A GEOGRAPHY OF EDUCATION IN NEPAL

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In his book "Nepal: Dimensions of Development" Harka Gurung, one of Nepal's most renowned geographers, introduces the chapter on education by quoting a Chinese proverb:

> If you are planning for a year - sow rice
> for ten years - plant trees
> for a hundred years - educate people.

This ancient wisdom of the importance of "human capital" has been increasingly acknowledged in recent years (see Sen 1998: 19ff), as for instance in UNDP's exercise of compiling a Human Development Index from 1990 onwards, based on the idea that "people are the real wealth of a nation" and that "the basic objective of development is to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, healthy, and creative lives" (ibid. 9-10). They continue to argue that one of the three essential choices is to acquire knowledge, along with leading a long and healthy life and to have access to resources needed for a decent standard of living, as stated in their introduction to the first Human Development Report in 1990. UNDP bases the measurement of knowledge on literacy figures because they reflect "a person's first step in learning and knowledge-building" although it is only "a crude reflection of access to education" (ibid. 12).

These objectives for (human) development have been incorporated into national agendas all over the world. Yet, many so-called developing countries are still struggling with providing basic education to the majority of the population, especially in (remote) rural areas and to socially disadvantaged groups. From this perspective, Nepal is no exception. Today's literacy rates, and rates for school enrolment, and especially the ones for women and girls, are lagging far behind development objectives and compared unfavourably even to neighbouring countries (see also Sen 1998: 21). Thus, it seems to be an interesting exercise to investigate into the history of education in Nepal, into objectives and policies of government regulations, and into regional and gender-based differences in levels of achievements.

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This article concentrates on primary education in Nepal, defined as class one to five since 1980, which is also the main focus of government policies. It analyses secondary data from population censuses (1971, 1991), from UNDP's recent Human Development Report for Nepal (1998), and from the Ministry of Education (for 1976/77, 1991, 1995, and 1996) on literacy and enrolment rates of boys and girls in several types of schools and in different classes for the 75 districts. A comparison of these data for different years allows for an interpretation of achievements and trends. In addition to this focus on primary education this article also includes a short glance at secondary education (classes 5-10) and at school leaving certificate (taken at the end of class 10), which is the only source available for data on achievements in examinations. All these analyses have to rely on the quality of the data, which has been questioned even by the Census Bureau itself (HMG/NPC/CBS 1987a: 127; see also UNDP/ NESAC 1998: 76) and which, of course, cannot be guaranteed by the author. Yet, these are the frequently quoted and standard sources and, besides, for a district-level analysis consistency is likely to be given.

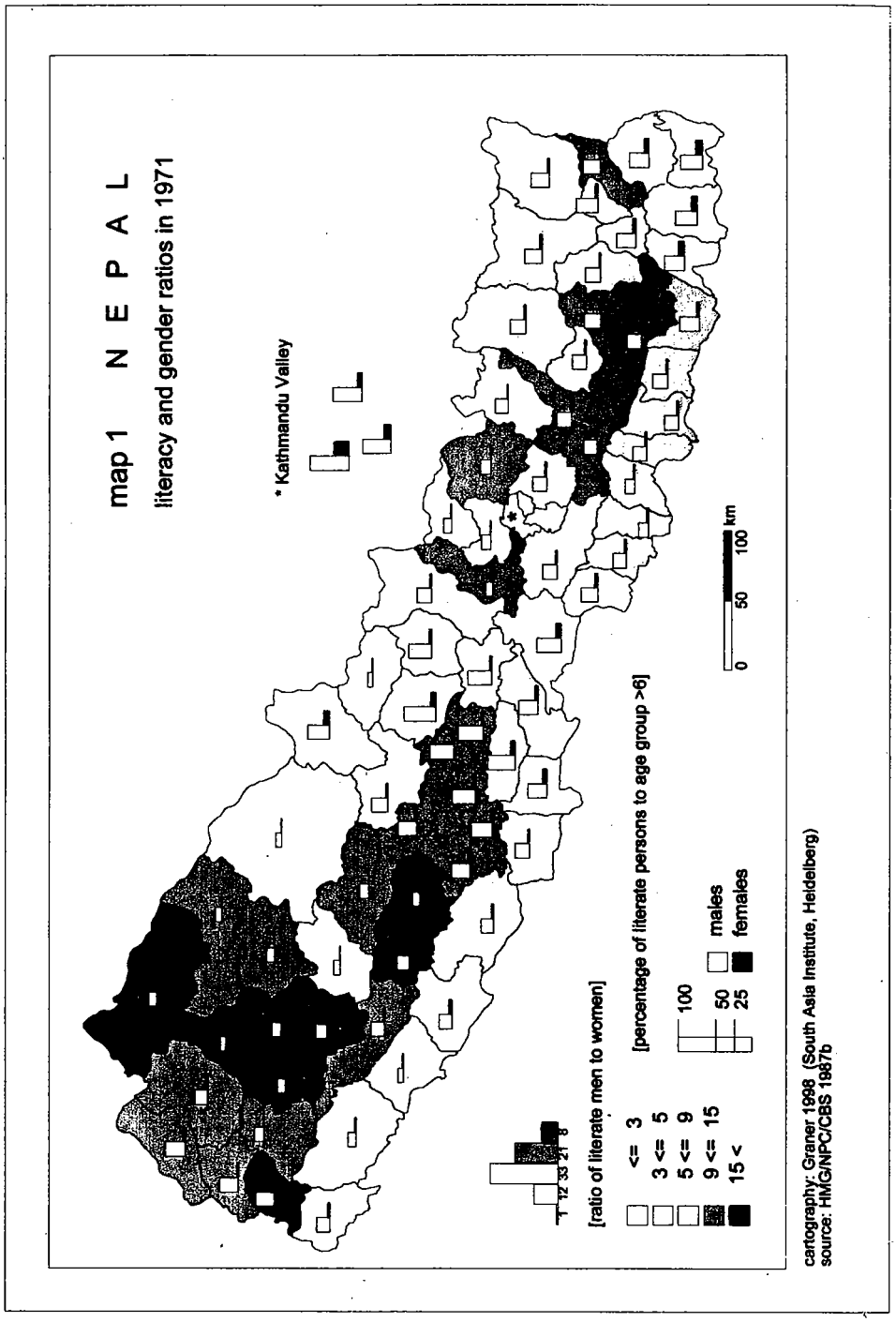
Education in the Past–a long way to go

Education in Nepal has a surprisingly brief history. The first school was established only in 1859 and, above all, access was restricted to members of Rana families. By 1951, for the vast majority of about 8 million Nepalese people there were only 321 primary schools, attended by about 8,500 students, as pointed out by Shrestha (1989:82). Thus, it was not surprising that the first census (1952/54) reported the literacy rate to be 5.3%, and whereas the rate was 9.5% for men it was merely 0.7% for women, resulting in a gender ratio (female to male) of almost 1:14 (HMG/NPC/CBS 1987a:128). During the intercensual period (until 1961) the literacy rate rose to 8.9% while it more than doubled for women (1961:1.8%). At the same time, an analysis of rural - urban differences, as documented in HMG's Population Monograph of 1987, reveals that literacy until 1961 had remained a predominantly "urban" achievement. Literacy rates in urban areas were 19.5% for women and 57.5% for men, yet this was in contrast to a vast majority of rural population where rates were as low as 1.1% for women and 14.6% for men. Thus, gender disparities for literacy were moderate (below 1:3) in urban areas whereas they were extremely high (1:13) in rural areas (ibid. 129). Similarly, ratios of rural to urban literacy were at 1:3 for men but 1:19 for women.

