

# A Critical Perspective of Non-formal Education in Nepal

-Focusing on the peculiar Nepalese social constitution-

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## **Introduction**

Non-formal education (henceforth, NFE) in Nepal is centering on literacy education of Nepali as a national language for adult women who were not able to have the opportunity of entering school during childhood. NFE programs are organized in the whole country and they are regarded one of the important national policy issues.

In recent years, activities of international NGOs (=International Non-Governmental Organizations; henceforth, INGOs) have become conspicuous, and the high level of their contribution attracts attention also in international society.

However, in regard to the effect of the programs it is reported that about 200,000 people participated in the programs in one year (CERID, 1999). In fact, the contents of study are not well established, and the improvement of the programs including the evaluation method is called for.

I interviewed the learners who participated in the literacy program, but I have observed the situation where, in spite of the existence of a large amount of assistance fund injections performed through the government and the development NGOs and INGOs, people are not getting relevant support.

There are differences in wealth and in caste status, and people who offer programs such as the government or INGOs and most learners are living in totally different life spaces. And the view of the world and the view of life which are held by these people differ significantly each other. Moreover, without proper understanding of learner's life, we cannot design effective learning (Nagaoka, 2000a, 2002).

A constitution peculiar to the Nepalese society shows such a present condition. The society of Nepal has the caste system as a substructure, and it serves the social organization which high caste controls. Since high caste dominates the Parliament which is the decision-making body and considering the situation of Nepal of these days, low caste people or ethnic minorities who are marginalized in the society cannot easily participate in the decision-making process. That is, whatever the policy is, today's Nepal society is governed by Parbate Hindu <sup>1)</sup> which occupies a central position. The political organization of Nepal shifted to democracy in 1990, but the ruling by high caste still continues. The activities of Maoists (people who support Maoism), which demand correction of a national economic gap today, have been intensifying. Also politically, economically, and socially as the result of the riot by the students who support Maoists

last year, unstable conditions continue.

NFE in Nepal started in 1956 after the opening of the country, and it is referred to as one of the important factors for educational development. Taking the social background where high caste dominates into consideration, the program for the minorities by the central government is far from supporting the socially weak people actually. Given such a viewpoint, is it possible to find a positive effect out of the educational support program called NFE?

In this paper, while considering the importance of NFE carried out in Nepal society and based on former studies (Nagaoka 2000a, 2002), the author attempts a critical analysis of NFE program from the above-mentioned perspective focusing on the peculiar Nepalese social constitution.

### **Toward a fundamental understanding of NFE program.**

#### **(1) Significance of NFE**

There are about 500 NGOs and INGOs that are involved in NFE in Nepal today. Although they cover various fields of activity, NFE has mainly developed focusing on the literacy program for adult women. The program is carried out by the initiative of INGOs or NGOs rather than the government, and the government supports their activities. About 55% of education budget is mainly distributed to basic primary education. However, NFE is assigned only about 2% of the total (NRC-NFE, 2000, p.13).

The fundamental aim of literacy program is to study reading and writing of Nepali, which should be mastered as Nepalese. In general, the basic program consists of primary course for six months and the post-literacy course (continuing study after the primary course) for three months. The participants need to pay neither the charge of attendance, nor any text cost. Most participants are women who were not able to have the opportunity of going to school sufficiently. Current literacy rate (men & women) is about 40%, and the government policy is trying to achieve 67% by the end of this year, which is a difficult challenge.<sup>2)</sup>

People of Nepal master reading and writing of Nepali through primary school education today. However, those who can access primary school education are limited, and the school enrolment is still under 63% (Tuladhar, 1999, p. 148). Moreover, there are many children who leave school without finishing the fifth grade even if they enter school, and it is believed that it is difficult to finish primary school education. The main factor is that schools are concentrated in the city, and children cannot attend school easily especially in the mountain area or Terai area (land region adjoining India in southern Nepal).

Second, during the agricultural season, when there develops a labour shortage, children become important labour force, and they end up quitting school by repeating long absence from school.

Third, there is a difference in the school enrolment rate between boys and girls, and many girls do not attend school because their parents believe that education is unnecessary for girls following the teaching of Hinduism (Nagaoka, 2000a).

Although the government is thinking of expanding basic primary education as a most important educational policy, priority should be given to the promotion of NFE program, considering the reality in which many children cannot enter school. Like "systematisation of alternative learning" outside schools, the fundamental concept of NFE is the "whole systematic process of organizing various forms of learning which the society has produced out of necessity" (Sato, 2001, p.54), and is understood as "all educational activities that are systematized outside formal education" (NRC-NFE, 2001, p3.). Given such a definition, we may say that NFE can offer most effective learning in developing countries.

