Reproductive Role of Schooling: An Ethnographic Study of an Ethnic Family in Nepal

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Abstract: This paper examines the role of schooling in harmonizing a culture by the reproduction of dominant culture of middle class into an ethnic Tamang family of Salyangaun village of Lalitpur district in Nepal. Based on Bourdieus’ work, the article explores how a minority ethnic family has undergone the process of acculturation to experience, learn and adopt middle-class culture by means of schooling.

1. Introduction

According to Bista [1], the Tamangs have been living in the surrounding hills of Kathmandu valley of Nepal since ancient time. They have been living within their own communities in stone-made and thatched houses. Their main economic activities have been preparing and supplying domestic supplies: doko (bamboo basket), namlo, (belt made out of plant fibres to carry load on head) and kuco (broom made out of grass) to the nearest market. Similarly, they have been collecting mushroom and edible roots and supplying to other communities. They have been also supplying farm products like goats and vegetables to the market. According to Pandeyeya [5] the Tamangs have the tradition of cross-cousin marriage. However, it is not mandatory. Originally, the Tamangs were Buddhist but they are found to be following both the practices of the Buddhism and the Hinduism.

Today, the Tamangs have started migrating to the valleys near by Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal and to the southern plains from the hills to the south of Kathmandu valley. My father finally came with my mother somewhere here in Lalitpur in Kathmandu valley and settled here and he never knew exactly where he was. Other people used to come to Kathmandu to carry loads for Rana Shahib and rich people of the town many years ago. There were no roads like they exist today to link the Kathmandu with the southern plains. My father said they used to live in the hills to the south of the valley. My father finally came with my mother somewhere here in Lalitpur in Kathmandu valley and settled here and he never migrated to the valleys near by Kathmandu, the practices of the Buddhism and the Hinduism.

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2. The Setting

The ethnographic study presented here is based on my fieldwork with a Tamang Family in Salyangaun of Lalitpur district of Nepal. Situated to the south of Kathmandu valley, approximately 14 kilometers away towards south from Patan, Lalitpur. The Kathmandu valley includes the main three towns of Kathmandu, Bhaktapur and Lalitpur and the main town of Lalitpur is called Patan.

Salyangaun is apparently a Tamang community with 46 Tamang households. The distinct settlement of the Tamangs, separated from the Brahmins’ and the Kshetris’ habitation of Neupanegaun, is spread down the narrow hill slope forming three clusters. Each Tamang settlement cluster is interlinked by narrow foot trails. Some houses are closer together, which share a common house-yard. Behind or besides each house lies their cultivation land.

For the purpose of my research, I chose a small family of a Goley (a subgroup of Tamang ethnicity), in the Tamang clusters. The family had five members: Indra Tamang - the father, Thuli Tamang - the mother, Bhunam - the son, Rabina - the daughter-in-law and Sandu - the son to Bhunam and Rabina. The Goley family’s house was well-built with stone wall and metal roof. The floor in front of the main entrance of the house was freshly and cleanly plastered with red soil. The house shared a common yard, which was paved with large stone slabs with another Tamang family house. However, the next house was not as clean as that of Indra’s. Two goats were kept in a corner of the veranda in the neighbour’s house. A half woven doko (bamboo basket) was hung on a wooden peg on the wall beside the door in the house. Whereas plastic utensils, linoleum carpet and a television set gave a distinct sight of the house of Indra in comparison to the others’ in the cluster.

3. The Story of Indra and Thuli Tamang

Indra began to tell his ancestral story. “I don’t know exactly when it was, but they say my father and other people used to come to Kathmandu to carry loads for Rana Shahib and rich people of the town many years ago. There were no roads like they exist today to link the Kathmandu with the southern plains. My father said they used to live in the hills to the south of the valley. My father finally came with my mother somewhere here in Lalitpur in Kathmandu valley and settled here and he never started migrating to the valleys near by Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal and to the southern plains from the hills and they have started to do other occupations like service in the police and military force, businesses and jobs in the government offices that once used to be the monopoly of a few upper Hindu caste people and the Newars only. Now the number of the Tamang boys and girls going to schools and colleges has been increasing day by day. According to the 2011 Census Report of Nepal, the population of the Tamangs has reached 1,539,830, which make 5.8% of the total population of Nepal.

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After Having deep conversation with Indra, I found out that Indra’s father who used to work as a porter for the Ranas came from Makwanpur district, a district towards the south of the Kathmandu valley. The Ranas were a ruling dynasty who ruled Nepal from 1846 until 1951. They were very luxurious in their life style and they used to bring all possible amenities to their Durbars from India making porters carry on their back all the way from Nepal-India boarder to Kathmandu.

