

# Chapter One: Introduction

## 1.1 Background

The reinstated parliament declared Nepal as a secular state on May 18, 2006. Though the monarchy was still in place, its power was curtailed by severing the state from Hindu religion. The interim constitution of 2007 also upheld Nepal's secular status. Finally, the Constituent Assembly declared Nepal as a secular, federal, democratic and republic on May 28, 2008. Nepal's new constitution of 2015 has upheld its secular status but has given secularism an anomalous definition. In spite of its constitutional status, secularism is a highly contentious issue, with various parties and factions demanding a return to Hindu state. This research will provide 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.

Religion has historically figured prominently in Nepali statecraft. Until 2006, Hindu religion was among the fundamental elements of Nepali nationalism and national identity. Nepal's Hindu identity was enshrined in the constitution of 1990. However, the 'Hinduness' of the erstwhile Hindu state was and is contested. The opponents of secularism claim that despite its constitutional status as a Hindu state, Nepal was not theocratic and ensured a harmonious relationship between all religions. As Nepal had already abolished caste and was not governed according to Hindu religious scriptures, one scholar claimed that Nepal of the 1990s was 'neither secular, nor Hindu' (Sharma, 2003). In spite of it, the Hindu character of Nepali state was evident in national symbols, state holidays, ban on cow slaughter, and ban on proselytization. The latter two markers continue unabated in the secular republic.

The category 'Hindu' has a long history in the political discourse of Nepal. As stated by Burghart (1996), throughout its modern history Nepal has been defined in various periods as the domain of 'Hindupati', 'the asal Hindustan', 'the only Hindu Kingdom', and 'Hindu, constitutional monarchical kingdom' (Burghart 1996: 262-74). Rulers generally used Hindu religion not just to legitimize their rule internally but also to project a distinct and unique identity externally. Nepal's first legal code, called the *Muluki Ain* of 1854 was based on injunctions in *dharmashastras* and was characterized by an obsessive level of detail in regulating caste regulations regarding food and sexual relations (Hofer, 2004). Gravity of offense and one's caste

standing became significant in determining punishments for crime. This 1854 legal code was replaced by a new code in 1963, which abolished caste. However, the constitution promulgated in 1962 following a royal coup had already defined Nepal as the only Hindu Kingdom in the world. The Hindu status of the state was retained, despite substantial opposition, in the constitution that followed the success of People's Movement of 1990.

The declaration of Nepal as a secular republic marked a rupture in its history. Nevertheless, it is important to note that secularism didn't come out of nowhere in Nepal (Thapa, 2015). The demands for secularism were raised even before the promulgation of the constitution of 1990. Ethnic and Dalit movements in Nepal have long demanded that Nepal be turned into a secular state, alongside other liberal, progressive, non-ethnic and non-Dalit forces. Secularism was also one of the key demands of Maoists before they started the insurgency in 1996.

The concept of secularism originally emerged out of a distinct relationship between the church and the state in Western Europe, as has been well illustrated by Asad (2003) and Taylor (2007). However, there are also many European states that are not secular, such as England, Norway, and Denmark. Several scholars equate secularism with Western modernity (Madan, 2009; Nandy, 2009) although the idea of a fundamental link between secularism and Western modernity has not gone totally unchallenged (Sen 2009, Bhargava 2009). In Nepal too, there is a widespread opinion that secularism is a Western and, by that logic a Christian, conspiracy. In debates surrounding constitution making, secularism has meant different things to different people. Centre for Constitutional Dialogue (CCD), in a booklet published in 2009, advanced three alternative forms of secularism, with concomitant strengths and challenges:

- ) An assumption that there should be a complete separation between the state and religion.
- ) A belief that the state should be neutral in religious matters.
- ) A notion that all religions should be equally protected. The state neither establishes nor prohibits any religion (CCD 2009: 7).