The main NFE program focuses on reading and writing in Nepali. Although literacy education is considered as standard as stated above, it is conducted jointly with such programs as "Family Planning program," "Income Generating program," "Primary Health Care program," and "Drinking Water program". And these knowledge and idea which are useful for the independence of women are provided. Moreover, basic education programs are offered not only to women but also to children who have not had the opportunity of going to school even if they have reached the school age, and to the children who left school. 3)

### Contemporary meaning of NFE

After democratisation, the new constitution (1990) defined Nepal as a "multi-ethnic nation," and changed Nepali priority. Each mother tongue is accepted as people's language (*rastrya bhasa*), and radio broadcast by various languages started. While the movement which appeals for the maintenance of ethnic minority languages becomes stronger, the movement toward Hinduizing or the formation of anti-Sanskrit is arising. (Yuki, 2000, p.69)

After 1990, the use of languages other than Nepali began to be accepted officially, such as Hindi, Newar and so on. But Nepalization came to emphasize the expansion of basic education in response to the policy proposal by "World Education Conference" (Education for All) held at Jomtien in Thailand in the same year (1990). Moreover, development assistance by INGOs became available in large quantities, and also internationally, NFE program centering on literacy education has come to attract attention.

However, as Nepal is a multi-linguistic and multi-ethnic nation, it is not easy to permeate Nepali among all people in Nepal. First of all, speakers of Nepali are only half the entire population. 4) Second, most languages of Nepal do not have letters and they are oral languages. So, it can be said that most participants in literacy programs are not familiar with reading and writing letters. Forcing acquisition of a national language to

ethnic minorities who are using only mother tongues leads to eliminating traditional knowledge they hold, and many people criticize in saying that it is an act of imposing the language by state power.

As merchants' trade activities seen at the bazaar indicate, it is indispensable to communicate with those who speak different languages and to take in various information. And it has been thought as very important for the life of people. Today, its necessity has been increasing with the development of globalisation day by day. It is argued by many researchers that there is no village into which information does not get in. Globalisation standardizes everything, but here I'd like to emphasize, as Aoki (2001) says, that we should recognise and respect unique features of cultural characteristics that are reflected in native culture and values while at the same time trying to bridge the gap between different cultures.

The contemporary significance of literacy programs can be indicated as follows. First, being able to read and write dose not merely mean the ability of writing letters and reading what was been written. While becoming able to acquire necessary knowledge freely, it also means to expand the spheres of activities for individuals. As a result, social participation is urged, and it provides the opportunity of self-development.

Next, it could not be overemphasized today that access to learning must be secured because basic education is a human right. The concept of "human rights" is not based on the measure in Western society. Criticism is made against development assistance provided from the position of Western humanism because it is believed that the logic of developed countries is made into the standard. If it dose not take into consideration and respect the peculiar tradition and custom in each area, sense of values, etc, the concept of human rights may change by country or areas.

Also NFE programs should be carried out in the form where they are connected with the student's life. For example, those women who have not entered school, but are engaged in agricultural work, may be well versed in all the information in their community. In such a case, if these women expand their learning besides agriculture, it will be useful also for their family and people in the community.

As long as NFE of Nepal developed by the initiative of INGOs or NGOs is concerned, it is carried out in the form entrusted to the private sector. The NFE ministry implements the policy but its posture is quite irresponsible. Although a large amount of financial support comes from overseas, it is hard to say that the money is distributed justly. However, NFE program is receiving adequate private cooperation, if the whole society of Nepal is taken into consideration.

## **Reality Observed from the Development Assistance of NGOs and INGOs**

### **(1) People engaged in the assistance**

Prices swell up several times in Nepal and the difference in wealth is expanding after

democratisation. While various goods circulate across the border, people of Nepal look perplexed in responding to the new system. However, the government's posture to NGOs or INGOs improved after political organization became democratised. Today, there are about 20,000 NGOs in Nepal, but many are the organizations just by name without real activities. Only about ten percent of the whole NGOs may be functioning substantively.

NGOs have acquired citizenship widely also in Japan. People are engaged in NGOs activities out of necessity, and have started their activities in many cases spontaneously. Activities of all such NGOs are performed with certain ambiguity because there is a question whether it is right or not. I am not going to deny the spirit of spontaneous social activity by the citizen that is inherent in NGOs. But the actual condition of the development cooperation or the assistance activities in development NGOs appears contrary to such beautiful sales messages as "assistance whose face is visible" and "assistance from equal position". We can observe the posture of people who look down from "developed countries" or "top" to the "developing countries" or "bottom."

There is also the following indication. "The main business of the representatives of development NGOs is planning and management of a project, and their work is hardly done in interaction with poor people on the spot. Except for going out to the spot several times a month to check the activities, they sit at the desk and produce documents, or make arrangements with the staff and the government." (Nakata, 1999, p.188) Therefore, although it is not applicable to all development NGOs, they cannot stand on the "equal position" with local poor people because they become intimate with the bureaucrats.