Thuli, Indra’s wife, unwrapped the crucial part of their union story. “He (Indra) used to be my maternal uncle’s son before we got married.” Obviously, keeping up the usual Tamang tradition, they had performed a cross-cousin marriage. “Can you read or write?” I asked. “How can we? We never saw the face of the school!” Indra answered. “But you said you sent your only son to school?” I entered into my topic of interest. “Why not? Everyone from that Brahmin village was sending their children to school. We didn’t want our boy to suffer like we did. See, it’s very difficult to find work to earn any wage for the illiterate like us. In my youthful days it was no problem to carry loads. I was able to do any heavy work. But now my limbs tremble. And, Thuli has pet ko rog (abdominal disease).”

Undoubtedly the motivation for the illiterate Tamang couple to send the boy to school was their aspiration that their son would have an easier life. He would not be a porter as they used to be.

“And has your dream come true?” I asked. “Well, we sent him to school for more than ten years in that school. Teachers said he wasn’t good in studies. How could he compete together with the Brahmin-Kshetri boys and girls? The school has teachers from high Hindu caste groups. Every teacher teaches their own caste children with more attention and takes their part in the exam. Anyway, he passed the tenth grade. “And then?” “He quitted his studies for ever. What else he could do? His senior friends of the village were working in hotels in the town (Kathmandu). He came to know that he could get training to work in the hotels from them. We had no money to support him for the training. So he started working as a helper-cook, which gave him the opportunity to get higher training later. Now, he says, he is a head cook in a good hotel.” “And how much are you satisfied from the schooling of your boy?” I asked. “We wanted him to become a big man who would be employed in a government office. Or we wanted to see him become a teacher in our own village. If that had been the case our prestige would have been different. We would have been also respected in the village. Other Tamang boys would have also reached to good positions following his example. He would be a role model. Everyone needs his own connection in good places (higher positions) to find a good job. Our son could have done that if he had been able to study a lot. But the school is also biased for poor and ethnic people like us. Upper castes’ boys and girls are doing better because the teachers care them better. We are sorry that he couldn’t become a big man. I don’t complain about him. He has treated his mother’s illness with his earning who was chronically sick since he was a child. I wasn’t able to do that for her. He frequently comes with money and materials when he comes home from the town. Only last year, he heightened the upper storey of our house and roofed it with zinc sheet. He has brought a TV. We have enough utensils and clothes. There is carpet in their room.” Indra continued, “However, I see him forgetting our own culture that I wish he wouldn’t do. I used to make bamboo products at home after I was not able to work in the stone crusher. But now he doesn’t want me weaving bamboos. I can do this job staying at home all day and enjoy it but he dislikes our traditional jobs. They have a son now. He goes to an English School.”

Obviously the father was sad to see his son not being able to continue his education and become a ‘big man’. More than that, he was angry about the elites’ system that has deprived them from better education and opportunities. His son could not compete with the Hindu high caste Brahmin and Kshetri children. On the other hand, he sees his son getting modern after attending school.

“Does Bhunam’s wife live here with you or stays in the town with her husband, your son?” I asked. “Yes, she lives here. She doesn’t go to work like other women do in our village. But she is good. Sandu, our grand son does not understand us when we speak the Tamang dialect. We almost all the time speak our Tamang dialect at home and around. He hasn’t learned it! He cannot learn from his mother, as she is a Newar by birth. Who will say he is a Tamang if he doesn’t speak the Tamang dialect? Actually we would have been happier if he could have been able to talk in Tamang. But, finally, I think, he will go to stay in the town if his father can earn enough! He will forget everything about Tamang. What can we do?” Thuli continued, “Once, our son wanted us to leave this place and stay with him in the town. But we didn’t want to. We don’t want to leave this place as we are approaching our dying time!” “Yes”, her husband supported her.

It was clear that the Tamang old couple were worried about losing the Tamang language and their cultural identity. For them their traditional values, their own language and living style is very
important to preserve and continue for generations despite the circumstances.

“What do you think you achieved from Bhunam’s schooling?” I asked the old woman.

“He is able to look after us well and this gives us satisfaction. Moreover, if he is happy we don’t need anything.” The old Tamang woman concluded. “Do you think that your son is getting different from other Tamangs, especially your generation? I wanted to know more from them. The Tamang old man started, “Well, he has become a man of naya chalti (new culture). You see, he married a Newar woman. Usually we practice the cross cousin marriage within the Tamangs. I don’t complain about him but he has neglected many of our traditions. We have been celebrating the Dashain but we never used to sacrifice a goat in our time. But now he buys a goat every year in the Dashain to sacrifice the Hindu goddess. He has sent Sandu to English School. I think Sandu will be like the town people. He will be no more like us (Tamang).”

The Tamang family has already undergone many cultural changes. The grandchild is not learning the Tamang language. Dashain is a Hindu festival. Bhunam, his wife and their son have started to celebrate the Dashain in the manner that the Hindu caste people do. Sanskritization is apparent in Bhunam’s social life.

“Your son is educated. He works and earns in the town. What difference has it made, personally, to you, old couple, in comparison to other families whose family members are not educated?”

“Didn’t we tell you? He gradually abandoned our own traditions. We are uneducated but I tell you, one should be proud of our own culture. These modern people have forgotten their culture. We don’t know what they teach in school.”

