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Research article

Decolonisation of curriculum: the case of language education policy in Nepal

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Abstract

While decolonisation is usually discussed in relation to countries that were formally colonised, countries that have not been formally colonised have also faced challenges related to colonialism. In this case, it is worth considering whether decolonial theory has more widespread applicability to respond to global challenges faced in the postcolonial era. This article documents the historical trajectories of colonisation and decolonisation of the school curriculum in Nepal. Although Nepal was never formally colonised, the introduction of modern schooling in Nepal was informed by the British colonisation of India, where local languages were replaced by English in the curriculum, diminishing the value of local languages and knowledges. Against this backdrop, the Nepal government issued a series of policies supporting Nepali supremacy, but the expansion of English was not significantly challenged. Rather, the policies resulted in a double colonisation of ethnic/Indigenous languages: external colonisation by English, and internal colonisation by the Nepali language. However, significant decolonisation efforts

have recently made space for minoritised languages in the curriculum. This article illustrates these colonisation and decolonisation waves, shaped by the government, local communities and other actors. Drawing on Nepal's legislative and educational policies, the article relates language policy decisions and actions as decolonial efforts to support ethnic/Indigenous languages and explores the implications for understanding tensions around decolonisation of curriculum.

Keywords decolonisation; curriculum; language education policy; ethnic/Indigenous languages

Introduction

From a postcolonial perspective, education should enable Indigenous empowerment and teach the languages and cultures of local people (Lopes Cardozo, 2012). After the demise of formal colonialism due to the independence of formerly colonised countries, neocolonial politics have continued to sustain colonial legacies that maintain unequal global power structures. This set of circumstances inclines the governments of colonised countries in some ways still to depend on former colonial governments in sustaining their economic and cultural systems. Inequalities across societies worldwide also continue to reflect colonially influenced race and ethnic hierarchies and power relations (Hangen, 2013). As Takayama et al. (2017: 3) claim, 'the idea of cultural and social difference itself has roots in the colonial division of the world, which played a formative role for the social and educational sciences created in the global metropole'. In this context, the value of diversity in education continues to be unduly influenced and outweighed by colonial histories and Eurocentrism (Takayama et al., 2017).

While colonialism in alternative forms continues to shape (re)negotiations of power, place, identity and sovereignty, decolonisation debates often concern previously colonised societies. This article considers the unique case of decolonisation in Nepal, a country that was never formally colonised, but which nonetheless faces challenges related to colonisation and colonialism as global phenomena. Nepal is a multilingual, multicultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious country (GON, 2015). Nepali is an official language, and the mother tongue of over 44 per cent of its population, but there are at least 129 other languages (Language Commission, 2019) spoken by more than 125 castes/ethnic groups (CBS, 2012). Despite having tremendous multilingual diversity, Nepali and English are predominantly used in governance, media and education, while ethnic/Indigenous languages remain marginalised in education and curricula.

Informed by colonisation and decolonisation debates as analytic lenses, this article reviews historical policies in Nepal to illustrate how Nepali and English became dominant. It also elaborates decolonisation efforts made to empower ethnic/Indigenous languages in education, by the state as well as by non-state actors, driven by discourses of national identity, human rights and educational equity. Drawing on this unique case provides a distinctive lens for understanding the impacts of colonisation beyond formally colonised countries, as well as major tensions found in efforts at decolonising curriculum, where multiple levels and forms of colonisation can be observed.

Key theoretical concepts: colonisation and decolonisation

To understand decolonisation, one should start with the processes and impacts of colonisation and colonialism. Colonisation is a set of legal, military and political processes and relations that subjugate local people and practices by external forces (Ferro, 1997). Tuck and Yang (2012) specify that internal colonialism involves the management of a society for the benefit of ruling elites coming from outside. In most cases, such groups may be settlers coming from beyond national borders, who have made a new home where Indigenous people used to be, thereby displacing those people.

Meanwhile, colonialism is a form of relational experience wherein the 'native' is obliged to regard themselves as deviant, deficient and 'other' in their home country (Spivak, 1999). Turin (2004) argues that eradicating or banning Indigenous languages in favour of English is one significant form of 'internal

colonisation', reflecting a status quo where foreign elites are positioned as superior to, and privileged over, locals. For instance, Macaulay's 'Minute on Indian Education' in 1835 expressed the view that Indian languages were naturally inferior to English, and that Indian literature was lacking in knowledge (Awasthi, 2008). He thus put forward a deficit view toward Indigenous languages and cultures, arguing that Indians would benefit more from learning the language and literatures of English than from continuing their studies in native languages. Macaulay's decree of English as the medium of instruction (MOI) in all Indian schools and universities was thus a form of linguisticism, or linguistic discrimination (Vaish, 2005), with his colonialist approach forming the basis for various policies that restricted minority languages in education among other social institutions during the British colonial period in India (also known as the British Raj).

