

The Interplay of Poverty and Literacy: A Case Study of a Woman in Rural Nepal

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Abstract

This article presents on the interplay of poverty and literacy: A case study of a woman in rural Nepal. It follows a qualitative research method and case study design to receive data from a single sample population. The participant was selected purposively. The main purpose of this study was to explore how poverty and literacy have brought metamorphosis in the life of a participant of this study. The site of the study is Palungtar Municipality, 9, Mirkot, Gorkha. Interview and observation were used as tools of the study to obtain data from the participant. Honesty and confidentiality were duly followed during data collection process. Data were analyzed inductively. The study revealed that literacy created awareness and consciousness in the life of a participant. Literacy is the symbol of gradual development for survival and political and social involvement in her life. Literacy teaches her to be independent and it gives rise to her personal growth. It gives influence on involvement, power and position. More importantly, literacy provides her freedom. The study explored that poverty is the hindrance to progress and it teaches her to do struggle and to make progress in her life.

Keywords: Education Learning Literacy Poverty Struggle

Introduction

Background

Education reduces poverty. It is a tool for development. Education brings a quality life in the life of a human being. In this context, Kofi Annan's remark is highly considerable here. "To educate girls is to reduce poverty. Study after study has taught us that there is no tool for development more effective than the education of girls." – Kofi Annan, U.N. Secretary General

Nepal is a country famous for its rugged beauty and deep cultural heritage. But many of the people living among some of the world's most breathtaking mountain ranges struggle with extreme, pervasive poverty. Though there is potential for economic growth and development for Nepalese people,

poverty in Nepal has proven to be a stubborn and significant challenge (Kathmandu Post, April, 2, 2024).

The root causes of poverty can stem from the social norms and traditions of a society, environmental factors and climate change, systemic issues that affect marginalized communities to an unfair degree, and many other issues that can exist in combination. In Nepal, according to the Kathmandu Post (April, 2, 2024), specific factors include: A complicated political landscape with the recent adoption of a new Constitution and multiple federal elections; Natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods and landslides; Inadequate infrastructure in some remote areas which would include sanitation, a widespread electricity grid, and well-maintained roads; Areas of limited access to education and

healthcare; Caste-based discrimination and Gender inequality.

Although Nepal has made considerable strides toward increasing literacy over the past ten years, there is still a sizable gender gap in literacy. In comparison, female literacy is lower in rural, mountainous, and far western areas (Khanal, 2023). It is doubtful why female educational attainment is still lower than male literacy if gender equality actually exist and gender stereotypes no longer apply in our Nepalese culture.

There are 2 secondary schools in this ward and five primary schools. It has some arable land. Majority of people are farmers. Farmers produce different types of foods and sell them in the local market. Transportation facility has just reached through muddy roads. Electricity service has reached in 2061. People are happy now with the services they have got there.

Nepal is a mountainous country. It has hills, plains and valleys. The structure itself of our country is a great hindrance to literacy. Lack of schools is another difficulty for literacy. The rate of literacy has not increased so much. The incidence of literacy has increased from 2048 to 2058 BS. Similar increasing trend is noticed in schooling system. However, if this figure is further disaggregated in terms of social groups based on poverty, the scenario may become completely different. In spite of the efforts made in the past, literacy status has not changed as expected and up to the standard. Many significant changes have been made in this sector but the rate of return is still much lower than expected. At this backdrop, this study explores insights from a single participant on the interplay between literacy and poverty through case study design.

Objective of Study

The objective of the study is to make an in-depth analysis of the poverty and literacy level of a participant of Palungtar, 9 through case study.

To meet this objective, I have selected a case of 'Maili' who belongs to feminine gender and a poor family. Based on the interaction, discussion notes, observation and interview, I have studied her livelihood conditions and gathered her views on literacy and poverty.