The situation is the same in the NFE program in Nepal, and many staff members of development NGOs who are performing support activities there have the strong stance of "teaching knowledge to those who know nothing," and local residents are put on the position of receiving "support" from "high-ranking people." Furthermore, the great portion of staff who are working in INGOs especially are "high-ranking people" of the country, and, whatever the purpose of the activity is, they are going to continue being "high-ranking people" themselves.

About people engaged in such a development project, Chambers and others have given their critical evaluation (Chambers, R. translations 1995 and 2001, Khanal, 2001). Criticism is targeted at the domineering posture of the specialists engaged in development projects, investigators, and researchers by repeating the question "For whose benefit are international cooperation and assistance provided?" Furthermore, whether in a city or a village, priority tends to be given to grasping the "reality" 5) of local residents. And the inversion of power relationship between "low-ranking people" in the society who cannot read and write and "high-ranking people" is attempted through the PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal) 6) approach. Especially, literacy programs based on this PRA theory have been increasingly focusing on INGOs.

Recently, implementation of literacy programs which have become like a fashion stimulates competition among INGOs, and their commercial orientation invites criticism

(Khanal, 2001). Furthermore, INGOs are trying to achieve actual results on their own without sharing information with other experiences (Tuladhar, 1999). It is pointed out that the network is not built among organizations engaged in similar activities just because the interests of organizations collide with each other.

## **(2) Hierarchical structure which obstructs development**

In the hierarchy among people engaged in development projects as described by Chambers, foreigners (= investigators, external intervention persons) mainly turn into "high-ranking people." However, in the case of Nepal, such structure appears also from the ranking relation of the people produced by the caste system. Historically, the social ranking system based on the family line or "caste system" was brought in by people from India who emigrated to Kathmandu basin. Under the present constitution, equality among castes is secured, but customs based on caste system remain, and affect people's everyday life greatly.

Generally, the society of Nepal is rigidly controlled by high caste, such as Bahun and Chhetri, and the leading positions of organizations are occupied by high-ranking caste as Bista (Bista, D.B, 1991) describes. One of the factors of underdevelopment in this country is the practice of people who treat "*chakari* (acquaintance with influential persons)" and "*aphno manche* (one's own relatives)" favourably. This appears to be a vestige of the panchayat system strengthened under the past Rana government (1846-1950).

While such means as corruption and bribery have spread regarding the development issue, various policies are carried out. The assistance fund in large sum from international assistance organizations or the government of each country is also assigned to the unrealistic plan which bureaucrats and influential persons worked out, and the rest is determined in compromise with "*chakari*" (Kobayashi, 1999). Therefore, for example, when it comes to building a school or a public hall in a village, high-ranking people try to secure a large amount of fund from foreign countries, but sufficient support is not provided to the beneficiary who must be supported, and the projects come to an end. Since project ideas are brought in through influential persons in the area who have personal relations with bureaucrats or the exterior, no matter what the project is, people tend to think that "vikas (development) come from outside" (Minami, 1997). In order to restructure such a system, some international assistance organizations conduct more detailed surveys and stop providing support if the projects do not progress as planned.

As you walk in the city of Kathmandu today, you will see the signboard saying "XX Development" frequently. It indicates that there are so many NGOs that try to secure their base in the city. Anyway, in many assistance activities, people participate expecting profits by a certain means, and it should be important to recognize such a reality.

### Purpose and problems of the Nepalization promotion policy

Currently, radical acts by Maoists are occurring one after another, and future developments including the policy changes of the Nepal government attract attention from inside and outside now. First of all, by the collision between the king and people, the present organization (democracy) was established overcoming much bloodshed. However, the irony is that people who believe in communism are now increasing rapidly, and mass media has all reported "The Nepal government is faced with the greatest crisis since democratisation."

Here, circumstances preceding democratisation will be briefly described. Nepal before 1990 maintained the national government system that was governed by King Mahendra which was called panchayat system (1961- 1990). The purpose of this system was to practice systematic rule of Nepal as a whole through "panchayat (consultation organization)" at each level of country, prefecture, county, city, town and village. Political party activities are prohibited. King Birendra who succeeded King Mahendra encouraged the "Nepalization" movement in order to promote modernization and economic development. "Nepalization" was intended to nurture "national identity" which encouraged all people in Nepal to overcome various cultural differences, and share common national consciousness. (Yamamoto, 2001.pp.235-236)

However, as Yamamoto (2001) argues, the core of the Guruka dynasty which inherits the blood of the present royal family was Parbate Hindu whose mother tongue was Nepali, and the main point of "Nepalization" was the "formation of Nepali as a national language" and "Hinduization" of people with different cultural background. That is, although it was very convenient for Bahun or Chhetri who belong to high caste of Parbate Hindu, for other people of lower caste, it was not the case. (*Ibid*, p.236)