Such Anglocentric positions on the nature of culture and knowledge enabled colonialists in India, and in many other places in the world, to build large-scale social and cultural systems where local ways of knowing were devalued while English became a currency of economic value. It also put imperialists and colonialists in control of organising various social institutions and decision-making, while non-English-speaking counterparts became second-class citizens with devalued knowledge. The entrenched framing of colonial languages as superior, and interrelated dependence on Western knowledge and sciences in colonial contexts, has been referred to as the 'captive mind' (Alatas, 1974). This means that local people are expected (or required) in light of so-called 'Western superiority' to be (or to act) uncritical and imitative, while they are not encouraged, or are actively discouraged, from being creative, resistant or critical in any way.

In this context, decolonisation is an approach that favours Indigenous community, life and epistemology (Fanon, 1952). It involves taking back what was seized by colonialists, with an approach undergirded by recognition that settlers have benefited from colonisation in myriad direct and indirect ways over a long history (Tuck and Yang, 2012), while Indigenous people continue to face oppression and exclusion. Thus, decolonisation involves going back to the past, and not seeing the future as fixed and part of a colonial-oriented agenda (Torres-Maldonado, 2007). Decolonisation efforts can, however, sometimes be appropriated to serve current and past elite legacies. In dialogue with Benson and Salem, Tuhiwai Smith alerts to such a possibility when she observes that 'you don't ask the thieves to write your financial plan for you. So why would you think institutions can suddenly come up with a decolonizing agenda...?' (Tuhiwai Smith et al., 2020: n.p.). This perspective emphasises that decolonisation must start from the grassroots, not from an elite orientation that is largely in line with historical colonialist views. Through a colonial lens, an Indigenous perspective may appear foreign, difficult, fuzzy and thus as something to be avoided (McKinley and Tuhiwai Smith, 2019; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). Decolonisation requires holding Indigenous practices in esteem in formal and informal settings (Alfred, 2009). For this, it is necessary to highlight the nature of the relationship between coloniser and colonised (Rizvi et al., 2006), and how these relational legacies are maintained in contemporary multicultural and multilingual contexts.

Furthermore, 'substantive decolonization as a counterhegemonic project must entail an intellectual element that is aimed at transforming the knowledge structures that facilitate dehumanization' (Dawson, 2020: 72). In a related manner, Tuhiwai Smith (1999) reminds us that colonisation can also take place as a hidden curriculum, as the organisation of school knowledge may reflect colonial or other nationalist views. For instance, in many contexts, it is observed that curricula focus on settler innocence and ingenuity, rather than on knowledge and understanding that can help Indigenous people regain what has been lost. In place of this tendency, Tuhiwai Smith (1999: 149) advocates that the curriculum should involve critical rereading of colonial and nationalistic histories regarded as valid in the past, to understand 'both internal colonialism and new forms of colonisation'. In relation, Tuck and Yang (2012: 19) recommend that different forms of 'curricula, literature, and pedagogy can be crafted to aid people in learning to see settler colonialism ... and set aside settler histories and values'.

Language of instruction and the values associated with it form part of the hidden curriculum. In many postcolonial contexts, teachers continue to prioritise English as a key indicator of quality in education and English language proficiency as invaluable for future success in lieu of local languages (Kambutu et al., 2020). However, holding a colonial language as key to quality and as the official medium of instruction while Indigenous languages take the backstage reproduces and reinforces hierarchies among languages and their users. If Indigenous languages are policed out of the classroom, their users may feel that their cultural legacies are devalued (Choi, 2016) and marginalised. This disadvantages students in cognitive and social development. Many, such as Choi (2017), Lin and Martin (2005) and Skutnabb-Kangas and Heugh (2012), argue that using students' home languages as a resource is

beneficial for Indigenous children, while teaching in unfamiliar or foreign languages is detrimental for content learning as well as cognitive development.

These remain priority concerns in international forums (for example, UNESCO's World Conference on Education for All in 1990). UNESCO (2016: 1) reported that, 'in multi-ethnic societies, imposing a dominant language through a school system has frequently been a source of grievance linked to wider issues of social and cultural inequalities'. Although such declarations and policies (as instances of decolonial efforts) promote Indigenous languages, English as well as national official languages nonetheless continue to constitute a major portion of the curricula in many contexts to the exclusion of minoritised languages, raising issues of epistemic injustice in bi/multilingual contexts. Understanding such phenomena from a decolonial lens is imperative in multilingual societies, such as Nepal.