A similar picture is still evident from data provided by the 1971 Census, when literacy rates in the 75 districts ranged from 4.2 to 37.5% and were at

an average of 12.6% (3.4% for women and 21.9% for men). A slightly lower median (11.7%) indicates that in half of all districts rates were still low and in more than 30 districts - scattered all over the country - rates were even below 10%. Yet, an analysis based not on district rates but on total population figures reveals that the literacy rate is significantly higher at 18.4% (5.3% for women and 31.4% for men), indicating that literacy rates are low in scarcely populated districts whereas they are (much) higher in densely populated, urban districts, a phenomenon which is also apparent for both male and female literacy rates. For men literacy rates were below 10% in only 7 districts but above 25% in a total of 26 districts, including the three of the Kathmandu valley and Kaski, were rates ranged between 39 and a maximum of 53.8% for Kathmandu.

An analysis of female literacy rates conveys a fairly gloomy picture (see Map 1). The rate of literacy was below 5% in 62 of 75 districts, below 3 % in 45 districts, and still below 2% in 29 districts. Rates below 1% were encountered in a total of 11 districts, among them the (now far) western mountain districts (Humla, Jumla, Mugu) and hill districts, but also in Rolpa and (central) Dhading district. Similarly, rates below 2% existed in a variety of locations, including hill and mountain districts of the central region (Sindhupalchok, Rasuwa; Nuwakot, Ramechhap). On the other hand, only in Kathmandu and Patan rates were 24.6 and 10.4%, respectively. These highly disparate literacy rates lead to extremely unfavourable gender ratios in all districts (see Map 1). Only one (or less) out of ten literate persons was a woman (ratio of 1:9) in almost half of the country (29 districts), located mainly in (far) western Nepal but similar ratios are also evident in hill and mountain districts of the central region (Dhading, Ramechhap, Sindhupalchok) and eastern Terai (Udaypur). Above all, in 8 districts, even less than one out of fifteen literate persons was a woman. Ratios were most favourable in Kathmandu (1:2.5) but also below 1:5 in 12 other districts, including Lalitpur (Patan), eastern Terai (Jhapa, Morang, Sunsari), eastern hill (Ilam), and Mustang.


map 1 N E P A L
literacy and gender ratios in 1971
* Kathmandu Valley
[ratio of literate men to women]
<= 3
3 <= 5
5 <= 9
9 <= 15
15 <
[percentage of literate persons to age group >6]
100
50
25
males
females
0
50
100
km
cartography: Graner 1998 (South Asia Institute, Heidelberg)
source: HMG/NPC/CBS 1987b

Promoting Education–early government approaches

An early approach at addressing the education of the (wider) population dates back to the interim phase of democratic government following the abolition of the Rana regime in the 1950s, when in 1954 a National Education Planning Commission was set up. A wider policy was designed in 1971 when education was the focus of the "National Education Systems Plan", following the guidelines of the National Education Advisory Board set up in 1968. This Plan organised education into three different levels (primary, secondary, and higher education). The objective of primary education (class 1-3) was to achieve proficiency in "the three R's" (i.e. reading, (w)riting, and (a)rithmetic). Lower secondary education (class 4-7) aimed at improving this proficiency but also at exposing the students to work situations by including pre-vocational training into the curriculum whereas upper secondary education (class 8-10) was subdivided into three streams, namely general, Sanskrit, and vocational, the latter being a compulsory component of all streams. Finally, higher education was to supply the country with her manpower needs in order to improve development (HMG/NECO 1972: 36ff).

Education was again the main focus of development policies when His Majesy King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev enthroned in 1975 and commanded his government to make primary education free of cost and accessible to every child, whether boy or girl, as stated in the coronation speech, because "education ... constitutes the mainspring of development" (quoted in Shrestha 1988: i). Government initiatives aimed at increasing literacy and school enrolment were characterised by a strong focus on physical infrastructure as school buildings and employment of teachers and thus the 1970s witnessed an "enormous increase in schools, students, and teachers" (HMG/NPC/CBS 1987b:283). Accordingly, the number of primary schools increased by almost 40% within this decade (see Table 1).

Table 1: Numbers of schools and students for 1970 - 1979/80

	1970	1976/77	1979/80		1970	1976/77	1979/80
	number of schools				number of students		
Total		12.019	13.631			1.077.843	1.580.346
Primary (class 1-3)	7.256	9.067	10.130		449.141	769.046	1.067.912
Tower secondary (4-7)		2.400	3.501			226.639	391.427
Secondary (8-10)		552	785			82.158	121.007

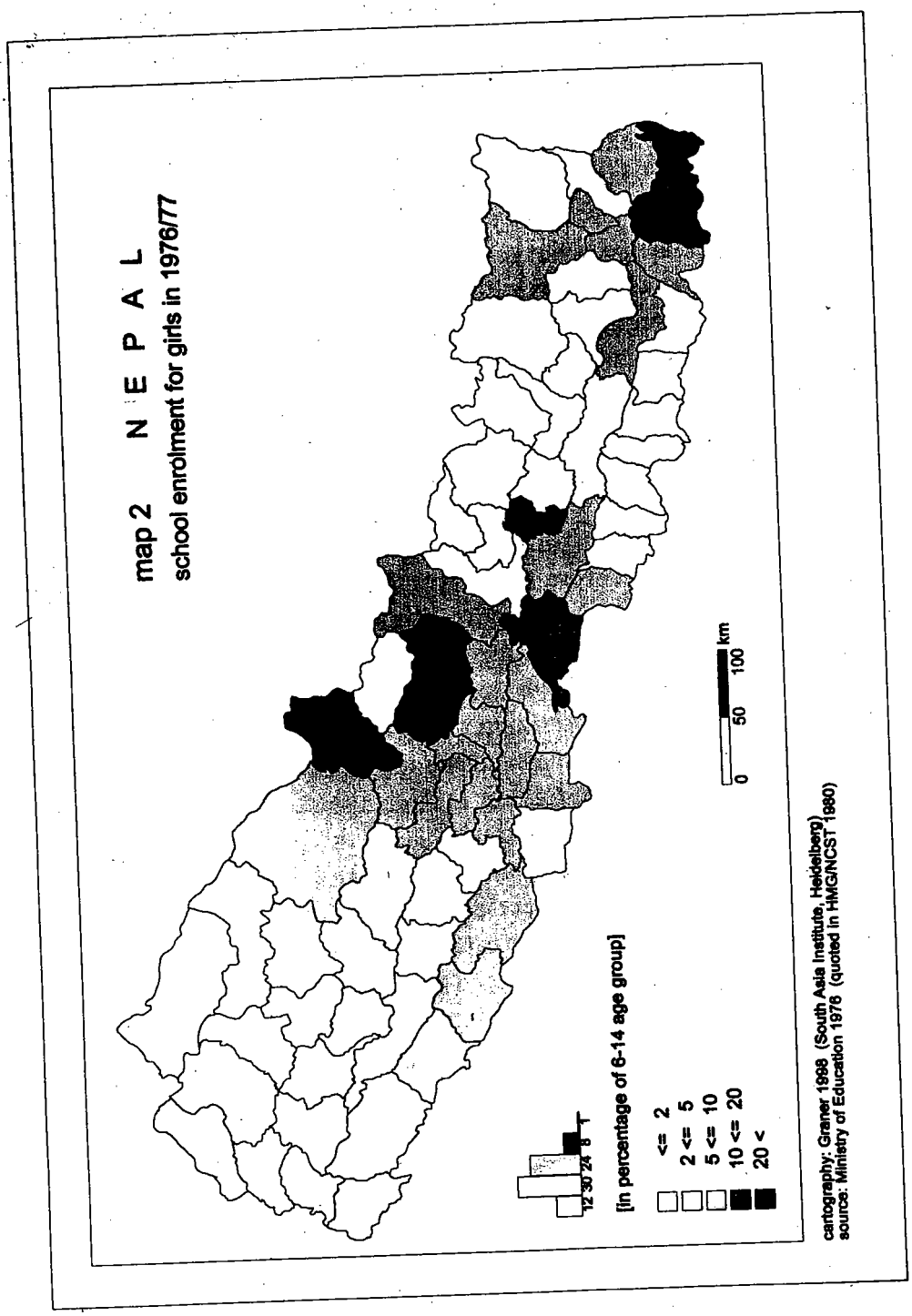
Sources: Shrestha 1988: 97; HMG/NPC/CBSb 1987: 283ff