Review of Study

Poverty is associated with backward and lower caste, working class and their education. The poor have always been suffering from the problem of basic needs; food, shelter and clothes and have no time to think of their children's education. Such family lack mainstream's cultural capital and thus remains deprived. These families and the community as a whole lack minimum learning materials and environment at home and their children are deprived of well managed schools. They are not in a position to sell their cultural capital. In this context Bourdieu's concept of cultural is affected by cultural deprivation though Bourdieu doesn't accept it. A culturally deprived person is also economically poor or vice versa because they cannot convert their culture into economic capital and thus the capital value of their culture is affected. Children from the poorer and more socially disadvantaged society are more at risk of educational under functioning and there is undoubtedly a link between poverty and educational under functioning and there is undoubtedly a link between poverty and educational attainment (Mittler, 1990). The parents of the poor family inadequately monitor the progress of their children. Children also do not get educational support from their parents instead they have to support their parents for earning their livelihood.

There are different theories of poverty-individualistic, cultural, conflict and social stratification. Theories of poverty may be grouped into two kinds of approaches: 'individual' and 'structural' approaches. The first emphasizes 'the characteristics, attitudes, or behavior of the poor

as the roots of poverty.' Individualist theory, which blames the poor for their laziness as the cause of poverty in them and cultural theories, which claim that the poor develop culture of poverty being isolated, inward-looking and fatalistic; fall under this group. The approach stresses the amount and distribution of economic and social opportunities' external to, and coercive over' individuals and that result partly from political economy (Cotter, 2002, pp. 535-536).

In order to understand the basic causes of poverty one needs to understand the whole structure of the society rather than the narrow limit of individual or from perspective of the culture of any society. As Peter Townsend states, 'the description, analysis and explanation of poverty in any country must proceed within the context of a general theory of stratification (as cited in Haralambos & Heald, 2004, p. 160)'. This theory of stratification argues that in order to understand the poor and poverty the stratification of social system as such should be studied. It is because poor are the lowest part of the stratification systems of any country or region.

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According to Washington (1999), low levels of literacy are linked with lower wages, lower levels of employment and more frequent spells of unemployment, thus contributing to poverty. The education level is one important indicator of poverty. Literacy helps to families by providing opportunities to learn together and by helping to ensure critical early stimulation for the children.

Methods and Materials

The study follows a qualitative research method to collect data. It follows a case study design. The site of the study is Palungtar Municipality, 9, Mirkot, Gorkha. It takes three hours to reach the ward office on foot from the district headquarter. It has about 7000 population. Different castes such as Chhetri, Bramins, Magar, Newar, Tamang and Dasnami live here. Primary source was used to collect data from the purposively selected sample population. Ethical consideration was duly followed during data collection process.

Research methodology is a scientific strategy to find the solution of problem (Kothari, 2004). It helps the researcher to evaluate the result and take rational decision, This study follows a qualitative research method and a case study design. Only one participant was selected purposively from Gorkha district. In-depth interview and observation techniques were followed to collect data. Data were collected from the documents. Methodology consists of three stage-setting statement of purpose, reviewing literature and deciding sample, and analysing and interpreting the information. Methodology is an essential theory that governs how the research should proceed (Cohen, Manion & Morison, 2007).

Case study is a useful design to study the real-life context and examine the specific phenomenon in which one systematically looks at a specific case. To explore perceptions and practices of poverty, literacy and development, I designed this study as a case study to study the case in a natural setting. This study was particularly designed as a single embedded case study design which highlighted the case of 'Maili' at Gorkha.

Interview guides help researcher to focus an interview on the topics at hand without constraining him/her to a particular format. This freedom can help interviewer to tailor questions to the interview

context/situation, and to the people he/she is interviewing.

Since interviews alone cannot reliably present an accurate picture, I collected observation data. As Adler and Adler (1994) suggests, “for as long as people have been interested in studying the social and natural world around them, observation has served as the bedrock source of human knowledge” (p. 377). Like interviews, observation as a data collection technique can be structured or unstructured to varying degrees, with qualitative observations at the more unstructured end of the continuum (Punch, 2009). Qualitative observations tend to be open ended, and actions and events are recorded as they naturally unfold.