Methodology

This article draws on an in-depth examination of legislative documents, educational policies and plans, curriculum frameworks and other educational policy documents published since the introduction of the first constitutional law in Nepal in 1947. With original policy documents not available prior to that time, reference to secondary literature has been made where required. An inductive–deductive iterative process of thematic content analysis (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006) was carried out while analysing the policies. While the understanding of colonisation and decolonisation literature provided a theoretical foundation, the in-depth inductive review of documents provided data generating themes discussed here in relation to English dominance, Nepali language supremacy, community initiatives and the roles of external actors. Hence, the findings are thematically organised and related to policy documents to develop consistency and trustworthiness (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). The themes and subthemes were closely scrutinised by the authors, and referential adequacy was maintained by returning to the documentary data. As some documents, such as the National Curriculum Framework, 2019 (MOEST, 2019; Sharma, 2011), were available only in Nepali, the extracted data were translated from Nepali into English where required. Table 1 summarises the major policies reviewed and their language policy concerns.

Table 1. Policy documents and their features (Source: Authors, 2022)

Year	Policy	Features
1947	Constitutional Law of Government of Nepal	The first constitution that came out of agreement between the Rana regime and King Tribhuvan Bir Bikram Shah. Designated Nepali as the national language, promoting Nepali nationalism.
1956	Nepal National Education Planning Commission (NNEPC)	The report of the first educational planning commission (also known as the Wood Commission) which worked in collaboration with the United States Operation Mission. All languages except for English and Nepali were banned.
1961	All-Round National Education Committee (ARNEC)	The education committee established by King Mahendra to develop a nationalist education policy in line with the political goals of the Panchayat system. Designated Nepali as the MOI.
1962	Constitution of Nepal	The constitution by the Panchayat government. Inherited the national language ideology and MOI policy from the previous government.
1971	National Education System Plan (NESP)	The five-year education plan to modernise Nepal's education system under the Panchayat government. Confirmed the national language as the MOI, while English-medium schools were encouraged to turn to Nepali medium.

Table 1. Cont.

Year	Policy	Features
1990	Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal	The constitution after promulgation of multiparty democracy, which guaranteed basic human rights. It inherited Nepali as the national official language, recognised all languages spoken as mother tongues and gave autonomy to communities to operate primary schools in their mother tongue.
1992	National Education Commission (NEC)	The education commission established after the promulgation of multiparty democracy in 1990. Mother tongues were encouraged as the MOI, but Nepali was also allowed. Policy initiatives were influenced by equity discourses.
1994	National Languages Policy Recommendation Commission (NLPRC)	An 11-member commission formed by His Majesty's Government in accordance with the Constitution of Nepal, recommended to continue earlier provisions in relation to Nepali and gave freedom for communities to operate schools in mother tongues up to lower or upper secondary level. Addressed linguistic human rights issues, especially recommending the use of community languages in education.
2007	National Curriculum Framework (NCF)	The first comprehensive curriculum framework for Nepal's school education. Mother tongue was designated as the MOI in elementary schools, and Nepali and English could be used afterwards. Influence of ethnic identity and nationalism, as well as a globalisation agenda in language-in-education policy decisions.
2007	Interim Constitution of Nepal	The constitution promulgated after Nepal's peace agreement with the Maoist party, in revolt at the time. It ensured the right to use mother tongues in official business.
2015	Constitution of Nepal	The constitution promulgated after Nepal transformed from a centralised system of governance to a federal democratic country. The local governments and schools were given autonomy regarding MOI decisions and the right to preserve mother tongues.
2019	National Curriculum Framework (NCF)	The first curriculum framework after Nepal changed to a federal state. The MOI of basic education is to be mother tongue or Nepali. English can be used as the MOI, except for in subjects which concern national identity (for example, civic education).

Table 1 also relates policy outcomes of political struggles at different points in the history of Nepal, informed by discourses such as preserving heritage languages as human rights or equity matters (see Poudel and Choi, 2021a, for further discussion of the discourses shaping language policy in Nepal). From Table 1, it is clear that there has been a shift from English-only policies to bilingual as well as mother-tongue-based multilingual education through provision of mother tongues as the MOI. In the sections that follow, the abbreviations from Table 1 have been used. Based on the thematic content analysis of the policies, we first categorised data into two broad themes of colonisation and decolonisation. Then the sections were broken down into more detailed themes to illustrate what happened during the *anciens régimes* and how counter-hegemonic discourses (for example, nationalism and ethnolinguistic ideologies) emerged over time. In the first place, colonisation in language education policy can be traced in relation to the dominance of the English language and then Nepali language. Decolonisation is discussed further in relation to the role of the government, local communities and external actors, especially at the macro policy level.