At the same time, the number of primary students increased even more rapidly (see Table 1), i.e. 71.2% between 1970 and 1976/77 and another 38.9% by 1979/80. In spite of these enormous growth rates enrolment rates (in relation to the 6-15 age group) were still extremely low in most

districts, as documented in an atlas published by HMG/NCST (1980). In 1976/77 overall enrolment rates ranged from 5.7% in Kalikot district to 76.1% in Kathmandu district, and the national average was 32%. Yet, in only six districts rates were above 50% (all three districts of the Kathmandu Valley, Chitwan, Kaski, and Jhapa) but in more than half of all districts rates were below 30%, 14 among these below 20%, including (mid) western hill and central mountain, hill and Terai districts (HMG/NCST 1980: 96ff). Enrolment rates were most favourable in the western region and in the far western and eastern Terai but low in almost all districts of the central region, with the sole exception of the districts located within the Kathmandu Valley. Above all, enrolment rates were still characterised by high gender disparities. Whereas HMG/NCST provides a database which calculated girl enrolment as a percentage of total enrolment (ranging from 2.9 - 35.9%; ibid.: 98) these figures of double-percentages are misleading and need to be disaggregated by directly relating girl enrolment to the respective age group. Thus, figures drastically decrease and the district average is 5.6%, ranging from 0.32% in Kalikot to 27.4% in Kathmandu (see map 2). The median is even lower (3.9%) and indicates high regional disparities. Only in 9 districts rates are higher than 10%, opposed by a majority of districts (42) where rates are below 5%, in 12 districts even below 2%.

Although these figures are already dramatically low actual numbers may even lag behind. HMG/NCST (1980) mentions that the data provide only a rough approximation, as information on demography is based on the 1971 Census whereas enrolment rates are based on 1976 data (ibid.: 96) which therefore gives rise to distortions due to population growth. Besides, enrolment rates are related to the age group of 6-15-year olds and thus do not account for both under- and over-aged students, who in absence of compulsory school attendance are likely to contribute (substantially) to the student population and who cause gross and net enrolment rates to differ significantly.' This point shall be further elaborated by giving a short, fictitious example. In a village where there are 100 children, 50 girls and 50 boys of (primary) school age and 100 children who attend (primary) school, the enrolment rate, at first sight, seems to be 100%. Yet these 100 school children could be composed of 65 boys, where only 40 boys belong to the respective age group whereas 5 are under-aged and 20 over-aged, with possibly 10 repeaters. Similarly, out of 35 girls, only 25 may belong to the respective age group and the others may also be under-and over-aged children. Thus, actual net enrolment rates are only 80% for boys and 50% for girls, and rates are, above all, likely to decrease during the course of the year because school enrolment numbers always refer to the student population as registered at the beginning of the respective year, which is often not the same as the numbers at the end of the year. These reservations have to be kept in mind when discussing enrolment rates, which certainly

are an important variable in assessing achievements in (primary) education, yet one which needs to be interpreted most carefully due to its low precision.



"Basic Needs Fulfilment Programme" - universal primary education by 2000

In spite of a government focus to widen and to improve primary education, its quality was lagging behind, as admitted in a government publication: "experience up to 1979/80 indicated that the grade 3 completers were virtually semi-literate" (ibid. 283). One immediate reaction in order to counteract this shortcoming was to extend primary education to class 1-5 from 1980 onwards. A new attack at improving educational standards was undertaken in 1985, at the occasion of the Silver Jubilee of the Panchayat System, when HMG launched its "Basis Needs Fulfilment Programme" aimed at reducing poverty by the year 2000. This programme addresses five quantifiable indicators, i.e. food, clothing, housing, education, health, and adds the qualitative category "security". The programme sets the target that literacy is to be raised from 29.9% to 39.9% and that primary school enrolment is to be made universal, increasing from 82.78 % of the 6-10 age group (1984/85) to 87% (1990), 95% (1995) and finally 100% by the year 2000, when a total number of 2,928,984 primary school children is projected (HMG/NPC 1987: 27ff).

Policies aimed at achieving these targets focus mainly on infrastructure and teachers, as is evident from a list of a total of 13 policy issues. Thus, student teacher ratios are to be improved (i), physical facilities of schools are to be improved (ii), regulations for teachers' careers are to be made (iii), (better) training is to be provided to teachers (iv), selection of teachers is to be improved (v), and inspection of schools is made compulsory (vi). On the other hand, only a few policies address the students at all. The first one mentioned, besides the student teacher ratio, is the need to reduce drop out rates of children (vii). This most critical issue is dealt with by proposing to make textbooks more interesting and simple and to make them "more relevant to their local environment and experience" (ibid. 29). Further policies addressing students are the establishment of pre-primary schools also (vii), minimising distances between schools and settlements (ix), and thus also allowing for small schools (viii), and flexibility of school hours for children who are involved in income-generating activities (x). One of the last policies (xi) mentions the need for increasing girl enrolment, by awarding schools with high girl enrolment, awarding scholarships and "programmes for encouraging parents to send their daughters to schools" (ibid.). In order to fund these various policies, education is provided with 14.5 % of the overall budget of BNFP (113 of 782 million NRs. at 1984/85 costs), which gives top priority and funding to food (59.4%), followed, at a distance, by education, and housing (12.7%).

The policies included in the BNFP follow the line of the previous Five-Year-Plan, which all state some rather ambitious objectives and only a few (minor) obstacles to be overcome. On the other hand, a much more critical assessment on primary education was written by Shrestha (1988), who (also) states that "investment in primary education [y]ields the highest rate of return [...]" but who, at the same time, critically assumes that "planners in Nepal do not seem to understand this basic formula of development" (ibid. 94). He continues to argue that too little of the national budget is spent on education, and even within education too little is being spent on primary education whereas the lion's share is given to "a few privileged students" in campuses and universities, an "undemocratic act" and a basic flaw in the conception of primary education which needs to be changed before launching any programme of universal primary education.

Shrestha also takes a critical look at statistical data and rhetorically asks whether "the statistics tell the real story of primary education" (ibid. 86). Whereas in his introduction he quotes the commonly given figures, stating that primary education is almost accessible to all primary school children in Nepal (85%) and calls this a "miraculous success" (ibid. ii) he later on modifies this number by pointing out that due to both underaged and overaged children the net enrolment rate (1985) is about 57% but only 29% for girls (ibid. 97). Analysing the national context, he also points out a shortage of studies, statistics, and surveys, concluding that "even bare minimum data are not available" (ibid. 87). Discussing the universalisation of primary education (i.e. the BNFP), he mentions "attendance and completion" and quotes figures provided by the Ministry of Education (for 1978-82) which quantify drop-outs within primary education at about 50% within the first two years and at about 75% within the first five years, which Shrestha calls "startling and highly discouraging" (ibid. 89). Interestingly, this issue has also been mentioned in the BNFP-document, yet confined to a footnote (HMG/NPC 1987: 27).

Analysing determinants of participation in rural areas, Shrestha quotes a CERID (Centre for Research in Education and Development) study which identifies need for household work (for 75% of all students), nutritional standards (45%), and, especially for girls, distance to schools (not quantified in the study), as most crucial (ibid. 90). The important role of nutrition is also emphasised in a recent study from Southern India, as documented in Subramaniam's article on "Barefoot teachers, Brave new methods" (1997:23). Shrestha sums up the existing weaknesses and the "bottlenecks" for quantitative and qualitative development of primary education as follows (ibid. 90ff). Primary schools do not operate as scheduled and planned, a "lethargy" with causes which are "not as simple as assumed". Secondly,

resource constraints are prominent, as for instance the fact that 90% of the government budget is spent on the salaries of primary teachers, "leaving virtually nothing for development activities" (ibid.). Yet, at the same time, wastage takes place by distributing textbooks for simple usage or by operating schools which are "not economically feasible" (ibid.). Another point from Shrestha´s analysis is the low success in encouraging girls to participate in education, in spite of various projects. He thus raises the question whether possibly wrong assumptions have been made, as for instance for causes of non-enrolment, and argues for the need for "proper diagnosis" (ibid.).

