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### **Inequality and Education: A Critical Analysis of Class Theories in the Present Context**

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#### **Abstract**

The purpose of this article is to analyze how education works in Nepal based on theories related to class inequality. The paper argues that the unequal distribution of wealth and power, prestige, social discrimination and cultural hegemony creates social inequality. Karl Marx and Max Weber made significant contributions to the study of social inequality arguing that the education system is controlled by the class that has the most wealth and power. As a result, the ruling class of Nepal has not paid much attention to improving the quality of government schools to be studied by children of lower economic classes. However, the class structure is in the changing process at present. The service sector is becoming wider than the manufacturing sector. The role of the manager is stronger than that of the owner. The education system is closely related to the new class structure. Therefore, the present educational inequality cannot be understood only from the viewpoint of the traditional class system. It is necessary to understand and find solutions to the new class structure created on the basis of economic as well as cultural hegemony and administrative status in the present context of the world including Nepal. And equality and quality should be sought in education to reduce class inequality in Nepali society. For this, it is necessary to make structural changes from national policy to classroom teaching and learning.

**Keywords:** Class structure, inequality, changing class, Power, education policy

#### **Introduction**

Education and society have a complex relationship and affect each other. Educational sociologists try to explain the similar relationship between education and society. But the sociological perspective tries to remind humans of the social environment rather than of their

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individual personality and biological body. According to sociological beliefs, human beings do not live in isolation but in a special social environment that affects every aspect of their life (Ashford et al., 2016; Zeidler et al., 2005). However, human beings are contemplative beings.

Inequality in society has been the focus of sociological studies including education. Education is an important means of achieving many other sustainable development goals. Only with the opportunity of quality education, people can be free from the vicious cycle of poverty. Therefore, education helps to reduce inequality and achieve equality (UN, 2018). The success or failure of education depends on the environment available. Therefore, inequality is one of the major problems of the modern world, as a result of which many problems are arising. In the present context, everyone tries to associate themselves with the principle of equality. But they find inequality in their lives and in other individuals or communities. The major ideologies of the present world democracy and socialism are based on social equality. Different forms of inequality can be seen in a society with two ideologies (Azevedo et al., 2019; García-Sánchez et al., 2020). However, the nature of inequality varies according to time and place.

Functionalist and dialectical classical sociologists have contributed greatly to the analysis of class inequality in society. Their ideas have played an important role not only in the then society but also in the analysis of the present society (Daoxiny, 2020). However, with the development of knowledge and science, there has been a change in the social stratification and balance of power of the past and present. In this context, especially the impact of Marx and Weber's ideas on the stratification and inequality of postmodern society has been analyzed. Furthermore, exploring how inequality is created in the education sector by the new class structure of stratification of society is the focus of this article. Thus, instead of looking at educational inequality separately, it should be considered as a part of social inequality. The purpose of this article is to explain how education works in Nepal based on theories related to class discrimination. At the same time, the new outline of the present class structure of education is to be clarified through a theoretical point of view.

## **Methods**

This article acknowledges that reality is changeable. In this context, no ideology, approach, class, source of power and field of knowledge can be stable. So, this article provides a critical analysis of class theories. Also, the author provides lessons learned from experiences. It reviews the issues of inequality observed in the educational system, reflecting the class dynamics brought by education in postmodern society as well as the approach to class theory. It uses secondary sources of textual nature; this qualitative conceptual analysis relies on reflective analysis of different types of text and other information. In addition, the critical

evaluation method has been used in particular to examine how class theories have worked in the education system.

### **Class and Inequality**

If society is divided into different groups on any basis except birth, then each of these groups is called social class. According to McIver and Page, a social class is the sum of individuals who have essentially the same social status in society (Gupta & Sharma, 2012). More specifically, when all the members of the society have access to natural resources and means, if all are at different levels of economic status, respect and power, then it is called class. In particular, property, wealth, and income are considered the main basis of class determination. According to Guldner, the financial status of a class of members is almost the same. According to Max Weber, every class has the opportunity of equal economic benefits, economic interest, and a certain opportunity in relation to equal income. According to Marx, class is created on the basis of the relationship between the means of production and the distribution of wealth (Saver, 2012).

Social inequality is the discrimination between individuals and communities on the basis of birth, caste, gender, religion, property, etc. Inequality is characterized by unequal distribution of power, authority, and wealth, social discrimination, and unequal rights over the means of production. According to Marx, class inequality is created by the root cause of the unequal distribution of means of production and wealth (Poudel, 2008). Since a limited number of people have a monopoly on the means of production, they also have a monopoly on property. This generates more income. Additional income accumulates additional wealth and property. With the help of money, one can get higher education, purchase comforts and raise the standard of living.