Evidently, Bhunam’s parents are worried about the loss of their Tamang culture. Even though they are uneducated they know the importance of their culture.

4. Bhunam’s Story

I met Bhunam separately and made several in-depth interviews. “Can you tell something about your school and education?” I wanted to know basically about his schooling.

“I went to the village school”. Bhunam spoke with a kind of aversion towards his school that suspended in his expression. “I never failed from class 1 to class 9. But in class 10 I was failed in English, Social Studies and Maths. Luckily, I passed the following year. I didn’t like the school, actually. we, the Tamangs were always neglected in the school. I will never forget the Maths teacher saying ‘these Tamang guys have no brain.’ I still remember the Nepali (subject) teacher saying us that we, Tamang boys, were slow, dull and unintelligent in studies because the Tamangs drink alcohol. He used to punish us for no apparent reason. I have had a feeling that they were biased towards us.

Clearly, Bhunam’s suffering during his schooling was due to the state’s education system’s indifference towards the reality of the ethnic minorities and diversities. Minorities are constrained by social, school, and classroom structures that have denied them equal opportunity over many generations [3].

“Did your schooling help you to get the present job then?” “Not actually! I have never shown my 10th class certificate anywhere till today; nor had I acquired any skill from that school. I got the opportunity to work in the hotel through my friends’ connection and I received cook-training later. Yes, I learnt English in the school, but I learnt to speak English only after school when I started to work.” “And your son goes to English school. How do you see this?” “In English school everyone is almost equal. All is learning in English medium. All books are in English. But in government school, particularly in lower classes it is advantageous only to the Nepali-speaking children whose mother tongue is Nepali. The Nepali speaking children can learn quickly but for our children it will be difficult.”

As Nepal entered into liberal economy after the restoration of democracy in 1990 the private sector has started investing in running private schools with the motive of profit making. The privately run English medium schools are popularly known as English school and the government run public or community schools are called government school. The medium of instruction in the government schools is Nepali. Undoubtedly, the Nepali language as a uniform medium of instruction in government schools from the very beginning of schooling was great obstacle for the pedagogic development of the children who came from different mother tongue groups. Bhunam was the victim of it in his school days. On the other hand, the Hindu high caste people have no other mother tongue except Nepali.

5. Theoretical Linkage

Bhunam’s parents sent their only son to school with a kind of expectation that one day he would become a great person. He would care them intensely; he would follow their culture with ardent respect and he would help them to uplift their position in the society. But Bhunam’s schooling did not take the direction as expected by his parents. It was not a mistake of Bhunam, but
rather a consequence of his schooling. According to Haralambos and Heald [4] on theory of cultural reproduction as proposed by Bourdieu, the major role of the educational system is cultural reproduction. This does not involve the transmission of the culture of society as a whole, as Durkheim argued, but instead, there happens reproduction of the culture of the dominant classes. These groups have the power to impose meaning and impose them as legitimate. They are able to define their own culture as worthy of being sought and possessed.

Bhunam’s parents had never expected that one day Bhunam would deviate from their own tradition. However, schooling, according to Bourdieu’s theory, is the centre for cultural reproduction. Bhunam, through schooling, is made to accept the values and norms of dominant culture, and obviously in context of Nepal, that dominant culture is culture of Brahmins and Kshetris.

Again in the words of Haralambos and Heald [4] “Schooling does not start from scratch but assumes prior skills and prior knowledge. Children from the dominant classes have internalized these skills and knowledge during their pre-school years. The educational attainment of social groups is therefore directly related to the amount of cultural capital they possess. Thus middle class students have higher success rates than working class students. From the story of Bhunam, the situation of his schooling is revealed. He was ‘a son of Tamang’ for his teachers and they usually used to portray him as the person who had no brain. The situation is as exactly as what Bourdieu mentioned in his theory. Parajuli [6] supporting Bourdieu’s reproduction theory writes, “dominant groups’ language, manners, dress style and code, games, customs, beliefs, etc. are regarded as the best and the students who possess these capitals are considered smart, intelligent and fast learning”. In the life of Bhunam, many better things had taken place because of his schooling. But he still had a kind of regret for those teachers who think to be born in a Tamang community is not worthy for schooling. These teachers are the representations of ‘schools’ and they favored the culture of dominant groups as explained by Bourdieu.

6. Conclusion

Nepal is a land of diverse cultures. However, along with establishments of schools different communities are at stake when observed from the perspective developed by Bourdieu. Since these schools are the arena for ‘cultural reproduction’, many students who belong to ‘other cultures’ tend to lose culture of their communities in the name of gaining school education. The story of Bhunam tells us how schooling through the cultural reproduction can endanger the identity of a minority or state’s subordinate group or groups. Thus, Bhunam’s family story cannot be confined only to the Tamang ethnic community. In fact, it is the story of all marginal ethnic communities and their endangered identities. Until and unless alternative discourses in education system are recognized and respected the prevailing schooling system is unjust, unfair and intimidating to the minorities and subordinate groups of the state.

References