Shrestha´s suggestions for improving the quality of primary education are laid down in five ideas: i) the concept of primary education as strict attendance of formal schools should at least be partially abandoned, especially in sparsely populated remote hill (and mountain) areas; ii) multigrade teaching and the combination of grades (as for instance in China) rationalise the use of facilities and should be adopted in Nepal; iii) government should only be responsible for the "average people" who need free education, whereas those who can pay for it should send their children to private schools; iv) the role of non-formal education should be increased, allowing for a much greater flexibility of schooling time; v) teacher training needs to be reformed, possibly by carrying out short-term in-service training (ibid. 93ff).

Shrestha's study is a fairly sobering analysis of conditions in primary education in Nepal during the 1980s, pointing out "the big gap between national aspirations and actual reality" (ibid. 82). Written at a time when free primary education had been implemented for about twelve years, it points out the limited success and crucial bottlenecks of previous policies and thus stands in sharp contrast to optimistic statements given in (other) government documents. From this point of view, chances for a successful promotion of (primary) education under a new strategy, such as "Basic Needs Fulfilment Programme", but within a similar time framework (1987 - 2000) seem not too favourable. Yet, his study is also characterised by some degree of ambivalence, if not contradiction, as his final conclusion states that "one can be very optimistic in achieving this goal [i.e. universal primary education within the turn of this century]" (ibid. 144) whereas he also predicts that "one can safely conclude that it will take generations to bring all girls to school" (ibid. 91). Obstacles are twofold. One is grounded in Nepalese society itself, as many families are not willing to pay the opportunity costs of sending children, especially girls, to school. But a second, and possibly more severe obstacle is grounded in the low quality of education, "hardly fifty percent of the expected education is provided by

these schools" (ibid. 82). Thus, it is Shrestha's conclusion that "the system itself needs to increase the efficiency on a priority basis before any step is taken for quantitative growth" (ibid. 90-91).

Education in the 1990s–universal for boys and girls?

By 1991 average literacy rates in the 75 districts have increased to 38.5%, ranging from 19.2% (Humla) to 69.6% (Kathmandu district). Based on population data, rates are at 53.3% even higher (33.9% for women and 72.6% for men), a phenomenon even more pronounced than in 1970s. Thus, the target set in the Basic Needs Fulfilment Programme (39.9%) has already been achieved, even within a much shorter period of time. On the other hand, regional and gender disparities are still pronounced. Rates for female literacy range from 4.6% (Humla) to 60.2% (Sunsari) and the difference between district average (23.1%) and median (21.5%) indicates the prevalence of regional inequalities which have ceased to exist for male rates, where the average is 53.4% and the median 53.8%. Gender ratios have decreased in many districts and are below 1:2 in 20 districts (1981: 3 districts), occurring in the Kathmandu valley and in most districts in the western region and in the southern part of the eastern region. Ratios have also decreased substantially in most districts of the central region (except for Ramechhap and Bara) where they are 1:3. Yet, simultaneously ratios have again increased in some districts in the far and mid-western region, indicating that access to education is still being provided to boys rather than to girls. Whereas in 1981 the ratio was higher than 1:5 in only 3 districts (Humla, Mugu, Rukum), this high ratio is again encountered in 6 districts in 1991.

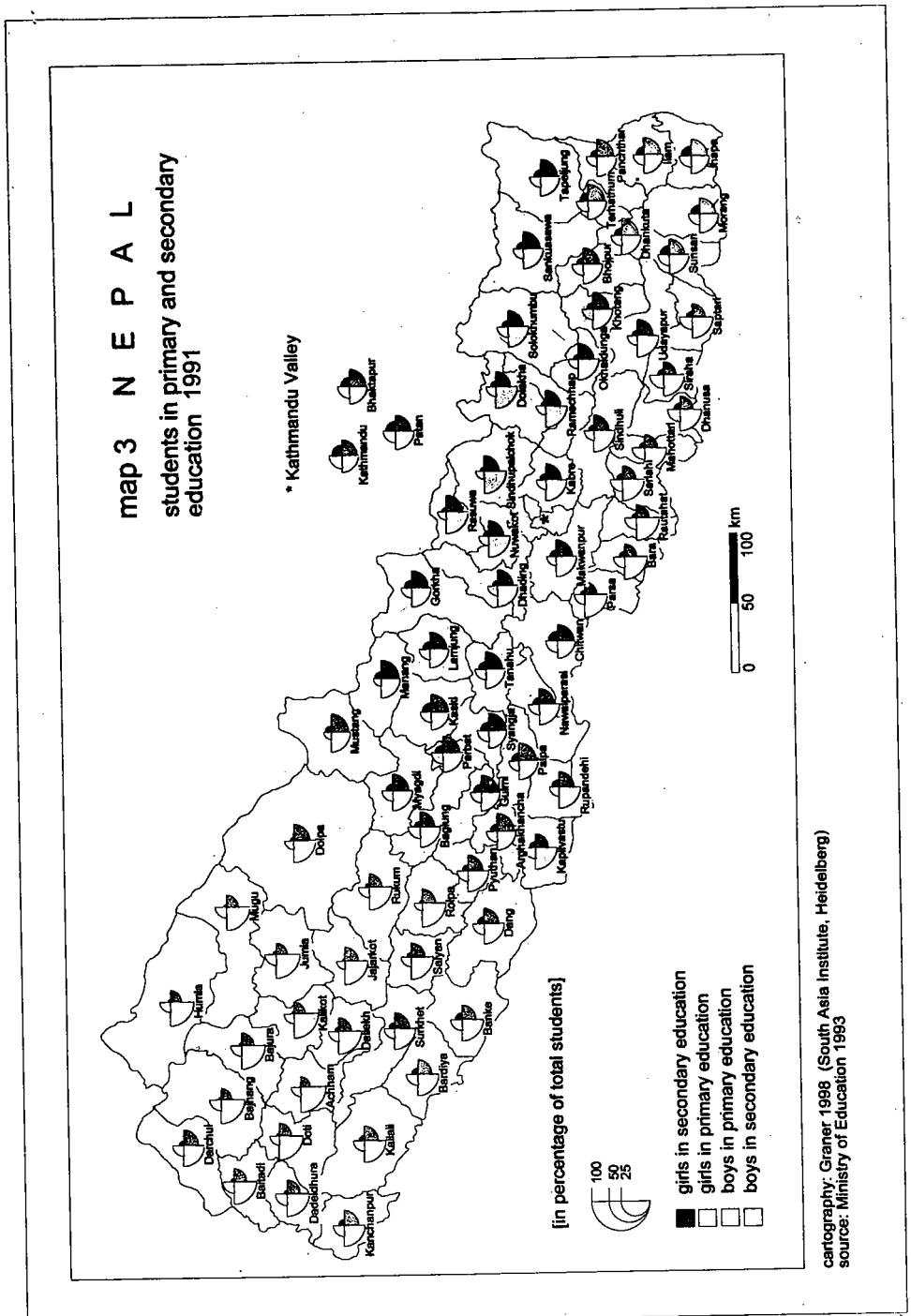
In terms of enrolment of students, their total number has again more than doubled during the 1980s, from 1.7 million in 1980/81 to 2.3 million (1984/85) and to 3.6 million by 1991. Gross enrolment indicates that rates are highest in the Kathmandu valley but are also high in the western region and in some districts of the eastern region. A more detailed analysis of enrolment in primary and secondary schools and of gender disparities in enrolment (see Map 3) reveals two marked differences between enrolment in the Kathmandu valley and elsewhere in the country. Firstly, in the Kathmandu valley the number of girls is only slightly lower than the number of boys (ratio 1:1.2 for primary and 1.4 for secondary schools). Gender ratios for primary education are also comparatively low (1:1.5) for most western and eastern districts, as well as in the Kathmandu valley and in Makwanpur district, and indicate that primary education has also become generally accessible for girls by 1991. Yet, in all other districts of the central region ratios are above 1:2 and even above 1:3 in the Terai districts of Parsa and Bara. Ratios are again least favourable in the far and mid-