Documents are commonly considered as historical records. They can be primary sources of data that include ‘manuscripts ,charters, laws, archives of official minutes or records, files, letters, memoranda, memoirs, biography, official publications, newspapers, magazines, maps, diagrams, catalogues, films, paintings, inscription, recordings, transcriptions, log books and research reports (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007)’. Cohen, Manion and Morrison state that these sources can be the base of the research as the literature. In the research, the literature enables the researchers to carry out a traditional, locate their work in context and learn from previous endeavors. In this research, journal articles, previous researches, newspapers, reference books, online information, etc are the major sources of documentary evidence. This will support the researcher to critically investigate events, developments and experience of the past (Singh, 2006). Singh defines documentary research as historical research that deals with previous experience and aims to justify social problems by discovering event, fact and attitude.

In this study, in addition to the direct observation of the researcher interviews and interactions

were completed with the informant on her views on literacy and poverty. Moreover, analysis was done how literacy has been affecting the living conditions based on her suitable key words, phrases and narrations. The researcher became familiar with her background and thus easily engaged her in an interaction to explore more about her situation. In order to maintain the credibility and trustworthiness of the information, rigorous interactions were done in different settings and basic information was triangulated by crosschecking with her next door neighbor and avoiding inconsistencies.

The study follows case study design to collect and analyze data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The holistic approach in case study refers to an inclusive and comprehensive perspective that considers the interconnections and interdependencies of various social, cultural, and contextual factors when studying a particular phenomenon. It emphasizes understanding the whole system rather than focusing on isolated elements, aiming to capture the complexity and interconnectedness of social phenomena (Bernard, 2017).

The home environment is a complex social system shaped by multiple interrelated factors, including cultural beliefs, values, practices, and social dynamics within the family. To truly understand the influence of family culture on the home environment, it is essential to adopt a holistic approach that considers the interconnectedness of these factors.

Furthermore, a holistic approach allows me to consider the broader socio-cultural context in which the family is situated. Family culture is not formed in isolation but is influenced by societal norms, community dynamics, and historical factors. By taking these contextual factors into account, I can better understand how external influences shape family culture and, subsequently, the home environment.

To support the need for a holistic approach in my research, various scholars have emphasized the importance of understanding the interconnected nature of social phenomena and cultural systems. For instance, Geertz (1973) argues for thick description in case study research, highlighting the need to interpret culture as a whole and examine the intricate connections between cultural elements. By adopting a holistic approach, I can provide a rich and nuanced understanding of the influence of family culture on the home environment, aligning with Geertz's emphasis on thick description.

Results, Interpretation and Discussion

Here, the data from the case study is presented and interpreted. The name of the informant is Maya. Everybody calls her 'Maili' since she is the Maili Chhori of her family. Her parents are farmers. She was born in a poor family. She has one younger and another elder sister and two brothers. Her parents do not have much field to cultivate enough food for their family. Her parents work in rich people's field and run their livelihood with great difficulty. Anyway her parents sent her nearby school which is not that much far. It takes only 20 minutes to reach school from her house. She also helps her parents at home after she comes from school. While asking about her likes she says;

"I like to play volleyball very much. I'm of mild type in my study. I enjoy talking, laughing and telling jokes at her small age. I also help my parents at home and look after my younger sister and brother as well."

From her description, the researcher knew that she is an interesting girl who is helpful and lovely too. She is good at playing games. She is humorous as well because she tells jokes with her friends. Such activities help in the process of socialization. Brown (1998) says socialization is the life-long process of learning the culture of any society. The term 'culture' refers to the language, beliefs, values

and norms, customs, roles, knowledge and skills which combine to make up the way of life of any society. This culture is socially transmitted from one generation to the next. In the same way, while asking about her stay at school, she presents;