Colonisation in language education policy

As seen through decolonial theory, elite groups in society tend to project and reinforce their languages as official ones at the cost of minority ethnic/Indigenous languages. Nepal's language education policy planning reflects these trends, with the government first promoting English as the primary medium of instruction, and later the Nepali language, rather than ethnic/Indigenous languages. Although some education policies have generated space for Indigenous languages in education, English and Nepali have played the dominant role in the curriculum throughout the history of Nepal's education system, both as compulsory subjects, and as the MOI (Poudel and Choi, 2021b). The introduction of English-medium instruction (EMI) in formal schooling and the promotion of Nepali MOI in the 1970s both instigated internal colonisation in the curriculum, as discussed below.

English language dominance

The rise of English in Nepal is based in the historical diplomatic relations of the earliest Nepali leaders with the British government, which began with the establishment of the British Embassy in Kathmandu in 1816. In addition, the construction of English-only language education policies in Nepal was supported and reinforced by colonial ideologies which spread from India during the British Raj, especially after the introduction of the aforementioned Macaulay Minutes (Awasthi, 2008). The Rana government's close relations with Britain and the colonial empire of India required them to increase their diplomatic and cross-border communication through using English, meaning that English-speaking officials were necessary.

Following these ties, English in education was explicitly promoted with the rise of the Rana regime, which ruled the Kingdom of Nepal from 1846 to 1950 (Des Chene, 2007; Sharma, 2011). This regime was founded by Prime Minister Jung Bahadur Rana, a totalitarian ruler. As he stated, 'aruka kura chadideu, aaphna choralai angreji padhau' (Forget other people, teach English to your children; Sharma, 2011: 39), reflecting his English-only, monolingual ideology. To enable this, following his visit to Europe in 1850, Jung Bahadur established an English-medium school (known as Durbar High School) in the palace premises in 1853 for the children in his extended family (Sharma, 2011). While there were Hindu as well as Buddhist education systems that taught in Sanskrit and Pali languages, the establishment of this English-medium school represented the Rana government's strong desire to produce English-fluent human resources for governance and diplomacy (Awasthi, 2008, 2011; Wood, 1959).

This introduction of English in formal education in Nepal, as in India, played a significant role in producing deficit ideologies towards Nepali as well as Indigenous languages (see Awasthi, 2008; Giri, 2010). It also informed further processes of linguistic homogenisation in India and Nepal. Referring to these processes, and the transition from traditional religious schooling (for example, Gurukul education, a traditional residential practice that took place at the homes of gurus/teachers) to English-medium schooling, Wood (1959: 29), one of the architects of Nepal's education system, claimed that the 'formalized primary education in Nepal is the replica of the British schools which were established in India'. He further added that learning English occupied the major part of the curriculum of Nepal's English schools until the 1960s, although other subjects such as arithmetic, history, geography and civics were also taught (Wood, 1959). This historical trend in Nepal, which also reflects global linguistic imperialism that advances English as a tool for cultural and economic domination (Phillipson, 1992), illustrates an instance of state-supported colonisation of education through English dominance.

The dominance of English in education continued until the 1960s, when the Panchayat government emphasised Nepali nationalism, to introduce 'tightly defined national(ist) curricula' (Caddell, 2007: 468). Panchayat is a partyless political system introduced on 5 January 1961 by King Mahendra Bir Bikram Shah, which emphasised Hinduism, the Nepali language and monarchy as the foundations of Nepali national identity. The Panchayat government's decisions partly displaced the English-only ideology and (re)established Nepali as the primary language of education. This nationalist drive also echoes the trend of rejecting English which occurred in India during the freedom movement (Mohanty, 2019). These common decolonial efforts, and the historical relation between Nepal and India in terms of educational development, reflect how the decolonisation movement in Nepal was influenced by that of India (see Phyak, 2021; Sah, 2021).

