

**Editorial****Valuing People's Learnings and Literacies**

“The country is in a state of utter barbarism and ignorance” stated the *first* Nepali educational development plan of 1955 (Pandey, K. C., & Wood, 1956, p. 74). As a strategy to address this situation, the plan suggested, “a universal desire for education must be created” (p. 74). The plan further added, “...there can be little improvement in our economic conditions without the help of technology and education. We cannot even exploit our natural resources without scientific knowledge and help” (p. 83). The plan was clear on the need for expanding access to and participation in modern education system, understood as ‘scientific’ and ‘technology’ oriented education, and its role in national development process of Nepal.

While trying to promote modern or ‘scientific’ and ‘technical’ education, the plan however rejected local practices of learning and educating. The plan denied generations of efforts, hard work, accomplishments, and history of collective and individualized epistemic activities. Like any other group of people in the world, people in Nepal have lived a life of struggles and achievements in the contexts of historical hardships and difficulties. They grow crops, trade goods, practice cultures and build relations, networks and alliances. In the course of time, people have developed systems of living, working and educating for the next generation. While accomplishing all these successes by overcoming challenges, many of them have however remained *illiterate*, a very disempowering pathological term making ill those people who cannot read and write. This probably explains why the architects of the first Nepali education development plan described Nepali people as *utterly barbaric and ignorant* giving the notion that all systems and civilizations developed by them were worthless that eventually led them to lose their own worth from the scene. The same notion still prevails even in the mindset of local and international players of Nepali education.

By the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, people experienced unprecedented expansion of the modernist form of literacy and education in the world. Literacy has been described as “reading, writing and numeracy skills, acquired and developed through processes of learning and application, in schools and in other settings appropriate to youth and adults” which has been considered “instrumental in the pursuit of development – at personal, family and community levels, as well as at macro-levels of nations, regions and the world” (UNESCO, 2005, p. 30). On the other hand, *illiteracy* is regarded as a shame and a sin for those who are literate/educated, thereby

continuing a form of symbolic violence upon those who are *illiterate*. The same UNESCO document has described *illiteracy* as “an appalling loss of human potential and economic capacity” (Foreword, para. 3) and “a serious violation of human rights” (p. 19). The 2008 Global Monitoring Report noted continuing *illiteracy* in the world as the “global disgrace” and those who are illiterate are “on the margins of society” (UNESCO, 2007, p. 1). The meaning is that any individual or groups of people were worthless if they lacked reading, writing and numeracy skills from a vantage point of standard modernist canon of education. This continued assertion of hegemonic notion of literacy neglects other forms of education and learning developed by people in their cultural and historical contexts. The notion is that all possibilities of a better livelihood and life quality did not arrive at them and they were forced to remain in poverty and deprivation. And, it did not matter whatever people knew and practiced if they were illiterate in this standardized definition.

Contemporary international movements, such as Education for All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goals (MDG) have greatly contributed to create such a standardized discourse on literacy. The discourse is dominantly revolved around the notion of “teaching people”. Governments across the world have been allocating budget for this purpose with the assumption that there are nothing to learn from the people. Even Paulo Friere, a champion of pro-people literacy ideologues, has been copied, reified and branded within literacy “textbooks” developed by the confluence of mighty government and donor agencies, thereby mistakenly transmitting Freirian aim of conscientization through the 3Rs framework of literacy. Donors provide grants and loan to developing countries to fulfill such an objective. Beside this standardized discourse, several other conceptualizations of literacy have been developed like multiple literacies (Kellner, 1998), situated literacies (Barton & Hamilton, 2000), new literacy (Street, 2003), and social practice (Papen, 2005). All these different ideas or conceptualizations of literacy have tried to understand literacy beyond the imposed learning of reading, writing, and numeracy and in socio-cultural as well as political contexts of learners in respective learning communities. One of the main arguments of these ideas is that learning is the outcome of the existing social relations which are often influenced by power dynamics and hierarchies. In this context, hierarchies of relations and power dynamics are critical in literacy and learning practices which often contribute to inequalities and injustice.