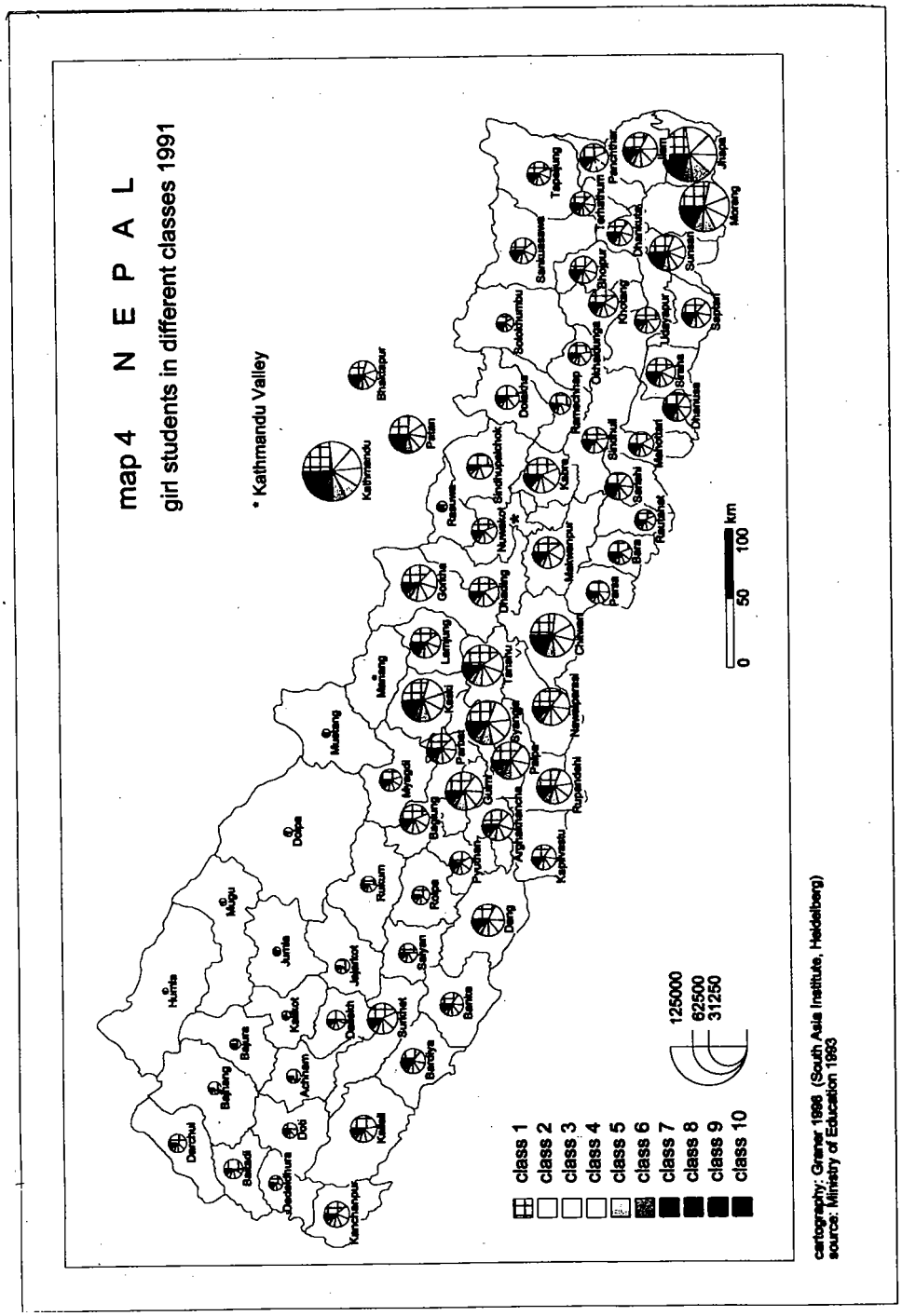
western regions where in 5 districts only one out of five primary school children is a girl (ratio 1:4).

Secondly, the decline between enrolment in primary and secondary education is far less pronounced in Kathmandu, where 65.3% of all children enrolled are enrolled in primary schools (67.6% among girls and 63.4% boys). Similar rates are only encountered in the western region, whereas at a district average out of all students enrolled as many as 81.2% are to be found in primary and only 18.8% in secondary education. For girls, percentages of more than 90% are encountered in almost a third of all districts, mainly in mid and far western Nepal but also in many districts scattered all over the country and reach a maximum of 97% in Acham, indicating that secondary education for girls is virtually non-existent. Enrolment numbers of boys in secondary education are also much lower than the ones in primary education but they decrease less dramatically, causing gender ratios for secondary education to decrease significantly and to be much less promising than the ones for primary education. For lower secondary education (class 6-8) gender ratios below 1:1.5 only exist for a total of 8 districts (such as Kathmandu, Patan, Jhapa, Chitwan, and Kaski). At the same time, ratios are above 1:4 in several Terai districts of the central region and in most districts in the far and mid west where ratios are even above 1:10 in 8 districts. Gender ratios for higher secondary education (class 9-10) confirm this tendency of less favourable ratios in secondary education. Low ratios (1:1.5) are only encountered in the four districts Kathmandu, Jhapa, Sunsari and Kaski and only 7 other districts of the Kathmandu Valley and the western region have ratios below 1:2. Again, most districts of far and mid western regions have ratios of less than 1:4 and even 1:10.

This composition of primary and secondary students is too pronounced to be explained solely by demographic data, i.e. a higher number of boys than girls (for this phenomenon see Seddon 1998) or a higher number of boys and girls in the 6-10 age group as compared to the 11-15 age group. The composition could be interpreted as an indicator for a successful campaign of promoting primary education, yet without the students continuing to secondary education, i.e. low transition quotas. Similarly, it could also be interpreted as an indicator for a successful promotion of education within the most recent past which has raised enrolment in primary education but which has not yet had an impact upon secondary education. On the other hand, this composition could also be interpreted as an indicator for extremely high drop-out rates within primary education, possibly even within the first one or two years, i.e. low "school survival rates". Thus, in order to gain a better and more detail understanding of primary education a class-level analysis of school enrolment for 1991 is carried out which reveals a most peculiar structure. Within primary education the number of class 1 students is disproportionally high in (almost) all districts and

accounts for 31.3% (Jhapa) to 60.1% (Humla) of all primary students and in half of all districts even for more than 50% and up to 78.8% (Mugu) of primary girl students (see Map 4). Seen in relation to the total student population (primary and secondary) class 1 students account for "only" 21% in Kathmandu but for 51.5% in Humla. Similarly, girl students in class 1 account for more than half of all girl students in almost one third of all districts (21), even in the eastern and central hills, the central Terai and in most districts of the mid and far western region, and reach a maximum of 75% in Mugu.




map 4 N E P A L
girl students in different classes 1991
* Kathmandu Valley
class 1
class 2
class 3
class 4
class 5
class 6
class 7
class 8
class 9
class 10
125000
62500
31250
0
50
100
km
cartography: Graner 1998 (South Asia Institute, Heidelberg)
source: Ministry of Education 1993

This peculiar structure does still not fully answer the question how to interpret these highly concentrated enrolment figures. A better understanding can be gained from analysing successive years, as for instance enrolment figures for class 1 in 1991 and class 5 in 1995, when the class 1 students from 1991 are expected to complete their primary education. These figures reveal that "school survival rates" are extremely low, ranging from 56.4% of the numbers of class 1 students of 1991 in Kathmandu to 11% in Mustang, at a district average of 28.2%. The median of 27.4% indicates that in half of all districts student enrolment in class 5 decreases to almost one forth within primary education, in 16 districts among these to one fifth, or even less. Rates for girls are even lower in 1995 less than one fifth of class 1 students of 1991 were enrolled in class 5 in 23 districts, and less than one tenth in 11 districts, as for instance in Humla (3.5%) and Mugu (3.9%) (see Map 5).