The domestic politics after democratisation just aimed at the maintenance and strengthening of the power of high caste symbolized by "Hindu regime" <sup>7)</sup> which is going to promote such a "national identity", but it can be said that its fundamental nature remains unchanged. Moreover, this situation also affects education and causes educational gap between the minority group whose mother tongue is not Nepali and the majority group. As indicated by the gap between those who can receive elementary school education from the beginning by Nepali, which is their mother tongue, and other people, unequal structure appears also in the educational system. <sup>8)</sup>

In Nepal, in addition to the Maoist demand for compulsory education, anti-Sanskritization movement is becoming strong. Social confusion has arisen domestically as a negative effect of "Nepalization" policy led by Parbate Hindu. If such a view is correct, it can be argued that there is a limit here.

### Conclusion

This paper attempted a critical analysis of NFE programs in Nepal focusing on its peculiar social constitution while recognizing the significance of NFE programs that are

currently carried out.

NFE programs are apparently promoting women's gender role in the household. However, their basic objective is to encourage women to act positively in the home and the community, such as celebrating the birth of girls without feeling sad, and to encourage men to participate in housekeeping or child-rearing practices. Developing consciousness that one is the bearer of responsibility in the community and society through learning leads also to supporting women who have been marginalized.

While educational support activities for the minority are often misused as a means to invite development projects, as I think of people who appreciate the joy of learning purely, I hope that the measure of NFE will be maintained, and that new system will be created. The structure that obstructs all the choices in the life of people in the name of religion will also be maintained from now on, unless the social organization symbolized by "Nepalization" is seriously reconsidered.

It is well known that Weber (Weber, M.) made a comparative analysis of the phenomenon peculiar to such a South Asian society in "Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism." In Nepal where the contrast between tradition and modernization is sharp, we have to keep our eyes on its future development.

However, in the conflict between tradition and modernization, we hope we will be able to find some hope in this poorest country in Asia. My argument is that NFE programs are one effective means by which such people's wisdom can be utilized.

#### Notes

- 1) "Parbate" means "mountain people who believe in Hinduism" and they live in the hilly area up to the altitude of about 3,000m. Their ancestors escaped Muslim invasion in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century, and moved to the mountain area. Parbate Hindu consists of Bahun or Chhetri and occupies the Kingdom of Nepal including the present Royal family.
- 2) Literacy rate is measured by whether people have about the third grade-level Nepali reading and writing ability. (Nepal Human Development Report 1998, p.76)
- 3) NFE ministry of the Nepal government plays a leading role in carrying out the NFE program in the policy context of BPEP II (Basic Primary Education Plan II). Actually, INGOs and NGOs implement NFE programs with their original programs, program management methods and program contents.
- 4) The population of those who speak Nepali as mother tongue is about 50.3% of the total population. (CBS, 1997, p.18)
- 5) It is said that "reality" which Chambers describes has two meanings. The first is

"material" reality and refers to the real world consisting of material things. The second is "individual" reality and refers to the conceptual framework where we feel, understand and interpret our own experiences. (Chambers, a translation, 2001, pp, 148-150.)

6) PRA (=Participatory Rural Appraisal) refers to a series of approaches and methods that enable local residents to share, improve and interpret their life knowledge and circumstances, and to plan, act, monitor and assess them. First, helped by the guidance of a facilitator, the learning circle discusses the real life situation of the village including land, property, and economic and social situation. Second, they construct the social map or graphics, and discuss the problems and needs of the community by using it. Third, the learning circle discusses and identifies the problems and needs of the community on different issues such as illiteracy, poverty, social burdens, agriculture and so on. Finally, the graphics drawn by the learners after PRA will be used as a starting point for reading, writing and numeracy lessons. PRA's aim is to introduce the learner-centered technique. Specifically, it can be translated as "positive participatory rural village investigating method." It is used not only for village development but also as a policy, or adult literacy study. Today, it is also considered as "development of learning and action by local residents" (=Participatory Learning and Action).

7) A "Hindu regime" refers to the peculiar social situation in Nepal as symbolized by the following three points: Hinduism as the state religion; Nepali as an official language, and the rule by high caste people who wear Tagatari (holly string). (O'Neill, 1994)

8) Although primary school education by mother tongue is allowed after democratisation, it is hardly practiced in reality. The main reasons are: 1) there are no unified notation systems of respective mother tongues; textbooks are not developed yet; there is shortage of trained teachers; 2) those who want to be educated in mother tongue concentrate in the city, and there is no consensus among ethnic groups who speak the same language; 3) people who want to be educated also in English as well as in Nepali are increasing rapidly in the city, and it is difficult to gather people even if education in the mother tongue is provided.

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