While EMI was partially checked in the 1970s and 1980s, since the end of the Panchayat regime in 1990 and the promulgation of a rights-based democratic constitution EMI has been revitalised in

education. There was optimism following the shift to multiparty democracy in the 1990s, as the NEC-1992 ensured greater equity and more opportunities for previously marginalised communities and their languages. It also encouraged more space for Indigenous languages in education. However, English continued to remain the dominant MOI, especially in private schools. As EMI in private schools rapidly emerged, it was perceived as a key to connect students to the wider world, offering greater potential for mobility. It thereby became the preferred MOI (Caddell, 2007). For instance, the curriculum of the Basic Level in Nepal projects English superiority as:

The English language is a global lingua franca and is an appropriate international language for Nepal to be connected with the global community. It is not only the language of international communication, but also a language of higher education, mass media, information and communication technology (ICT), business, tourism, science and medicine. (CDC, 2019a: 17)

Similarly, the Secondary Level curriculum (Grades 9–10) glorifies the value of English:

The learning of English opens up the world for our children and youth. It gives them the ability to become active participants in the knowledge making society and raises their awareness of the multilingual and multicultural world they live in. (CDC, 2019b: 50)

In the same way, the NCF-2007 conceptualises an equal status of English and Nepali as MOI, stating that ‘the medium of school level education can be in Nepali or English language or both’ (MOE, 2007: 34). The same is inherited by the NCF-2019, as ‘English can be the medium of instruction in the subjects except social studies and human values/civic education including the contents related to Nepali art, culture and local identities’ (MOEST, 2019: 36). Hence, all these policies reflect a sense of the superior value of English as a subject, as well as an MOI. This trend continues to project English as a hegemonic language, against national and other ethnic/Indigenous languages. Furthermore, the fact that there is ‘lack of attention in government policy’ to ethnic/Indigenous languages reflects the continued marginalisation of those languages (Choi and Adamson, 2020). These policies contribute to generating an ideology wherein being able to speak English and having an English education is to be of a higher class (Tamim and Lee, 2021).

Nepali language ascendance

Nepali language ascendance dates back to the unification of principalities into the Nepali state by King Prithivi Narayan Shah in the later part of the eighteenth century (Sharma, 2011). Following the Gorkha conquest, the Khas Bhasa (Khas language), the language of the ruling elites, now known as Nepali, was transformed into an official language (Gautam, 2020). Before modern education was introduced, positioning Nepali as an official language, education was conducted at traditional institutions such as *Pathashalas* (Sanskrit-medium Hindu schools), *Gumbas* (Buddhist schools) and *Madradas* (Muslim religious schools), where Sanskrit, Pali/Tibetan and Arabic/Urdu languages were used, respectively.

Until the unification of the principalities, the language of the palace was Sanskrit, but the officialisation of Nepali was adopted as a tool for developing national ‘unity in diversity’ (also called ‘*anekatāma ekatā*’) (Sharma, 2011). Most ethnic/Indigenous communities in Nepal have experienced the official status of Nepali as an internal form of colonisation and have been victims of an associated hierarchal, colonial mentality since then, as their languages, cultures and value systems have been marginalised. Although setting an official language was seen as indispensable for nation building, and as a symbol of national unity and integration in Nepal (Ghimire, 2022), it also represents in another sense the colonisation of Nepali over ethnic/Indigenous languages.

While English and Nepali were both used in education in early Nepalese history, a heightened emphasis on Nepali can be identified since the 1950s. The state-led planned promotion of the Nepali language in education began as early as 1956, and it was later further enhanced with the Panchayat government’s emphasis on Nepali nationalism. Two of the education commissions, NNEPC-1956 and ARNEC-1961, recommended Nepali MOI in all schools, except in language-related subjects. For instance, NNEPC states:

The medium of instruction should be the national language in primary, middle and higher education institutions, because any language that cannot be made lingua franca or does not

serve legal proceedings in court should not be developed and should not be preserved. The use of national language can bring about equality among all classes of people, can be an anchor-sheet for Nepalese nationality, and can be the main instrument for promoting literature. (Pandey et al., 1956: 95)

This commission promoted Nepali as the language of education and perceived that learning and teaching it would enhance equality and strengthen national unity. Alarming, the government pursued active deletion of ethnic languages at the same time, indicating that they should not be preserved. Such nationalist as well as assimilatory policy was inherited by the ARNEC-1961 as, 'the medium of instruction in all schools across the country should be the same language ... In all primary and secondary schools, except while teaching Nepali and other language subjects, the medium of instruction must be the Nepali language' (MOE, 1961: 58). The same was reiterated by the NESP-1971, the new education plan implemented by the Panchayat government to transform Nepal's education system from 'primitive' to 'modern' (MOE, 1971). Such an orientation again influenced the content taught and the organisation of the educational system toward a form of internal colonisation.

