

Hindu School in a Secular State: Interpreting Secularism in Nepal
Ved Vidhyashram

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LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION

This is to certify that this Thesis entitled “Hindu School in a Secular State: Interpreting Secularism in Nepal Ved Vidhyashram” was prepared by Mr. Avash Bhandari under my supervision. The researcher has met the criteria prescribed by Central Department of Sociology. I hereby recommend this thesis for final evaluation and approval.

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APPROVAL LETTER

This is to certify that the thesis entitled “Hindu School in a Secular State: Interpreting Secularism in Nepal Ved Vidhyashram” submitted by Mr. Avash Bhandari in partial fulfillment for the requirements of Master Degree of Arts in Sociology has been evaluated and approved.

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that MA thesis entitled "Hindu School in a Secular State: Interpreting Secularism in Nepal Ved Vidhyashram" submitted to Central Department of Sociology, Tribhuvan University is entirely my original work, prepared under the guidance and supervision of my supervisor, Dr. Krishna Bhattachan. I have fully acknowledged all ideas and information borrowed from various sources in the course of writing this thesis. The result presented in this thesis has not been presented or submitted anywhere else for the award of any degree. I assure that no part of the content of this thesis has been published in any form. I am solely responsible if any evidence is found against my declaration.

Signature:.....

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ABSTRACT

In the newly secular country of Nepal, the meanings of secularism remain unclear and highly contested. The reinstated parliament declared Nepal as a secular state in 2006, curtailing the power of the monarchy which was historically derived from Hindu religion. The Constituent Assembly ended the monarchy and declared Nepal as a secular, federal, and democratic republic in May, 2008, and the constitution of 2015 upheld these basic tenets. Strangely enough, the new constitution defined secularism as protection of ancient religious practices and freedom of religion. Nevertheless, secularism is still a highly contentious issue, with various parties and factions still demanding a return to Hindu state. This research provides a case study to illustrate how social tensions around the adoption of secularism are played out in a school, which is primarily dedicated to the study of ancient Hindu texts.

Secularism in Nepal does not mean total separation of state from religions or even from Hindu religion. Rather, secularism is widely interpreted by those who support it as equal support and protection of all religions by the government, at least on paper. Nepal's constitutional secularism is silent about the state's relationship with denominational schools, which primarily impart religious education, despite the fact that these gurukuls, gumbas, vihars and madrassas occupy a prominent space in Nepal's educational landscape. Although the number of students educated in gurukuls is relatively small, these schools play an important social role as centers for the preservation and transmission of ancient Hindu knowledge. In this thesis, I am examine one gurukul's relationship with the secular state as mediated by the Pashupati Area Development Trust (PADT), a statutory body headed by the Prime Minister and chaired by the Minister for Culture.

The school is a site for both the preservation of traditional Sanskrit education and for the production of English-educated citizens who will carry forward the state's goals of modernization and development. Though the avowedly secular state's support of traditional Vedic education may seem contradictory, I will explore the ways in which the actors involved perceive it as an appropriate strategy for promoting historical continuity, preserving religious heritage and identity, and contributing to national pluralism.

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