing challenges (Aryal, 2023). Ghimire, (2024) advocates to foster an inquiry-based learning environment and facilitating pedagogical changes.

Transformative Learning and Critical Pedagogy

The enabling environment for transformative learning can be through fostering critical awareness, inclusivity, and active engagement, moving beyond teacher centric, subject centric models of learning. This can empower individuals and contribute to societal transformation through meaningful learning experiences. The question for myself and participants is; has the journey of higher education been transformative? Are we contributing anything to the community that I belong? As per my 19 years of educational journey experience, the outcome of mainstream education has led to not able to question the larger society, larger societal structure on the ongoing negative impacts caused to Chepang community. I realized that I have become the silent victim of the current capitalist model of education, which has further taught me to dispositions shaped by history, culture and material condition (Bourdieu, 1977). This has rather taught me to accept existing pattern and structures and applaud the societal structure for the tokenistic inclusive approaches in development approaches (Bourdieu, 1977). Assimilating in tokenized life world is

now used as a mechanism to legitimize the issues rather than critically challenging the actions of institutions and social structures.

Knowledge is not only through formal schooling, attending university degrees but learning can be from external environments (Wibowo et al., 2025). The findings of the research revealed the process of learning, acquiring knowledge and skills. Learning can occur in different socio-cultural context. Sharing (teachers') students' prior beliefs and worldviews as indigenous knowledge, allows each other to interact and discuss about their culture and community knowledge and practices.

Recognizing the Complexity and Addressing Educational Inequality

Incorporating every ethnic group's voices, Indigenous Peoples voices in curriculum starting from schools to universities in pluralistic national state where there are more than 142 caste and ethnic groups and more than 110 languages (Guragain, 2024) could be challenging but it is not impossible. The geographical difficulties, language difficulties, lack of infrastructure including roadways, schools, Universities, basic necessities in classrooms and several other issues still remains pertinent in Nepal. In addition to this the issue of curriculum is another component that questions the real transformative change that education can bring or cannot bring in people's lives. Mainstream education systems often fails to take into account of indigenous communities' unique culture and social contexts which shows disconnection between the curriculum and Indigenous values. The research shows how educational curricula and dominant societal structures may inadvertently perpetuate exclusion and limit critical questioning of systemic inequalities. The system neither reflects indigenous values nor includes their voices in development discourse. Although participants benefitted from scholarships, the participant felt that the community's worldview and identity were absent in the engineering curriculum.

This dissertation unveiled the intersecting factors in access to higher education, such as socioeconomic background, gender, disability, language, and infrastructures compounds the access to education. Sharing narratives of hardship and success can raise increase awareness among wider society about the challenges faced by marginalized communities, further aiming to improve educational outcomes. There is need for promoting decolonized education making it inclusive, equitable, and reflective of Indigenous knowledge, histories, and worldviews, rather than reinforcing dominant narratives overcoming capitalist model of education.

Chepang Student's Agency and Determination

Educational experiences of Chepang graduates must be understood through three interconnected theoretical lenses that collectively illuminate the complex interplay between personal transformation, structural constraint, and cultural negotiation.

Mezirow's transformative learning theory provides the foundation for understanding through different "frames of reference" those deeply ingrained structures of assumptions, beliefs, and expectations through which individuals interpret their world (Mezirow, 1991). These frames, shaped by cultural background and early socialization, operate as mental filters determining how people think, feel, and act. The given figure 2 below presents a three core dimensions of conceptual framework of Transformative Learning Theory applied to Chepang students in higher education. These three dimensions illustrate that transformative learning among Chepang students in higher education is a holistic process that reshapes not only how they think about themselves and their beliefs, but also how they live and act in the world. The figure 2 below illustrates through the Mezirow theoretical lens of seeing through transformative change in oneself, beliefs and behaviours.

The first dimension is psychological, which involves changes in understanding of oneself. This includes oneself being able to redefine their identity, respect, and dignity within their social environment. The second dimension is change in belief systems which includes intellectual and ideological transformation, wherein students engage in critically questioning, challenging their viewpoints. The third includes behavioral transformation, that encompasses changes in lifestyle i.e. adoption of cleanliness and hygiene practices, becoming competitive in job markets, taking on new roles, and engaging in critical reflection. Education encourages women to demolish the old customs and empower them to raise voice against injustice and inequality and to stand against gender bias by improving their decision making capabilities (Adhikari, 2024). Education has been a means through which young people learn the ways to address social health issues which also increases the capability and the capacity of an individual and empowers them to achieve positive social transformation. Access to education and skills for life is essential to empower the youths and quality of life, leading to positive rural transformation (Adhikari, 2024).

Marxian perspective

The dissertation articulates through Marxian lens that illustrates material deprivations, feeling of inferiority, stereotyping and domination, material deprivation, oppression, class struggles and economic hardships in participant's journey of higher education. From this perspective, the labelling, stereotyping, and discrimination Chepang students face appear not as isolated incidents but as manifestations of systemic exclusion embedded in education's very structure and content. A Marxian perspective, can be articulated in this dissertation where there is no space for Chepang students' indigenous knowledge to be valued.

For Chepang, habitus as mentioned by Bourdieu (1977) cultural capital, social capital plays crucial role in educational journey. Social capital plays an important role for social mobility. Participant received support from Nepal Chepang Association during undergraduate course got support to work as an employee and support her living cost in Kathmandu. As per participant exposure also plays crucial role, such as interaction of children with different social economic status was also necessary to have exposure with external peoples other than the community people. Such as communication within the community people tend to limit the conversation, nature and discussion remains within the domains of the community conversation such as siblings and basic updates of day to day livelihood. It was necessary to have an external network to talk, gossip, chat and at least expose in different environment. This was crucial factor for maintaining social connectedness with diverse groups of people from different social strata's. This would also broaden the horizon of networks of peers and their family members. The social networks, and social capital plays significant role in job referrals and land in better jobs. Some supports were received from Nepal Chepang Association among Chepang youths too. Based on the interviews and responses from the participants, only the ones who could not afford only goes to public schools and the ones who could afford private education was from the ones who could afford. Chepang students, who possesses less social capital, cultural capital lacks recognition, manifesting as material deprivation and inadequate guidance in real life. DiMaggio (1982) also clearly mention in his research that cultural capital impacts grades independently of family background.