### **Class Inequality and Functional Theory**

Just as there are different organs in the human body and they function in different units have to perform different functions in the social structure to sustain the whole activities of the society. It is the function of the units of society to play their respective roles relating to one another. Functional sociologists believe in the consensus and support of all units of society for certain values in society. All the units work together to achieve some common values in society. When a unit in society or a cultural or social group does not support each other, then a situation of discrimination is created in the society.

The functionalist theory seeks to clarify how social inequality exists in any society and how it contributes to the operation of a society. That is to say, this theory takes into account the aspect of what it does in society in terms of explaining social inequality. In this regard, Davis

and Moore (1945) argued that every society should do something to keep its members alive and move forward. It is imperative for every society to play its role according to its structure and to mobilize the members of the society for appropriate activities (Giddens, 2012), for example, producing, storing, cooking, etc. There are some things in society which are difficult and distasteful, which people do not want to do. For example, it takes a lot of effort and time to study some tasks or subjects. In this case, a person needs to be motivated to do such things. Such an endeavor enables a person to actively engage in related work without retreating from their role. According to functionalists, a person who continues to play an important role should be given additional incentives or rewards, which may not necessarily be financial. It can also provide social prestige, respect, and the necessary resources to complete the work. Social inequality is needed to keep a society alive and to meet the needs of every individual. From a functional point of view, education identifies who can play which role properly. Education, in particular, identifies which person can be a good teacher or politician or doctor, etc. and on this basis, students are selected in educational institutions. According to the functionalist view, this is the reason why there are relatively few good schools and universities, maintaining social stratification. In society, some people have more wealth and resources than others. This gives them the opportunity to work harder and get an education as well as encouragement. More importance is given by society and every person actively for achieving the same standard of living. In this sense, social inequality is inevitable.

Most sociologists seem to disagree with functionalists' views on social inequality and education (Giddens, 2012; Saver, 2012). Society needs to find some ways to motivate individuals to fulfill their role in society. But this does not mean that the way our society is doing today is the best. According to the critics of this theory, many social inequalities can be counterproductive for motivation, and from this, social development cannot move in a positive direction. Various facts are trying to make it clear that most of the students have been deprived of educational opportunities due to the lack of funds. Those who are deprived of educational opportunities have been deprived of their potential. A large number of Nepal's population lives in poverty and they cannot afford to get better education. Now the question arises, is social inequality working according to Nepal's needs?

It is said that people do not need too much inequality to motivate themselves to work and a small difference is enough. But in some organizations, there is a big difference in the service facilities received between the person holding a higher position and the person working at the lowest level. What is incomprehensible is why there is such a big difference in the contribution of the two. On the other hand, the executive or owner of a cigarette company may have amassed more wealth than an honest and diligent teacher. Now the question arises, is the cigarette company more meaningful and in the public interest than the teacher?

## **Conflict Theory of Social Inequality**

According to the conflict theory, there is no social inequality based on the benefits of the way of working, but through the process of one group dominating the other and taking advantage. It emphasizes the conflict between social classes. Such conflicts occur not only between economic classes but also between other social groups such as caste and race. According to sociologists and philosophers such as Karl Marx and Max Weber, social conflict occurs in the realm of human social life. However, they have different views on social conflict and domination. According to Marx and Marxists, inequality is an inherent aspect of capitalism. Capitalist production is made from the cheap labour of the workers (Max & de Leon 2003). Workers sell their labour to those who have control over the capital. Those who have control over the capital also have power and also have control over the market. The bourgeoisie does not allow daily wage workers to come as equals. If the working class is equal to them, it may be difficult for them to operate according to the order. It is because of their antagonistic relations that the bourgeoisie is taking advantage by maintaining its dominance over the working class. That is why social inequality persists.

According to Marxists working in the field of education, schools and campuses are under the control of the class having more wealth; hence there is inequality in education. The bourgeoisie has designed the framework of an education system in which the working class can get only the minimum and basic education for the benefit of its class. The main reason for the poor condition of working-class and poor schools, especially government schools, is the lack of interest of the ruling class in Nepal to improve the education of the poor. As far as the investment required for the education of the poor or the improvement of government schools is concerned, the taxes paid by the poor or the working class are sufficient. Instead of increasing investment in government universities, the ruling class has been investing the collected taxes in areas of its own interest. But the children of the rich and powerful go to expensive private schools because they have enough capital.