Statistically, it is not possible to distinguish how many of these class 5 students have really started their primary education in 1991, as repeaters from earlier years may possibly contribute (substantially ?) to the student population of a certain year and class. Similarly, it is not possible to quantify the number of students who continue their (primary) education in other parts of the country. Thus, these figures only give gross retention rates but, nevertheless, they indicate that drop-out rates within primary education are pronounced and that there are only a few districts where rates are low, opposed to a majority of districts where drop-out rates are (extremely) high. Further evidence for these high drop-out rates is also provided by a study carried out in 1993/94, based on a sample of almost 30,000 students from 21 of the 25 districts where (then) the Basic and Primary Education Project (BPEP) was implemented, which quantifies drop-out rates within primary education at 69.4% (HMG/MOE 1995: 20). Similarly, UNDP/NESAC quotes a MOE document from 1995 which quantifies the drop-out rate in the first grade at 21% and the repetition rate at 42% whereas only 38% of the students are promoted to class 2. The number of students who successfully complete primary education is quantified at 37%, and only 10% are expected to complete primary education without repeating any class (ibid. 78).

Between 1991 and 1995 the total number of students has again increased by 24.9%, the number of girl students even by 39.4% and the number of primary students is higher than the one projected for 2000. Enrolment of students in class 1 has increased less (14.2% for all students and 20.3% for girls) on a national level (see Table 2). Yet, there are some regional disparities which are difficult to interpret. High increases have occurred in Kathmandu (42.6%) and have to be attributed to population increases due to migration and/or "education drain" to the high-standard (private) schools which have mushroomed in the Kathmandu valley during the last decade. Similarly, numbers of students in class 1 have also increased by more than 10% in one third of all districts, many of them located in the eastern Terai,

such as Sunsari (22.4%), Jhapa (11.9%), and Morang (10.2%), and in the mid and far western Terai, such as Banke (12.7%), Bardiya (20.3%), and, most significantly, Kanchanpur (33.1%). Simultaneously, some districts have experienced decreases of class 1 students, a phenomenon which can possibly, but perhaps not exclusively, be attributed to out-migration (and/or education drain) from the respective districts (as for instance Mustang, and possibly also Okaldunga, Gorkha and Kaski).

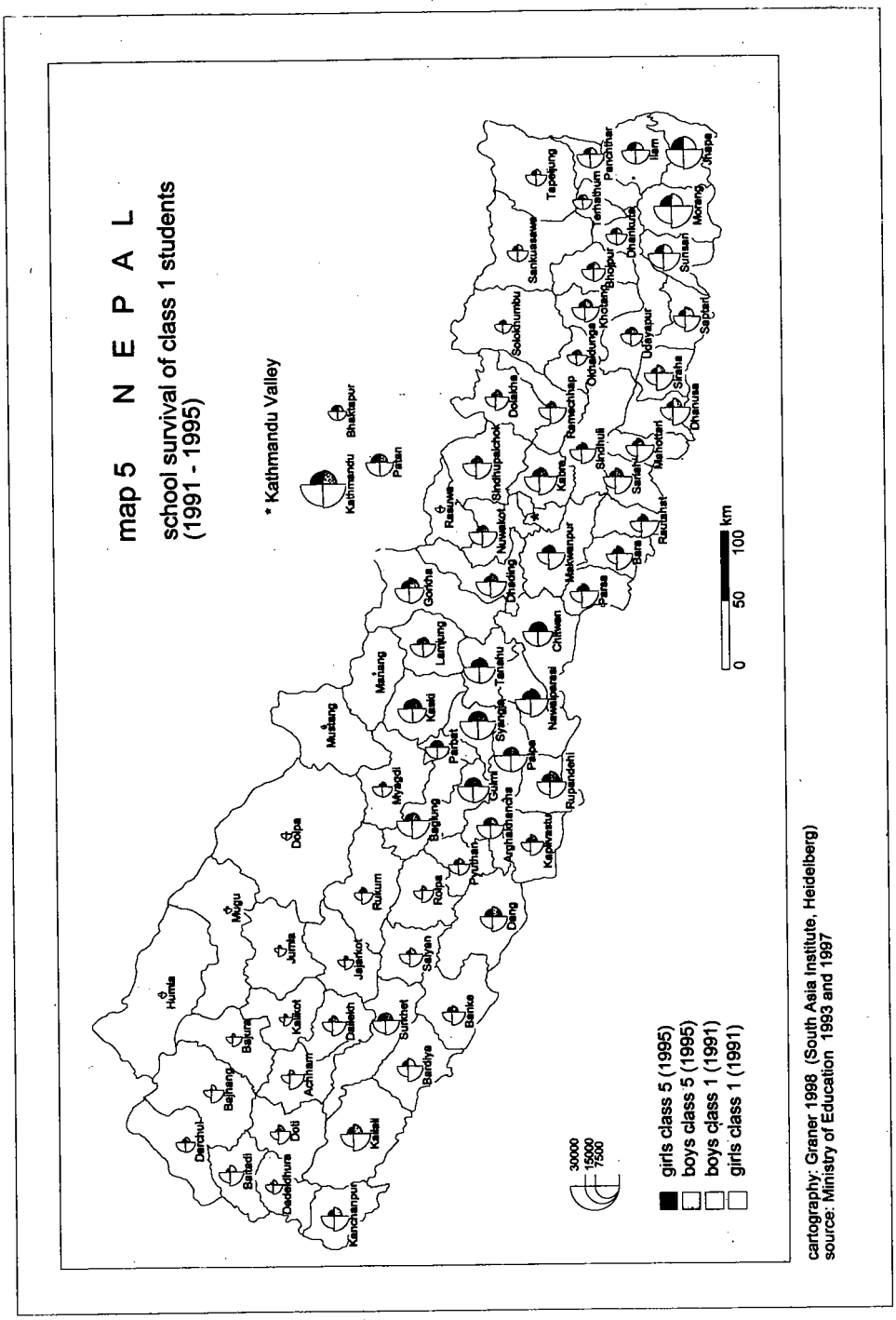


Table 2: Numbers of students and girl students for 1991 - 1996

	1991	1995	1996	1991	1995	1996
	number of total students			number of girl students		
Total	3,658,083	4,281,193	4,568,942	1,306,061	1,667,797	1,821,255
Primary (class 1-5)	2,884,275	3,235,535	3,447,607	1,073,319	1,301,640	1,401,346
Class 1 only	1,239,578	1,322,659	1,415,612	484,434	535,994	582,877
Secondary (6-10)	773,808	1,045,658	1,121,335	232,742	366,157	419,909