Following the international discourse, Nepal began its literacy interventions in 1950s that have been supported by international donors, including INGOs. Since then, literacy practices and discourses in Nepal have undergone several changes illustrating shifting social and political contexts within the country as well as in international discourses (Robinson-Pant, 2010). Nepali literacy practices are thus very good examples of hierarchies and power relations that operate both within and outside the country. Nepal has just followed the international literacy discourses of basic literacy or

teaching reading, writing and numeracy to its learners with little effort to contextualize those practices. That is, basic literacy practice in Nepal has little to do with local literacies. Such a practice of rejecting local cultural values and describing one's own situation as *utterly barbaric and ignorant* is the outcome of international power relations.

This situation is also the outcome of national power dynamics. Nepali state found the international discourse in line with its endeavor in modernization. It promoted a standardized literacy discourse across the country in order to achieve their implicit political objective of creating an emotive and homogenized nation-state (Onta, 1996; Parajuli, 2002). Following such an implicit objective, the state developed and enforced a homogenized literacy practice completely rejecting the learning in local knowledge base. As a strategy to control its populace with more ease, the state wanted to instill a feeling of inability and backwardness in the minds of people so that they could ignore their own cultural values while adopting the new and modernized values in the state designed path. This explains why learning reading, writing and numeracy has been much emphasized while they completely ignored local values related to learning and educating. Such policy of rejecting local knowledge base was powerfully enforced in Nepal until 1990. After that, owing to political change, situation gradually altered and people and communities are now contesting for their space and identity. Such ignorance of local knowledge base is not only a Nepali context but is also the case of many other countries in one or the other way.

While basic literacy competency has been conceptualized and measured in a number of ways, there is very minimal practice of assessing local literacies. Literacy has been defined differently in different countries. In some countries, simple ability to read and write is enough to be considered literate while in many other countries, some form of schooling is also considered necessary. Nevertheless, we demand some form of reading and writing as part of literacy. We identify all those as *illiterate* who do not know reading and writing but know many other life-related skills and knowledge. We have been doing injustice by such denial of people's skills and knowledge. 'Literacy inequalities' (Maddox, Aikman, Rao, & Robinson-Pant, 2011) are to be seen not only in unequal distribution of literacy but also in denying one's knowledge and values. The root of the problem lies in our narrow understanding of literacy as well as in our wish to see learning in some homogenized and standardized form. We have been seeing literacy in its uni-dimensional form and denying its multi-dimensional forms.

With all these arguments, I am not saying that learning reading, writing and numeracy or basic literacy is not necessary. These are obviously a must for most people. More so in the present globalized context where a large number of people are moving beyond the national borders in search of job, education, and business. They would need multiple literacies to be able to sustain and progress in a competitive context. Basic literacy like reading, writing and numeracy is necessary not only for

those who leave their locales but also for those who are in their own places and active in their traditional domains. Basic literacy definitely opens up many other opportunities and is one of the foundations for socio-economic progress and transformations of people and communities. The argument is to broaden our conceptualization of literacy and recognize that there are multiple dimensions of literacies. Literacies in this sense are different forms of skills and knowledge. They are something that people have developed and practiced as part of their livelihood and socio-cultural aspects of their life. Instead of disgracing people as *illiterate* just because they do not know a prescribed set of basic literacy requirements, we can honor the rights and dignity of all who are leading a dignified life with all their knowledge and skills. Going beyond the present practice of categorizing people as literate and illiterate on the basis of text and number based knowledge, there is a need to conceptualize literacy as literacies and see them in multi-dimensional forms and as continuum. A person might not be able to read and write but he or she might have lots of other life related competencies. Likewise, a community might have elaborated knowledge and practice on different aspects of social, cultural, economic and political well-being. All these must be recognized and documented.

In this world where its people are much diversified and their needs and demands are also different from each other, they are contesting not only for a better life but also for socio-cultural identity and a space in political processes. In such a context, the concerns dwell in realizing people's literacies as they define and aim for themselves.

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Mahesh Nath Parajuli  
School of Education, Kathmandu University  
Email: mahesh@kusoed.edu.np