## **Class and Means of Production**

At the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century, Marxist theory was of great help in understanding the difference between class interests. Marx drew everyone's attention to the fact that control over the means of production is the root cause of anomalies in society. The capitalist culture emphasizes personal gain rather than social interest. Capitalist culture or production system provides benefits only to those who have control over the means of production and deprives other communities of it. According to Marx, modern society is divided into two main classes: a class that has control over the means of production and another class that has only its own body and is making a living by selling its labour in the

market (Max & de Leon, 2003). According to the Marxist educational point of view, the kind of inequality seen in education is directly related to class antagonism. But an analysis based solely on the bourgeoisie and the working class, in a way that helps to understand the social tensions of industrial Europe at the time, is just as difficult to understand in modern Nepal. That is to say, the nature of inequality or social tension has to be looked at in social relativity (Kellner, n.d.). For example, in which category should a government official, manager, and professor be placed? Capitalist or labourers? If they are to be placed in the bourgeoisie, they may have no control over any means of production. If they are to be kept in the working class, there is no basis for who is exploiting them. Their income can also be good. They may have a large number of other employees under their control. Their children can study in expensive schools. It is also true that the lowest level employees/office assistants working in their office may have the same social background. Even though their income is low, they may be struggling to make ends meet and send their children to private schools. What is clear is that ideology is for society or human beings, not society or humans for ideologies.

Therefore, no science, especially social science, and the theories based on it can be absolute, but it is relative. Marx formulated the theory of class inequality about one and a half hundred years ago on the basis of the production system of the then European society. Sociologists such as Goldthrop and Marshall (1992) and Wright (1995) defined Marx's theory of class inequality by incorporating some of Weber's views. According to them, even if Marx's view of class inequality is correct, it should also include what is the status of a person in the labour market and what kind of power they have. Education is very unlikely to make a person a capitalist by providing some kind of capital. On the contrary, social class is affected by the position of education that a person acquires on the basis of the educational qualifications they have acquired.

### **Class and Market Conditions**

Due to the rapid development of human beings in the field of science and technology, the shape of the market is also constantly changing. Changing markets demand a variety of capabilities and competencies. Suppose that forty years ago, there was a huge market for "Khukuri" (knife), a domestic product based on traditional skills. "Khukuri" makers had a good income and respect. But nowadays "Khukuri" produced from the factory is selling more. In addition, a person with formal education, even if he/she earns less than a traditional artisan, has a better standard of living in the current social stratification. In this way, education is increasing the productivity of the individual as well as the quality of the product, and the market demand for that product is also increasing. In this context, is it relevant to try to understand class discrimination only on the basis of labour and capital? Both of the above can

also be productive workers. However, their class may be different. Traditional artisan may be working as hard as other educated producers, but the character and demand of the market has changed.

Education, in particular, is helping to provide students with the knowledge and skills that are in demand in the market. If there is a high demand for knowledge and skills of agriculture in society, then education or schools should provide knowledge about agriculture to the students and help in bringing about change in their class status. If the number of people with knowledge of agriculture exceeds the requirement, their demand in the labour market will decrease and their class status will also decrease. Therefore, in order to understand the relationship between education and class in today's society, it is very important to know about Marx's class division (relation to the means of production of the individual) as well as the state of demand and supply in the market.

### **Power, Class and Education**

To understand the relationship between class and education, a detailed study of power can be important. According to Weber, the relation of the class structure may also be due to more or less the acquisition of power. The one who has more wealth also has more power (Giddens, 2012). For example, those who have a lot of money can go to an expensive school, buy a lot of books, and make any effort to get a good education. Those who have less wealth do not get a better education than those who have more wealth. The important thing is that unless the government or any other party provides free education, most people will not be able to get the basic opportunity of education. In particular, the acquisition of power is based on the power of someone else. However, this may not always be the case. For instance, the educated class of the city, especially the high-ranking employees, and the merchants, are gaining strength and the education system is changing according to their needs. On the contrary, the needs of the peasantry and the working class are ignored. Although this may not always be the case in all circumstances, it is always possible to do so.