Through these policies, the government institutionalised a 'monolingual norm' by adopting an assimilationist ideology, similar to that of the Macaulay Minutes on Indian Education, reflecting the Western colonial ideology that conceptualised linguistic diversity as a problem and Indigenous languages as inferior or backward (Awasthi, 2011). Hence, a systematic obliteration and marginalisation of Indigenous languages occurred, eventually suppressing Nepal's ethnolinguistic vitality and the cultural epistemologies of native communities (Awasthi, 2008; Ghimire, 2022; Gurung, 2009). These processes reflect the process of colonisation, as they reveal the language of the powerful dominating and persecuting the less powerful (Mufwene, 2002).

These instances of policies and practices of colonisation in language education policy also instigated moves to protect, promote and integrate ethnic/Indigenous languages in education. Advocates for the rehumanisation of education favoured the repositioning of Indigenous languages, lives and epistemologies in education systems. In response, decolonisation efforts have more recently been initiated at the governmental as well as at the community level to counter the colonial legacies in language education.

Decolonisation efforts: reinstating Indigenous languages in education

In addition to internal reflection on the need to fight marginalisation of ethnic/Indigenous languages, the declaration of the World Conference on Education for All 1990, commissioned by UNESCO, added pressure on member states, including Nepal, to fine-tune their educational policies to ensure that all children could learn in their mother tongue or the most familiar language. Such equity-raising efforts counter previously hegemonic mono/bilingual educational policies in multilingual countries. These efforts, which challenge the place of colonial elite languages in society, are instances of decolonisation. This section illustrates efforts towards reinstating ethnic/Indigenous languages in education. Our inductive analysis identifies that several actors, including the government, communities and external agencies, have all contributed to decolonisation through policy changes, advocacy and related actions. As is often the case, these actors' policies and actions are interrelated and not mutually exclusive.

Government initiatives

Significant efforts have been made at the governmental level in reclaiming national and local languages in education in Nepal. The Nepal government's initiatives in decolonisation of language education can be observed at two stages. First, it started Nepali-only MOI in schools during the Panchayat period, which challenged the dominance of English in education; later, in the 1990s, it adopted a rights-based approach that generated space for Indigenous languages. Although repressive policy actions against Indigenous languages and cultures took place during the Panchayat period (Awasthi, 2008; Ghimire, 2022; Sah, 2021; Weinberg, 2013), from 1990, Nepal's government attended more to the reinvention and rejuvenation of local history, culture and Indigenous languages. The government's adoption of a rights-based approach to governance and educational transformation reveals a desire to integrate previously minoritised languages into education (for example, GON, 1990; MOE, 1992).

These changes in constitutional provisions and educational policies, which frame linguistic diversity as a resource in education, are thus part of the government's decolonial efforts. For instance, the

Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal (GON, 1990) stated, 'each community shall have the right to operate schools up to the primary level in its own mother tongue for imparting education to its children'. This provision counters earlier exclusive education policies, such as those stated in NNEPC-1956 and NESP-1971, which banned the use of Indigenous languages in education, developed deficit ideologies in relation to them and perceived linguistic diversity in education as a problem (see UNESCO, 2016).

The policy shift from linguistic homogenisation to multilingualism after the 1990s reflects efforts at decolonisation, as the intention was to raise the status of ethnic/Indigenous languages. Such trends transformed the earlier stereotypical labelling of these languages as 'the speech of the illiterate' (Malla, 1979: 112) and repositioned linguistic diversity as a resource, thus legitimating the inclusion of minority languages in education. The educational policies and the curriculum frameworks developed after 1990 emphasised this decolonial approach. For instance, Recommendation No. 8 of the NLPRC-1994 recommended 'to make a provision to teach mother tongue instead of Sanskrit as an alternative subject within the curricular framework of the lower secondary level curricula' (Nembang et al., 1994: 3). Similarly, the first comprehensive curriculum framework NCF-2007 stated that 'the medium of school-level education can be in Nepali or English language or both. However, in the first stage of elementary education (Grades 1–3), the medium of education will generally be in mother tongue' (MOE, 2007: 34), which was echoed in the NCF-2019, as noted above.

Even though these state-commissioned policies continue to project English and Nepali as dominant languages, they also emphasise the place of ethnic/Indigenous languages in education, both as MOI and as a subject. This move on the one hand exemplifies a decolonial effort to resist the wider expansion of EMI in public and private schools, while on the other it signifies the Nepal government's effort in bringing in more languages. The fact that mother tongues are related to 'culture and local identities' shows awareness of the threat of losing Nepal's linguistic legacy and the importance of preserving a wider sense of the country's cultural heritage (Starr and Hiramoto, 2017).