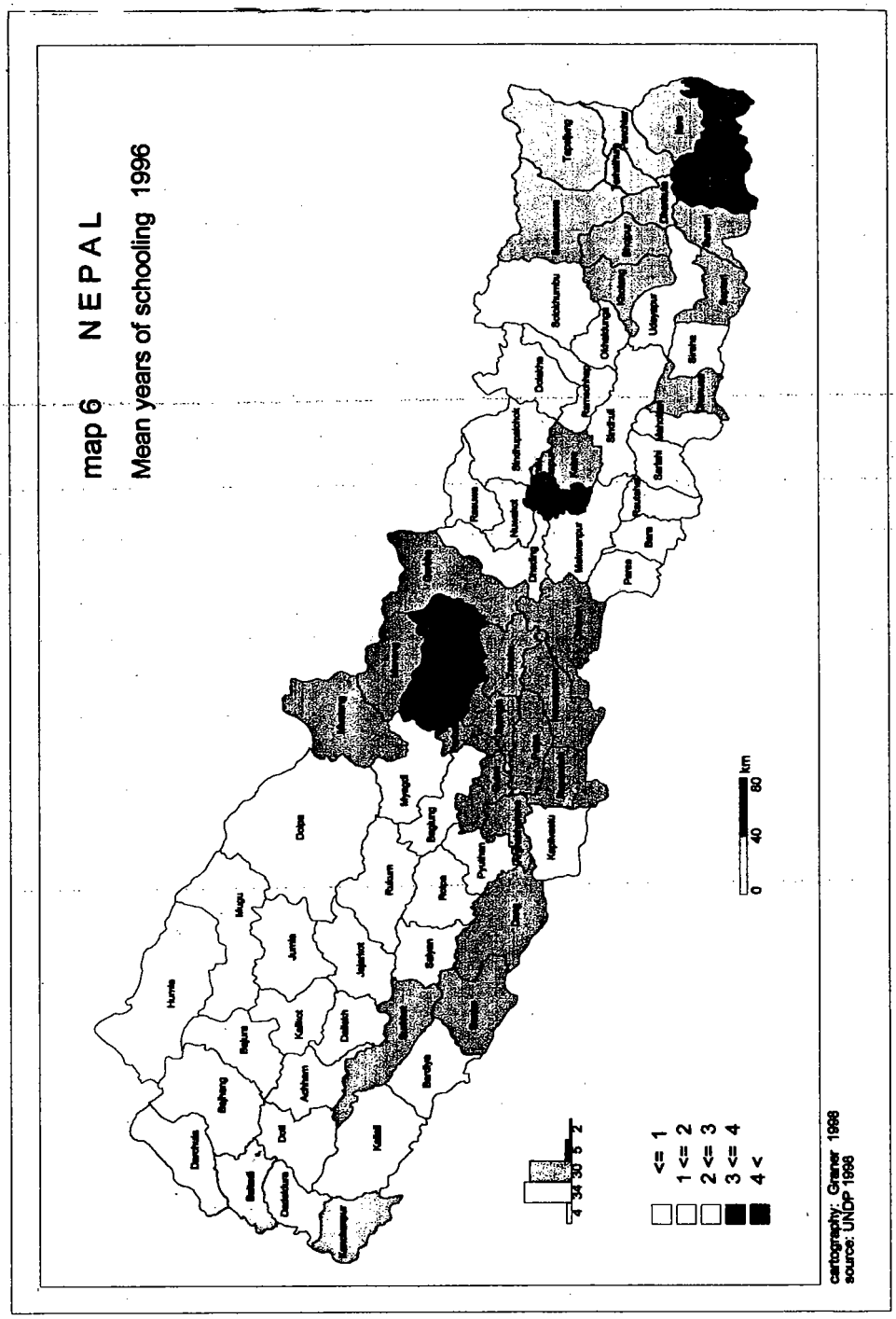
Sources: HMG/NPC/CBS 1993; 1996; 1998

Interestingly, the peculiar structure of having disproportionally high numbers of class 1 students, which has been noted for 1991, is still prevalent in 1995 when class 1 students account for 31% (Jhapa) to 60.2% (Humla) of all primary students and even for 81% of all girl students in Humla (1991:78.1%). In only a few districts this composition has become less concentrated, as for instance in Okaldunga (1991:47.2% and 1995: 39.3%) and similarly in Udaypur, Parbat, Doti and Kailali. In a few other districts this rate has increased even further, as in Manang (1991: 38.4% and 1995:47%) or Dolpa. Figures for 1996 are similar, ranging from 29.6% to 63.3% for all primary students, with a median of 42.4% and 11 districts where rates range between 50 and 60%. In 1996 girls in class 1 account for 29.2% (Jhapa) to 80.1% (Humla) of all primary girl students, the median is at 43.5% but in a total of 10 districts rates range between 50 and 60% and in 8 more districts rates are even higher than 60%.

While enrolment rates and numbers of students convey a somehow optimistic idea of the state of (primary) education in Nepal the previously quoted figures cast some doubts upon the "success story" in education. The structure of enrolment in different classes of (primary) education seems to indicate that it is more appropriate to speak about "class 1 - education" rather than of primary education. Above all, this structure is characterised by a high persistence throughout several years which allows for the conclusion that school education, even in the mid 1990s, is not only characterised by an (extremely) low transition quota between primary and secondary education but also by extremely high drop-out rates within primary education. Thus, these data provide substantial evidence for questioning whether the goal of achieving primary education for all children, operationalised in form of attending primary schools for 5 years, is being achieved.

Similarly, average years of schooling, in relation to the total population are still extremely low, as shown by data provided by UNDP/NESAC in their recent Human Development Report for Nepal (1998) where they quantify mean years of schooling for 1996 ranging from 0.813 (Mugu) to 5.354 (Kathmandu). School attendance is at a national average of

2.254 years and a district average of 2.068 years but is below 3 years in 68 of 75 districts and only above 5 years in Kathmandu (see Map 6) (ibid. 264-65). For women and girls, mean years of schooling range from 0.031 in Humla to 4.318 (Kathmandu), at a national average of 1.132 years. School attendance above 2 years occurs in only 9 districts (Kathmandu Valley, Kaski, Jhapa, Ilam, Parbat, and Syanjya) whereas it is below 1 year in 34 districts, and in 13 among those even below 0.5 years (ibid. 268-69).



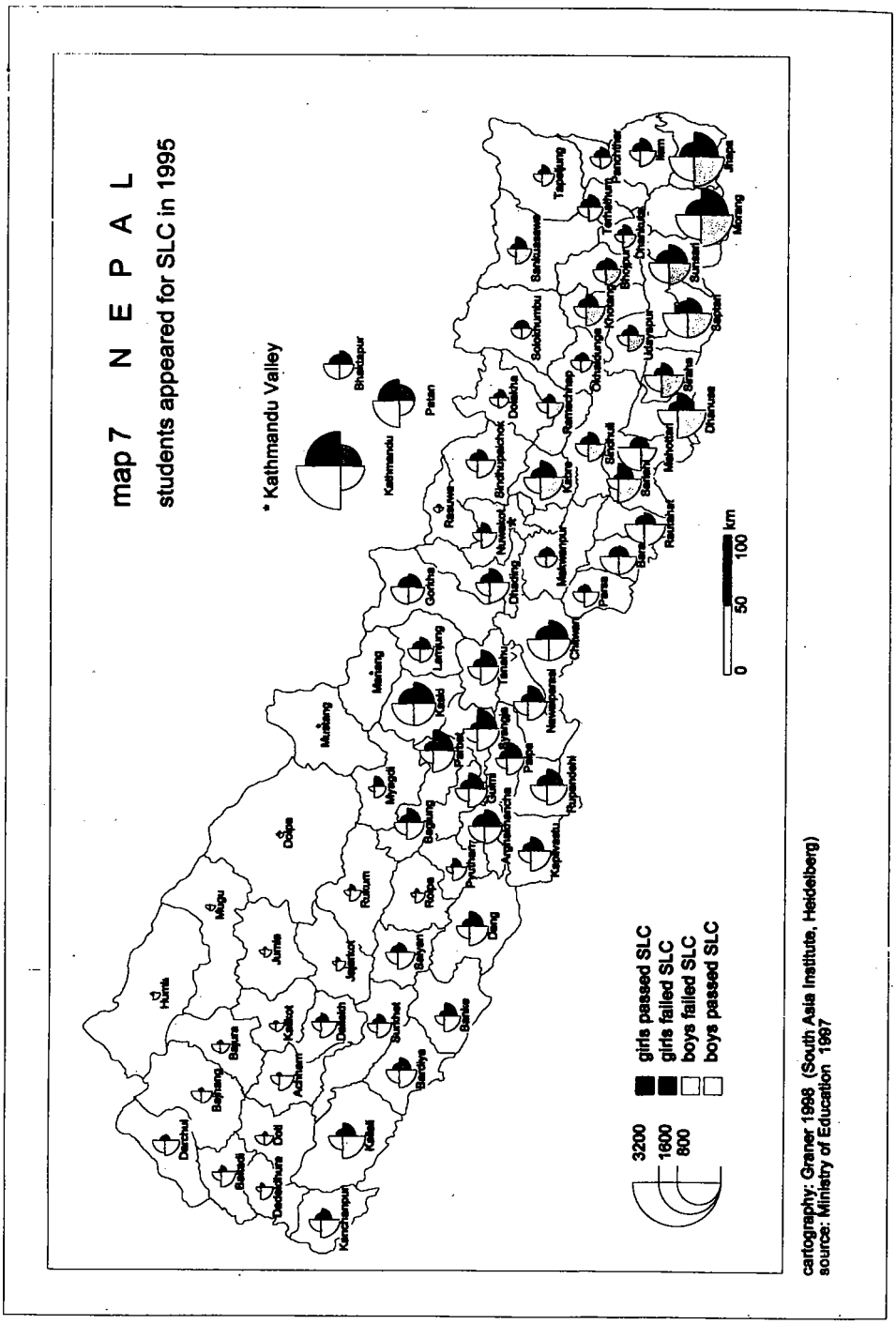
Education in the 1990s–where have all the girls gone?