This means that each person has different preferences. In other words, there is some kind of conflict between people. In the presence of two or more people, there is a possibility of some kind of power struggle. Disagreement is not a new thing but an essential force of life. Some people conclude that dominating other people and forcing them to obey is an important aspect of social life, while others believe that communicating with everyone, treating them equally, and respecting the views of others is the key to maintaining harmony in a diverse society. In a civilized society, there is very little need for control over others. Now the question arises, what needs to be taught to the children - to continue the efforts to climb the ladder of class power? Or crushing others or the weak? Or developing different kinds of ethics and expectations

through education? An important question of morality arises from the social understanding of power if it is natural to want to dominate the people because of the omnipresent virtue of power. Or is it natural to want to treat people with love, equality and equity? Some people seem to be in favor of the first idea, while others are in favor of the second. Human beings are also rational beings. The choice of one or the other depends on the culture in which the person grew up. Both ideas are forms of power but power and influence are different.

Thus, there are different types of power. One style is repressive and the other is acceptable or democratic. Both of these behaviors can be seen in school classrooms. Some teachers are trying to assert their authority over the students through homework while others are trying to gain power through other options including backing. The child thinks that doing homework is the best option.

The difference between the bureaucracy and the charismatic power put forward by Max Weber (Luzker, 1982; William, n.d.) is well known. The production and distribution of the way the current economy is evolving is under the control of the bureaucracy. Be it civil servants or managers in banks and corporations, the special power of the state is vested in them. Therefore, every person tries to gain power through a certain type of bureaucratic position. An important example of this is the willingness to work in the civil service or other institutions, even at a lower level, than to be a top-level teacher in Nepal. The bureaucracy has the right to control others (William, n.d.). But that does not happen in teachers. Weber also discusses charismatic power in which the person has gained power not because of the bureaucratic position but because of the way they treat their colleagues or students. The professional challenge for teachers is that they get the job through the bureaucratic selection process but a good teacher can only be when they show the ability to create charismatic power through teaching. Sadly, our education system and most of the educational institutions are running on the fateful “traditional authority” proposed by Weber.

Normally, teachers do not have the authority to command, control, remove, etc., like the bureaucracy. The teacher only advocates the policy rules prepared by the bureaucracy and reassures the students. In society, the teacher is considered useful but as a helpless creature. The teacher himself/herself considers powerless. Although the work of a teacher is the most important, the teaching profession is not considered attractive in Nepal. In fact, these are misconceptions created by the society and the teachers themselves. Once in a conversation with the author, a secondary school teacher said that if he got any other option, he would give up this teaching job as he did not get any dignity and respect. Nepali society has taken education as a profession for those who have not been able to get a good job. Educated people prefer to enter the lower-level civil service than to be upper-level teachers. Similarly, when



the author saw a teacher entering to civil service resigning a teacher, I asked, “Why did you do so?”, the reply was that there is no attraction in teaching profession and it does not bring any prestige in society. This clarifies how society understands teachers despite the fact that teachers educate their children, and how teachers take it up in the teaching profession.

Ensuring development, pride and progressive change of any country depends on its citizens. Legal authorities, leaders or bureaucrats, whether good or bad, if the people are conscious and aware, the development of society will continue to move forward. According to Nyarere (1966), the role of the teacher is paramount in shaping public opinion more than any other class in society. The teacher works to shape the perception and tendency of the nation. That is the true meaning of burning up of bad psychic imprints. It is not the real power to command or control anyone (Teacher Monthly, 2008). In this sense, the teacher can get the basic power of social change from the qualities like teaching art, scientific thinking, positive thinking towards students, good conduct, studiousness, equal treatment, enthusiasm and so on.

### **Changes in Class Structure and Relationships**

Marx sought to analyze class relations on the basis of the economic structure of Europe at that time. From the middle of the 19th century to the 21st century, the class structure of the world has evolved and changed to a great extent. In many countries of the world, the service sector has become bigger than the manufacturing industry.

In many countries of the world, among other things, the service sector has become larger than production and industry. In Marx’s time, a post like a manager did not even exist, which has become a specialty today. From the middle of the twentieth century, analysts (Guillebaud, 1942) began to say that the management of the world’s power structure was now in the hands of the managers and that they had control over the industry rather than the owners. By saying this, their role may have been given too much attention, but in spite of all this, there is no doubt that this class of manager, who is called to play the role of mediator, is an important product of today’s education system and the previous, plays an important role in the new class structure that came into existence in the century. Because of the way the education system works, it is very closely tied to the class structure. It is built on the basis of class and itself helps in developing class disparity. Once, the basic function of education was to produce a civilized person, and it did not contribute much in making someone too authoritarian or resourceful according to the demand of the market. Today, along with the idea of making a person civilized, education also plays its role in deciding our various class conditions. It becomes part of the class system and cannot be understood as mere intellectual development of the individual.