The relationship between the state and religious institutions in Nepal came to the surface with two important cases; the Pashupatinath case and the Kumari case (Letizia: 2012; Uprety: 2014). The first case revolved around the government's involvement in the appointment of a priest while the second one challenged the practice of Kumari on the grounds that the practice was a

violation of children's fundamental rights. Both of these cases accepted the state's role in supporting and reforming religious practices and also indicated that secularism in Nepal does not mean the complete separation of state and religion.

The short history of secularism in Nepal shows that secularism does not mean total separation of state from religions or even Hindu religion. Rather, according to the definition of secularism provided by the new constitution, which says secularism should be understood as "protection of religion and culture being practiced since ancient times, and religious and cultural freedom," it is correct to say that secularism in Nepal has a very clear Hindu bent. Furthermore, the ban on proselytization and cow slaughter can be forwarded as a proof of the Hindu state's continuity behind the veneer of nominal secularism upheld by the constitution. Several social commentators in the Nepali public sphere have highlighted the ambiguity surrounding such redefinition of the term itself, arguing that this ambiguity in the new constitution retreats from the promises made in the interim constitution and privileges the majority Hindu community over rest of the population (Jha, 2015; Lal, 2015).

Besides mainstream education, religious education in gurukuls, gumbas, vihars and madrassas also occupies a prominent space in Nepal's educational landscape. As this study deals with a Hindu school (Gurukul) in an ex-Hindu secular state, I will discuss only gurukuls in the lines that follow. CERID (2007) suggests that there are altogether 200 schools under gurukul in Nepal, although not all of them formally registered. In spite of the fact that 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. The Gurukul Education Council, formed under the Ministry of Education, looks over the affairs of gurukuls in the country. Gurukuls provide education on Hindu religion, Vedas and philosophy and most, though not all, gurukuls accept boys only.

Religious education in a publicly funded school is a controversial topic in many secular states (NSS, 2013). Nepal's constitutional secularism is silent about the state's relationship with denominational schools like gurukuls, which mostly impart religious education. Before 2006, the Hindu state of Nepal "sought to underline its Hinduness through the school curriculum" in both public and private schools (Sharma 2002: 30). One cannot be too optimistic that things have changed in the secular state. Writing when Nepal was still a Hindu state, Sharma (2002) noted

that the state selectively chose and inserted stories from Hindu religious scriptures and more tellingly not from Bible, Koran or Buddhist Jataka tales in language-related subjects.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Barring few notable exceptions, most writings on secularism in Nepal have limited themselves to newspaper articles or opinion pieces. There are even fewer empirical studies that focus on the relationship between religious institutions and the new secular state. It is far from clear what it means for Nepal to be a secular state despite its constitutional status.

The widely held notion of secularism as a separation of religion and state and the relegation of religion to the private sphere is insufficient to understand the complexity of secularism in Nepal and South Asia. This research calls for the nuanced understanding of the idea of separation with special focus on the relation between a denominational (Hindu) school and a secular state.

When it comes to education and secularism, the dominant view in the some western countries, France in particular, is that the state should stay away from the denominational schools and should not grant them any kind of financial support. The subsidization of religious schools is a heated topic within the discourse of secularism and some see state support as a violation of the principle of secularism (Smith: 2009; Galanter: 2009). Furthermore, secularists also believe that religious education should be kept away from publicly supported schools in a secular state. Others argue that if the state is supporting schools of one religion, then the same support should also be extended to schools of other religions. The question that arises in this context is how the state will conduct itself when it comes to dealing with denominational schools and most importantly for this research, how the schools themselves perceive and rationalize their relation with the secular state. Is the idea of total separation or exclusion applicable to the context of Nepal or should there be some combination of “symmetric treatment” (Sen: 2009) and “principled distance” (Bhargava: 2009)? Instead of advocating for the total exclusion of religion from the public arena, symmetric treatment calls for the equal treatment of various religions. Similarly, the idea of principled distance aims towards a contextualized understanding of secularism and is not always against the involvement of state in religious institutions.