Given the great dialectal diversity across mother tongues, NLPRC-1994 further recommended developing writing systems, preparing learning materials, managing human resources and conducting teacher training as part of infrastructure development for implementing mother tongue education. Following this recommendation, the Curriculum Development Center developed textbooks in over 25 languages that had official written scripts (Turin, 2007). Continuing earlier provisions, the Constitution of Nepal 2015 authorised provincial governments' decision making to co-opt the language spoken by the majority population as the language of official business in addition to Nepali. It also established the Language Commission to settle matters concerning languages, in research as well as in documentation of existing and new languages. Recently, the Language Commission recommended the adoption of a multilingual policy for official communication at the provincial level. For instance, the fifth annual report of the commission recommended the use of Tamang and Newar (Nepal Bhasa) beside Nepali in the Bagmati province of Nepal (The Himalayan News Service, 2021).

These policy developments and changing trends in Nepal reflect government initiatives to reposition minoritised languages in education and therefore can be regarded as decolonial efforts. One such macro policy initiative is a provision of local curriculum in the national curriculum framework, in which a locally developed subject including the language(s) as well as cultural values of the local community can be taught (MOEST, 2019). This policy effort intended to reclaim cultural epistemologies of ethnic/Indigenous and marginalised communities in education. However, challenges (such as resource limitations and community disengagement) in the implementation of such policies have been reported by authorities (for example, municipal-level policymakers) delegated with the responsibility of managing languages in education (Poudel and Choi, 2021b).

Community initiatives

Community engagement in countering colonial ideologies has also been significant in Nepal's struggle to reinstate Indigenous languages in education. Following political changes in 1990 that guaranteed the right to operate schools in mother tongue up to primary level in each community, and Nepal being declared a multi-ethnic and multilingual country (GON, 1990), Indigenous nationalities such as Newar, Tamang, Rai, Limbu, Gurung, Tharus and Danuwar acted to further resist linguistic, cultural and religious homogenisation (Hangen and Lawoti, 2013). In 1991, the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities was established as an umbrella organisation of 59 Indigenous nationalities to contribute to building

an equal, equitable and just democratic society by fighting for Indigenous peoples' rights and identity. Hence, Gellner (2007) describes the post-1990 period as one of 'ethnicity-building' in Nepal.

Recognising such Indigenous movements, the government established the National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities in 2002, as a permanent body to cater to the concerns of *Adhibāsi Janajātis* (Indigenous nationalities). Although these advocacy movements relate to broader changes in access, political participation and equality, they had significant implications for language education. Addressing their language-related demands, in 2009, the government piloted mother tongue MOI multilingual education in primary schools in seven districts, in languages such as Tharu, Urdu, Rajbansi, Santhal, Tamang and Athppahariya Rai (UNESCO, 2011).

Some community and individual actions by politicians have also reflected resistance to traditional colonial practices in relation to language use. For instance, Vice-President Pramanandha Jha, a leader from the Madhesi community in Nepal, took his oath in Nepali and Maithili, the second-most common language in Nepal and his mother tongue. Jha's activism, albeit at an individual level, had implications for social justice discourse in Nepal. Similar efforts were made by lawmakers who took oaths of office and secrecy in 11 languages thereafter – Maithili, Bhojपुरी, Tamang, Tharu, Nepal Bhasa, Bajjika, Sherpa, Hindi, Magar, Gurung and Nepali – with many attending the ceremonies wearing traditional attire from their respective communities (Paudel, 2018). These actions of lawmakers, elected through proportional representation of their respective communities, as well as from direct election, have aided in countering previous Nepali-only monolingual practices in state official business. Their efforts reflect the public uptake of provisions in the Interim Constitution of Nepal 2007, which stated, 'nothing shall be deemed to prevent the using of any language spoken as the mother tongue in a local body and office', also indicated in the Constitution of Nepal 2015 (GON, 2007; GON, 2015).

In line with these actions and policies that created space for ethnic languages, some local governments have started to develop curricula for teaching local languages in schools. One such example is the move of the Kathmandu Metropolitan Office, which decided to teach Newar language, prepared textbooks and recruited 172 teachers to teach the language in public schools in the municipality (Pathak, 2021). This decision was a community initiative, as Newars are natives in the Kathmandu Valley. Although the outcomes of such policy decisions are yet to be fully realised, the inclusion of mother tongues within state-sanctioned educational spaces is a significant move towards realising the ambition of reinstating ethnic/Indigenous languages in the society.