When I was 15 years old I studied in class seven. There were 50 students in my class. Among them there were 30 boys and 20 girls. Once there was a volleyball match in my school. I was the captain of our team. The whole school was watching the match. There were some spectators from another village. One of the spectators was very much affected by my beauty, youth and leadership. Our team won the match. I was declared the man of the match. At once, the strange person offered me to marry him. My literate mind was also motivated to marry him. He was handsome too. In this way I could not say no to his offer. There was intense fear in my mind and in his too. Both of us made a quick decision to escape from the village and get married somewhere in the temple. We got married in the temple without inviting anyone. We promised not to deceive one to another. I did not even inform my lovely parents that I eloped with someone from Chitwan. I knew later that my parents wept bitterly in my elopement with that literate boy too. After that I could not continue my study.

From this, the researcher understood that she is really good at playing volleyball. She became the man of the match indicates that she has developed her leadership skills. It is mainly because of this reason; the boy was highly motivated with her and offered to marry. Her beauty and youth has also greatly fascinated the boy. Her quick decision to elope with him suggests that she is gullible. It was a wonderful offer to a literate and poor girl like her. According to Callewaert (1998) children from different social classes arrive at school with capacities and attitudes toward these capacities that are different because of the differences in family education. Similarly, while asking about her new life with a literate boy, she expresses;

He took me where his parents stayed. His mother was very angry when I said your son married me. She did not let me enter inside. The boy trapped me in the room which was outside the house. Tears rolled down my cheeks. I got fainted. There was no one to help me. The boy was very afraid of his mother. My literate mind knew that he was planning to take me to India and sell there. The next day, I reported to the police and telephoned my parents to come to my place. Police and my parents arrived in that house at the same time. The police arrested him and took him to the custody. Later, my literate mind desired to forgive him if he accepted his wrongdoings. He admitted before police that he would not commit any sort of crime upon her. With the sympathy I showed, he got released from there. With this decision my parents were happy.

The researcher knew that her elopement with that boy has turned into sadness when she reaches to his house. He is a criminal and his mother is cruel and inhuman. She really led a difficult, sad and bad life there. The researcher also knew that the girl was sympathetic. Next, while asking what happened after that she says;

My husband gave me immense torture and tension. He left sleeping with me. He started sleeping with his younger brother. My mother-in-law always abused me bitterly without showing any sense of humanity. She told me to jump over Narayani River and die there, poor girl. Really, I was a poor girl from the village. I accepted it before her. Days passed and year passed, I started living with too much trouble. It was at the time of his interest he used to come to me remembering the game I played so nicely while I was at school. I became pregnant. His mother always angrily said that I was a poor girl from the hilly area having no dowry, no money, no land, no power, no position and no prestige. She repeatedly told me to go away from this house soon. That used to be her regular remarks. She did not give me enough food to eat, clothes to wear and money

to buy anything I like. I was very much hated by them. As a result I could not stay there with hungry stomach and angry mind. I returned sadly taking my son to my birth place.

From the above description, the researcher knew that the girl's position was greatly poorer than the position enjoyed by the boy's family. She was very much hated mainly by her poverty. The boy considered her as his special toy for entertainment made her pregnant and damaged her entire life. Then, while asking about her return with her son to her birth-place, she says:

I went to my birth place with my father. I started living with my own parents. With the little money my father earned, he bought a small shop in the rent to sell Tarkari, Chiya, Mithai and Biskut. I learnt simple counting in mathematics, English alphabet and I can read and write Nepali. I started earning some money which hardly supported me and my son. Slowly, my son started growing. I admitted him in the Nursery class when he was four years old. I was not that much able and capable to send him to the Boarding School but the local environment made me send there.