The relationship between denominational schools and the state is still unexplored by scholars while interpreting secularism in Nepal. In Nepal, secularism and religious schools have been

studied separately without any effort to link the two. The studies about religious schools have paid attention to efforts taken by governments to mainstream religious schools like gurukuls, gumbas and madrasas, their management and curriculum (CERID, 2007). Studies focusing solely on educational policies and reforms have failed to touch on a serious issue of engagement between the secular state and such schools run along religious lines. Towards that purpose, this research focuses solely on the relationship between one gurukul and the secular state.

I think it is pertinent to look at the adjustments made by Hindu schools after Nepal's conversion from a Hindu state to a secular state in order to get a broader picture of Nepali secularism. Driven by such research problems, I formulated the following research questions:

#### General Research Question

1. How does a gurukul, including its management, teachers and students interpret the state of secularism in Nepal?
2. How has the institution adjusted itself structurally and ideologically with the secular state?
3. How do those involved in running the school explain the apparent conundrum of state funding for a thoroughly religious institution?

#### Specific Research Questions

1. What role does the Pashupati Area Development Trust play in the overall management of the school and as an institution situated between the secular state and Nepal Ved Vidhyashram?
2. What are the courses and curriculum offered by/in the school?
3. Where does the school stand regarding the questions related to inclusion and exclusion in terms of caste, ethnicity and gender while admitting students?

### **1.3. Objectives of the Research**

The objectives of the research are following:

1. To explore the gurukul's adjustments and accommodations after Nepal's conversion into a secular state, paying attention to its admission policies and curriculums and courses

offered. In other words, to examine the continuity and changes in gurukul education before and after 2006.

- ) To find out the gurukul's interpretation of secularism and secular Nepal and how they relate to the idea of social inclusion and exclusion with regards to gender and caste.
- ) To give a contextualized understanding of secularism resulting from this interaction.

#### **1.4. Rationale of the Study**

In the newly secular country of Nepal, the meanings of secularism remain unclear and highly contested. Instead of focusing on the public discourse on secularism in the mainstream media, social media and academic journals, this study aims to interpret secularism in Nepal through the interaction between religious institutions as represented by a Hindu school and the secular state. This study will contribute to the studies on secularism in Nepal by paying attention to a macro level institution i.e. the state and a micro level institution i.e. school. Furthermore, secularism is generally viewed as one of the key components of democracy, which is why it is necessary to examine the state's relation with religion and religious education. Secularism does not necessarily imply the decline of religion but the start of a new and qualitatively different relation between the state and religious institutions.

The present research will also be helpful to those trying get a handle on the practice of secularism in Nepal and how one Hindu school has adapted itself to the changed context. Moreover, this research will also be useful to those interested in studying the religious and formal education provided by gurukuls. Though it is not my overt objective, this research might also help the government, which is seeking educational reforms in denominational schools and to mainstream these schools.

#### **1.5. Limitations of the Study**

Owing to several constraints imposed by time and costs, this study of secularism has focused only on one kind of denominational school. Moreover, among the gurukuls, this research has limited itself to one extensive case study of Nepal Ved Vidhyashram. Therefore, the research has following limitations:

- ) This study is about the state of a Hindu school in a former Hindu and now secular state of Nepal. Therefore, it does not study about other kinds of denominational schools such as vihars, gumbas, madarasas while examining the practice and meaning of secularism.
- ) The research will limit itself to one gurukul. Therefore, the findings might not apply to every single gurukul in the country.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

### 2.1 Secularism in the West

Secularism arose out of a distinct history of confrontations between church and state in the Western Europe. The complex initial motives of secularism were, “to check absolutism, religious bigotry, and fanaticism to ensure that the values enshrined in particular religions did not trump other values, to manage religious conflicts reasonably” (Bhargava 2009: 1). France upholds secularism as its national identity and is committed to relegating religion from public sphere but as Calhoun (2010) has noted, the history of French secularism is related with its own religious history of anti-clericalism and its secularism is far from being neutral, as can be seen in the response to Islamic immigrants.