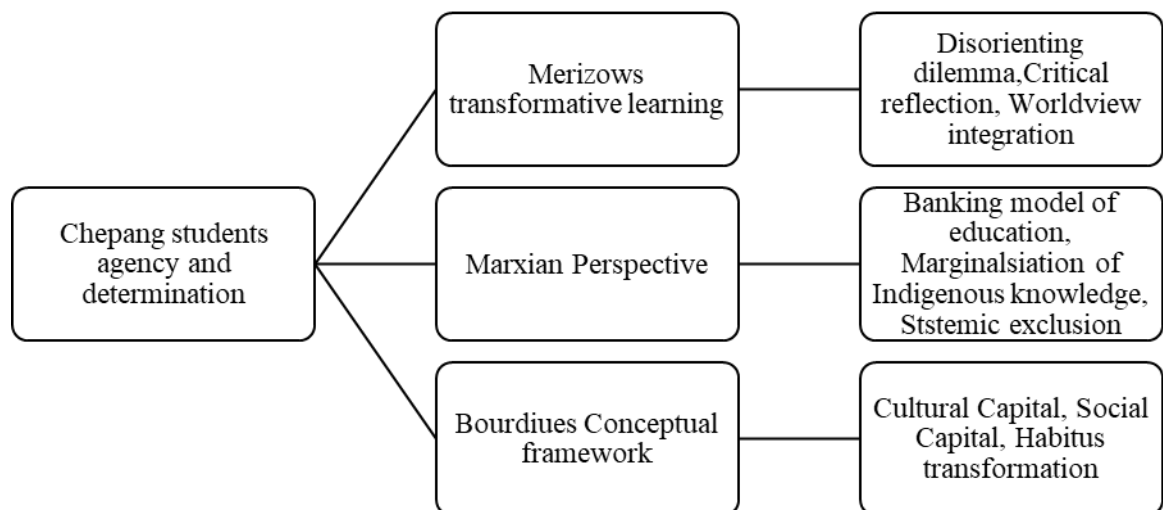
Bourdieu's Concept of Habitus

Chepang faces hysteresis which means dislocation as mentioned by Bourdieu when habitus proves to be inadequate for navigating new social fields or in academia.

This only leads Chepang graduates to undergo negotiating between original and newly acquired dispositions in ways that may enable cultural production rather than mere reproduction. These perspectives analytically converge on whether higher education transforms Chepang graduates in Mezirow's deep sense or merely integrates them into existing structures without challenging systemic inequalities, and whether it empowers them to live dignified lives as Chepang people while participating in broader society.

Figure 2

Theorizing Chepang Students Agency and Determination



Conclusion

Education plays both the role of fostering critical consciousness, liberation or maintaining the status quo of oppression and several studies mentions that higher education has the potential to raise critical consciousness among Chepang youths, but it has not really been the case in reality. Education has not really encouraged critical thinking and advocate to challenge the systemic forces of marginalization. It has been noted based on interviews and responses from participants, Chepang faces significant barriers in accessing higher education due to systemic inequalities, including economic hardships, geographic isolation, and linguistic challenges. Both government and private should collaborate to address the issues of marginalized communities to meet the increasing demand for formal educational credentials in job markets.

This auto/ethnographic study comes to the conclusion that education reproduces inequality, the system perpetuates cultural disassociation, leaving Chepangs disassociation between worlds neither fully aligned with their Indigenous roots nor fully absorbed into the dominant cultural and economic framework. The findings from this research shows that higher education often socializes students to accept injustice rather than challenge it. The higher education in Nepal has not promoted critical thinking, which is essential to question oppressive structures, reclaim their agency, and participate meaningfully in societal change. There is complex intersection of social, cultural, and economic barriers that continues to shape educational access, achievement. Tangible aspect of the challenge faced by Chepangs are material deprivation, geographical remoteness which limits access to higher education, whereas the deeper issues are tied to cultural identity, and languages.

Knowledge should not be confined to formal schooling or university education; rather, it should be a continuous and dynamic process where one should also be able to learn from external environment. Learning should take place within diverse socio-cultural contexts, where individuals engage with one another to share, discuss, and transmit their cultural values, community knowledge, and practices. Acknowledging the unique cultural and social contexts of Indigenous communities and connecting conventional curricula and Indigenous values, underscoring the need for more inclusive and context-sensitive approaches to education can be a way forward in coming days.

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ANNEXES

ANNEX 1

Guiding Interview questions for Research

1. Could you please share your experiences growing up in a Chepang community.
2. Please do share your journey of pursuing higher education (Master's Degree) and what does it mean for the Chepang community to be educated?
3. What are the specific cultural, social, and economic barriers that limit access to higher education for while pursuing higher education Chepang people? Labelling/ discrimination/ biasness/ Material deprivation / Guidance / Parental support / Academic performance
4. What roles does role of language, curriculum, and pedagogical practices in either promoting or hindering the Chepang community's educational advancement?
5. How do you see yourself as graduate? (ethnography/ontological question/)
6. What kind of changes in the mindset, behaviors, lifestyle, aspiration, skills, academic performance, location, self-determination, knowing themselves, feeling of responsibilities, proving them wrong?
7. How do other Chepang members in your community perceive you after graduation