From this, the researcher knew that her father has sentimental love attachment with her daughter. He has opened a small shop for her to run her livelihood at least. She is able to count and can read and write Nepali. After this, while asking about her loneliness and her youth, she says:

I can live alone without him and his mother. I won't go to him. When my son gets bigger, I have a slight hope that he will go to him and ask for land and property. Mainly, I cannot go there because of his mother. I still remember the days she gave me nothing to eat. Her cruel attack upon me is still fresh. My husband never supported me when I had a row with her. Now, I am learning how to live alone without him. But it has been really very difficult to live without husband. A poor literate girl

like me always undergoes lots of problems. In the eyes of other shopkeepers I am always bad even if I speak the right thing. They always look at me with doubtful eyes. People in the society call me 'Ghar Garera Khana Nasakne Manchhe.' These words of them always pinch me a lot. Next-door shopkeeper throws angry words when people come to buy things to me. My literate mind actually gave me torture and tension throughout my life.

From her description, the researcher knew that she underwent lots of problems due to poverty (Brown, 1998). She spent days without eating. She did not get what she likes to wear. Her mother-in-law is very oppressive to her. She attacked upon her with cruel words and actions too. The girl has immensely lamented of her immature decision. Then, asking about her social and political life, she says:

It has been very difficult for me to interact with the people in society. I feel insulted when people call my names unnecessarily. I do not have much time to play politics with people in the society. Sometimes, I feel myself sorry when I cannot manage time for politics. Poor shopkeeper like me is always busy to look at the eyes of customers. My mind always lives with hope that people will come to me to buy things they need.

From the above description, the researcher understands that time does not favor her to interact with the people in society (Brown, 1998). She is greatly insulted by other members in the society. She cannot manage time for politics. She is quite hopeful that customers come to her shop.

Asking about her future life, she says, "I have this son with whom I am fully determined to spend my remaining days. She says, "Mero Karma Ni Yestai Rahichha". I as a researcher, feel very sad and bad listening to her sobbing voice. The situation made me really emotional. Anyway, I controlled it. She has fed up with her life too. Her future life is not good and bright. After this, we took a new turn to our mode of interaction.

After the researcher finished interview and interaction with her, the researcher started observing her. From the close observation, he found that she is doing her business with the literate mind (Washington, 1999). She seems young and lovely. She is of moderate height. She smiles when she deals with anybody. She speaks politely. Her father visits the shop time to time. She plays with her son in her leisure hour. Her face smiles with happiness when people come to buy to her. She speaks happily with her customers. Young boys go to her and take gossip entertainment, play cards, have tea etc.

From the above description, the researcher knew that she handles many techniques to attract the customers for the enhancement of her small business. She provides space for the young people to play cards there in one of the rooms of her shop.

Conclusion

From the above narration, description and interpretation the researcher has made these findings and concluding remarks. Literacy created her awareness and consciousness. With the help of these tools, she has made a survival in her life. She tasted the fruit of struggle. It was a kind of big surprise for her to have a battle with her husband and mother-in-law which she had not thought of earlier that such would happen in her real life. Her consciousness created a small space to run her business. Literacy is the symbol of gradual development. Had she not been literate, she would not have sent her son to boarding school. She knows that education brings changes in the life of anyone. Literacy is the tool for survival. With her literate mind, she opened up a business and ran a small shop. The father helped her a lot in this case. She solved her and son's hand to mouth problem with the help of literacy.

Literacy gives rise to political and social involvement. She shows interest in political and social development. But the problem is that she cannot manage time for that and some people in

the society look at with evil eyes. Literacy teaches her to be independent. She has learnt to stay independent. She does most of the things herself. She runs the shop independently. Literacy gives rise to her personal growth. Even if she does not have her husband, personally she has fought with poverty and shown the signal of smiling in her life. She is gradually developing the deep rooted stages of poverty. Literacy gives influence on involvement. Her involvement in playing games made her really influential. She has grown her leadership skills. Literacy creates power and position. Even if people hate her in the society, she does not mind but she creates her power and position there. Literacy provides her freedom. She is very free to do the things she likes. She has freedom to speak freely. She is frank as well. Poverty is the hindrance to progress. She could not continue her study because of her poverty. It is because of her poor position; she might have eloped with the boy without understanding the detail. Poverty teaches to do struggle. Actually, she made lots of struggle to make her life meaningful and happy.

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