In today's world, including Nepal, we see the rise of big capitalists and managers as the most powerful class in the class structure. Although small in number, they are greatly influencing political decisions. In the twentieth century, the alliance between industry and the state has grown stronger, and it is impossible for small, medium, and large capitalists to function without the support and protection of the government, despite all the claims of market liberation. Managers want to exploit workers in such a way that they produce goods and services that benefit their employers and increase their own wages. Due to privatization, laws and regulations, protecting workers from exploitation seems to be weakening. Due to the state policies, the number of regular employees has increased insignificantly while the number of irregular and contract workers has increased exponentially. Such individuals are increasingly being controlled by managers and exploited by employers. For example, in Nepal, the state has pursued a policy of privatization in education for the past three decades. Teachers working in private educational institutions are found to be working as bonded laborers for a nominal salary.

Finally, along with the development of education, there has been a change in social thinking and class structure. Knowledge has become the main source of power. Along with wealth, prestige and power, knowledge/education has also become an important element of class inequality. Education is a dynamic aspect and is the most powerful medium to eliminate social inequality. Therefore, equality in education should be sought to reduce the class gap in Nepali society. To maintain equality in education, it is necessary to make structural changes from national policy to classroom teaching and learning.

## **Conclusion**

Education is a dynamic social phenomenon. There is a complex but close relationship between education and society. Education contributes to poverty alleviation by increasing the productivity of the individual, achieving higher rates and controlling and balancing the population. But today a large number of children are working as child labourers. Around the world, about 218 million children between the ages of 5 and 14 are living as child labourers. One out of every four people is living in absolute poverty (Giddens, 2012). It is estimated that there are 263 million children and young people who are out of school globally, and they still face the same and possibly more pressing challenges compared to their peers in formal education (UNESCO, 2017). Various studies have shown that the situation in Nepal is even more critical. According to the recent reports of the Ministry of Education and the university, the learning achievement of various levels of public schools has not exceeded 50 percent and 85 percent of the students in the university have failed. It is certain that this will increase the class gap. This fact explains the situation of inequality.

Different perspectives exist on the basis of class formation in society, justification, class inequality, and its relation to education. Functionalists view society as a whole system and class as a unit of society. According to them, society works by combining different units. Since schools are run at a fixed value, education as a social unit plays an important role in the socialization of children. Therefore, class inequality is a natural process. But every unit has to play its role.

However, Marxists reject the notion that schools and societies have the same culture and social interests. Conflict theories argue that class is determined in society on the basis of wealth, income, and power and that class inequality persists because of its unequal distribution. The education system favors social inequality according to the vested interests of the ruling class. According to Marx, there is a close relationship between the mode of production and education. According to Weber, there is a close relationship between power and education. He recognizes the difference between education as a cultural value and education as a means of seeking power in any society. Not only the curriculum but also the overall knowledge, skills and employers are concerned about class inequality. In this sense, society is class based and also divisive. Education also carries a social character. Therefore, teachers and students go to school with the existing value of the social structure, which is reproduced through education. It perpetuates social inequality through education (Bourdieu, 1986).

There is diversity as well as inequality in society. This is reflected in education as well as in schools. There is a constant conflict between those who want change in education and are accountable to students, and those who cheat students and enjoy the status quo. In order to eliminate educational inequality and increase the power of teachers, a strong effort is needed to eliminate the tendency to rejoice the status quo. It also makes possible a qualitative change in education. Educational inclusion, on the other hand, provides education opportunities. From the opportunity of education, access to power resources of every individual and community is increasing. As a result, income generation will increase and the level of education of every person will increase and inequality will be reduced. But in order to raise the standard of education, it is necessary to increase the quality of education. In order to increase the quality of education, it is necessary to change the existing tendency of teachers. The latest teaching skills such as art, conduct, and professionalism will not only maintain social equality but also bring about a miraculous change in the dignity and power of the teacher himself/herself.

Similarly, education in the broadest sense is any action or experience that has a constructive effect on a person's mind, character or physical abilities. In fact, education is the process by which society consciously transfers its accumulated knowledge, skills, values, and technology from one generation to another. Hence there is a need for equity in education

opportunities, making educational institutions resourceful and teachers knowledgeable, professional, and powerful. In this environment, teachers must direct and facilitate the entire educational system to create a conducive environment that accommodates the smooth teaching and learning process for the overall betterment of the students and society.

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