The analysis of (primary) school attendance for the early and mid-1990s has shown that class 1 students account for a disproportionally high number of primary school children, especially for girls, and, at the same time, this structure is persistent throughout the years. This has two most ambivalent implications. On the one hand, this most peculiar structure can be interpreted as an indicator of the willingness of parents to send their children to school and/or the willingness of school children to attend (primary) school, at least for a (short) period of time. This holds true for both boys and girls in most districts as is apparent from most favourable gender ratios for class 1 students in (almost) all districts for 1991, ranging from 1:1.02 to 3.9, at a district average of 1:1.75 and a median of 1.5. Thus, in half of the country out of five school children two or more are girls. Ratios below 1:2 are encountered in 20 districts, and only in five among those ratios are below 1:3. By 1995 gender ratios in class 1 have even further improved and for the first time ever, there are a few districts (Chitwan, Bhaktapur, and Mustang) where more girls than boys attend class 1. In 1996 gender ratios of class 1 students range from 1:0.9 to 2.5, at a median of 1.4 and an average of 1:1.6. These ratios, indeed, indicate an enormous success in terms of enrolling girls into primary schools.

On the other hand, the second implication is much less optimistic. This structure also indicates that drop-out rates are (extremely) high, especially for girls, and need to be decreased in order to be able to speak of (a success in) primary education, rather than of "class 1" - education. Yet, if parents are willing to send their children, boys and girls, to school for at least some time, then it seems to be a most crucial question why (the same) parents should stop them from attending further classes, and, similarly, what measures can be undertaken in order to counteract this trend. These questions are most difficult to answer and can only be based on profound analyses of village-level data from a great variety of locations. Nevertheless, one answer seems to lie in the nature of examining and promoting students, where failures are frequent, especially among girls. Unfortunately, data for examinations within primary (and secondary) education is not available and thus it is not possible to quantify failures at a district-level.

In the absence of such data a short analysis is given of (school-leaving) SLC-examinations, taken at the end of class 10. Data is available on a district-level for participation and achievement levels in examinations, revealing that the number of boys and girls who failed is much higher than the ones who passed, with the sole exception of Kathmandu and Patan districts. Rates are about 50% in only a few districts whereas in many districts rates of failures are extremely high. This holds especially true for girls, where more than 35% pass in only 4 districts. In most districts of western and eastern Nepal rates for girls generally range between 25 and 35%, as well as in a few districts in the central region. Yet, this is opposed by rates of 15-25% in the mid and far western districts, and 7 among these

have rates even below 15% (see Map 7). This seems to provide evidence that a high number of parents are willing that their children attend secondary school, even up to class 10, but that such investments into "human capital" do not yield particularly good results. Thus, it can be concluded that explaining low enrolment rates by (primarily) blaming parents for their reluctance to send their children to school in many, if not in most cases, seems to be a myth rather than a fact.



Universal education – the way forward

In 1991 HMG/MOE has raised concerns that the country may end up with a five-tier (basic) education system model, i.e. an expatriate model for the affluent, a private model for the less affluent, a public model for the middle class, an out-of-school model for the poor, and no model for the poorest (quoted in UNDP/NESAC 1998: 87). This article, concentrating on public education, has shown that enrolment figures generally seem to confirm parts of this statement. On the other hand, an analysis of class 1 enrolment figures has also shown that these figures tell a different story. Enrolment figures are much higher than solely being attributed to middle class children. Assuming that the poor, and possibly even the poorest sections of society also send their children to school, for at least one or two years, gives hope that the crucial question for planners is not how to bring children from these sections to school but how to keep them there - yet, one which is not necessarily easier to answer.

An analysis of causes for drop-out rates has to be based on profound and detailed case studies. Many analyses have concentrated on, and are partly pre-occupied with, physical aspects of schools and the situation of teachers (as for instance HMG/NPC 1987). UNDP/NESAC has provided a list of eight most significant causes for drop-outs, which can be grouped into aspects related to the family, such as i) work burden, iii) income poverty, or v) low perceived relevance; and aspects related to schools, such as ii) irregularity of operation, iv) physical distance, and vii) neglect of mother tongue (ibid. 1998: 78ff). Certainly, all of these causes are of relevance, as has already been pointed out by Shrestha (1988).

The analysis of enrolment figures seems to provide substantial evidence that parents are willing to give their children, both girls and boys, a chance to attend school, at least for learning how to read and write. Thus, it is probably more appropriate to explain these dramatically high drop-out rates by the way schools operate. It seems to be crucial that students, and especially girls, do not learn what they, or their parents expect. Causes for this can be twofold. On the one hand, children are possibly not taught what they should be taught, i.e. the quality of teaching is (too) low. In this case, main causes can be seen in the performance of teachers, who either do not care to operate their classes according to schedule (see UNDP/NESAC 1998:79, ii, as well as Shrestha 1988:82), a feature encountered in many hill and mountain districts where service is often done by Kathmandu Valley or Terai staff, reluctant to live in what they perceive to be "the middle of nowhere". This grievance could be remedied by raising the accountability of teachers to village-level bodies. Secondly, a low performance of teaching may also be attributed to the capability of teachers, who possibly need

improved training, especially how to deal with and motivate children who have been/are exposed to school education for only a short period of time.

On the other hand, it is possible that children, and especially girls, are not able or capable of following lessons, for various reasons. One which is possibly most important, is the difficulty in language (see UNPD/NESAC, above). Primary schools should be allowed to run their lessons in the mother tongue of the respective areas for at least the first year, and to gradually extend Nepali-medium lessons in successive years, even if this regulation is a task which is difficult to organise in a country characterised by a mosaic of various culturally and linguistically different ethnic groups. Secondly, tuition needs to be improved, especially for girls, by possibly having extra-teaching units administered to them, continuously throughout the year but especially before the exams. One further aspect is to integrate pre-school training, an important component of private schools, also into government schools, which will simultaneously decrease the burden of school-aged children to watch their pre-school aged siblings.

Education in Nepal has certainly come a long way since the 1970s, yet, achievements need to increase in order to further improve the quality, the basic precondition before any quantitative growth can take place which is not merely ephemeral but sustainable (see Shrestha 1988:20; 90-91). Only then, the big gap between national aspirations and actual reality, which was pointed out by Shrestha for the 1980s (ibid. 1988:82) and which, unfortunately, is still valid for the 1990s, can finally vanish.

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