

Volume 33, Number 2
July 2006

CONTRIBUTIONS TO NEPALESE STUDIES



Journal of
Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies
Tribhuvan University
Kirtipur, Nepal

CNAS

Contributions to Nepalese Studies

ISSN: 0376-7574

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Subscription Rates

	Nepal	India	Other countries
Single copy	NRs. 250/-	IRs. 250/-	-
One year	NRs. 450/-	IRs. 450/-	US\$ 50.00
Note: Air-mail postage is included.			

का.प्र.जि.का.अ.का.प.द.नं. ३२-०३०

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EDUCATION IN NEPAL: MEETING OR MISSING THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS?

Elvira Graner

Education in Nepal has a number of annual highlights. One is the National Education Day, on Falgun 12th (late February), commemorating the late king Birendra's coronation address in 1975. There he proclaimed that "education constitutes the mainspring of development" (quoted in Shrestha 1989: i). Accordingly, he commanded his government to make "primary education free of cost and accessible for all, boys and girls" (ibid.). A second annual occasion addressing education is the festival *Basanta Panchami* (mid February), a day dedicated to *Saraswati*, the goddess of wisdom and learning. On that day, (Hindu) students all over the country visit temples, where they spend hours scribbling down their notes in chalk, as notes written down on this particular day will never be forgotten. While this latter day is usually celebrated and characterised by its festive mood, the National Education Day is simply being "observed" (Khadka 1997: 12), and it is a rather ambivalent affair, or even a gloomy one, and indicative for the (poor) state of education in Nepal. Some authors even find stronger expressions, as Khadka in his cynical article "Celebrating the pathetic state" (ibid.), or Shanta Dixit (2002), in her critical assessment "Education, deception, state, and society" (2002).

Further regular events when education "hits" the headlines are in March/April when class 10 students need to take the final examinations of their secondary education in order to obtain their school-leaving certificates (SLC), and again in June/July, when SLC-results are published. While the first one is an occasion of at least modest hope, the second is usually one of more or less great despair, as the number of failed students usually outnumber those who pass. While pass rates ranged between 30-36% during the last years (see SPOTLIGHT 2003), in 2004 an astonishingly "high" number of 46% students passed (see Amgai 2004a), and this rather dreadful result was celebrated as a major national achievement. Yet, this was partly due to re-introducing a "grace mark" system, when failures within a 5%-margin in a single subject were to be neglected (ibid.). Worse still, less than 10% of class 1 students reach class 10 (Dixit 2002: 193), and only less than 50% reach class 5 (HMG/UNCTN 2003: 15). These figures render the Millennium Development Goals, aiming at universal primary education for boys and girls and gender equity in secondary education by 2015 (HMG/UNCTN 2003: 19), meaningless paper declarations, ridiculing past policies and millions of dollars spent and wasted from donor agencies.

Another crucial feature is that the private sector is playing an increasingly important role in the Nepalese educational "landscape". By now there are



Printed at:
Tribhuvan University Press
Kirtipur, Kathmandu, Nepal
☎: 4331320, 4331321