Role of external actors

With Nepal's educational reforms being largely donor-driven (Regmi, 2017; Robinson-Pant, 2001), educational initiatives such as large-scale curricular changes and the formation of educational policies typically, directly or indirectly, involve multinational development partners. In that sense, the roles of external actors, the government and communities intersect in language education policy. As a member of the United Nations since 1955, Nepal's educational policies are informed and inspired by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948 and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People 2007, as well as by many other international covenants that orient education policies towards mother tongue education (UNESCO, 2011). Accordingly, linguistic diversity and multilingual education have been reaffirmed as priority areas in educational reform plans, such as the School Sector Reform Plan-2009-16 and the School Sector Development Plan-2017-23.

Such actions have also been inspired by the fact that development partners are directly involved in technical and financial aid-in-support for these plans (MOEST, 2016). International organisations have frequently expressed the need to resist changes that jeopardise equal opportunities and equity in education, including those related to the choice of MOI in schools. UNESCO (2021: 10) reiterates such concerns by raising the question, 'will the dominant languages of instruction shift and the languages used in students' homes become more favoured in education?', which adds pressure to member states to reimagine curricula to embrace Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

The international community and development partners also instigate change through their willingness to fund organisations of Indigenous nationalities for language advocacy projects to reclaim Indigenous cultural and linguistic identities (Weinberg, 2013). Although international organisations are often criticised for contributing to institutionalising universalist ontology and epistemology (Takayama et al., 2017), their contributions to Nepal's educational reforms in terms of equity and social justice

provide vivid examples of external actors' engagement and advocacy in (re)humanising education through integrating local cultural epistemologies and languages in the curriculum.

Conclusion and implications

Although decolonial theory takes its starting point from the historical legacy of colonisation, and thus is usually oriented towards postcolonial national contexts, decolonisation efforts are also important in many countries that have not been formally colonised, but which have nonetheless experienced colonialist pressures over history. This article has illustrated instances of colonisation and decolonisation in relation to language education in Nepal, where marginalisation, oppression and exclusion of ethnic languages have been simultaneously intentional and unintended at different times in history. It has also unpacked efforts made by the government, Indigenous communities and external actors to counter the legacies and ideologies of colonisation and to diversify education by reinstating Indigenous languages and cultural heritage in curricula.

EMI was adopted in formal education from 1853, driven by the desire to acquire English, the language of the coloniser of the neighbouring country, India. The move created legacies of colonisation that resulted in English dominance to the detriment of Nepal's languages. The subsequent emergence of monolingual nationalist ideology promoted the Nepali language during the Panchayat period, countering this trend. However, Nepal neglected to recognise its linguistic and cultural diversity at that time, entrenching Nepali monolingual nationalism through sanctioning the Nepali language at the cost of the rich linguistic diversity constituted by Nepal's more than 129 languages (see Awasthi, 2008; Language Commission, 2019; Weinberg, 2013; Yadava, 2007). In other words, Nepali nationalism contributed to the internal colonisation of ethnic/Indigenous languages. However, efforts to incorporate Indigenous languages continued through policy developments to resist historical legacies of systematic injustice and oppression against minority ethnic/Indigenous languages.

Understanding the case of Nepal helps shed light on the complexity and tension around understanding the political constructions of colonisation and decolonisation. While current policy provisions that give control to local governments in developing local curriculum to teach local languages are key to benefiting linguistic minorities (Tollefson and Tsui, 2018), how such communities, in collaboration with state and non-state actors, critically engage in dialogues to challenge the historical legacies of deficit ideologies in relation to minoritised languages also impact the effectiveness of decolonisation efforts. Although the expanding decolonial movements and policy changes create safe spaces to reinstate Indigenous languages as subjects and as MOI alongside English and Nepali, the translation of policies into practice in linguistically heterogeneous schooling contexts is challenging in Nepal's quest to materialise a decolonial agenda. Given the complex sociocultural and linguistic situation of Nepal, understanding the micro complexities of implementing decolonising practices in education requires further research. As decolonisation has multiple interpretations in the contemporary context of globalisation and internationalisation (see Lin and Jackson, 2020; Torres-Maldonado, 2007; Tuck and Yang, 2012), how the state, as well as non-state agencies, continue to empower local/Indigenous languages and knowledge systems is equally important to consider.

Despite policy structures that aspire to reinstate Indigenous languages in education, at the practical level the meaningful participation of native communities in educational policymaking remains essential. In addition, as language education is a complex, socially situated terrain (Hult, 2018; Poudel and Choi, 2021a), it is also imperative to explore the outcomes of Indigenous community movements, government initiatives and implications of external agencies' support in collectively correcting for historical and systematic exclusions and minoritisation of ethnic/Indigenous languages in education.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

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Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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