According to Calhoun, “the root notion of the secular is a contrast not to religion but to eternity” (Calhoun 2010: 5). He further suggests that the word secular was derived from *saeculum*, a unit of time adapted by the Romans and in the ancient world and *saeculum* meant a century. Calhoun also remarks that secular was counterposed to eternity not religion, and the distinction was made between earthly existence and eternal life with god. Casanova (2011) states that secularism is a worldview and an ideology. He also makes a distinction between “secular”, “secularization”, and “secularism”, where secular is a “central modern epistemic category”, and secularization is “an analytical conceptualization of modern world-historical processes” (Casanova 2011: 54). In addition, “secularism also refers to a different normative-ideological state projects, as well as to different legal-constitutional frameworks of separation of state and religion and to different models of differentiation of religion, ethics, morality, and law” (Casanova 2011: 66). He also differentiates between “secularism as statecraft doctrine” and “secularism as ideology”. The former deals with the separation between religious and political authority while the latter conceives religion as “non rational” and supports its relegation from the public sphere.

However, secularism in both France and the United States has been tested with recent debates over rights of Muslim women to wear veil and the battle to teach creationism along with evolution respectively. Bhandar (2009) contends that secularism and multiculturalism is used by



states to govern difference in these societies. Bhandar also questions the attempt to sever culture from religion to form a common political culture, pointing out the “implicit Christianity” of the “Anglo-European norms of culture”.

Tambiah (2009) touches on the relationship between education and secularism while discussing about various meanings of secularism in the west. According to one meaning of secularism, “national education should be purely secular, and in this sense a ‘secularist’ is an advocate of restructuring education to ‘secular’ subjects” (Tambiah 2009: 420). Another meaning of secularism adheres to a view that state supported schools should stay away from religious instructions and rituals. Moreover, as Tambiah points out, the latter view also asserts that state aid should not be granted to denominational schools.

## **2.2 Secularism in India**

The Indian state adopted secularism as its directive principle after its independence in August, 1947. Secularism in India was meant to check religious strife between the Hindus and Muslims, after the horrors of partition. For D.E. Smith (2009), secularism consists of three sets of relations:

1. Religion and individual
2. The state and the individual
3. The state and religion

The first part deals with the individual’s freedom of religion and the state is excluded from the relation between religion and individual. As Smith argues, “the state cannot dictate religious beliefs to the individual or compel him to profess a particular religion or any religion” (Smith 2009: 178). However, he points out that the secular state can legitimately regulate religion, “in the interest of public health, safety or morals.” Secondly, a secular state takes individual not group as its basic unit for citizenship. Normatively, a secular state cannot discriminate any citizen on the grounds of religion and other group identities. In a secular state, “religion becomes entirely irrelevant in defining the terms of citizenship; its rights and duties are not affected by the individual’s religious beliefs” (Smith 2009:179). Finally, the third component argues for the separation of state from religion and disagrees with the state’s support, promotion, regulation and intervention in any religion. “The underlying assumption of this concept is simply that religion

and the state function in two basically different areas of human activity, each with its own objectives and methods” (Smith 2009: 180).

The Indian constitution has several articles in its constitution dealing with the relationship between the secular state and education. For example, Article 27 states that “No person shall be compelled to pay any taxes, the proceeds of which are specifically appropriated in payment of expenses for the promotion or maintenance of any particular religion or religious domination” (Smith 2009: 216) Smith interprets this article as forbidding of taxation for the benefit of one particular religion but not for the benefit of all religions, which he contends will be constitutional. Likewise, clause (1) of article 28 says, “no religious education shall be provided in any educational institution maintained out of state funds” (Smith 2009: 219).

In India, the most trenchant critique of secularism is advanced by Madan (2009) and Nandy (2009). For Madan, secularism in South Asia is impossible as a shared credo of life because most people in South Asia are adherents of some religious faith in their own eyes, impracticable as a basis for state action because religious neutrality and equidistance is extremely difficult to maintain, and impotent as a blueprint for the future because secularism is incapable of countering religious fundamentalism and fanaticism. Madan sees secularism as an attempt of a minority to impose its will upon the great majority of people. Moreover, he also claims that the secular related to power and interest i.e. *artha* is encompassed by the sacred or spiritual i.e. *dharma* in South Asian tradition that has a “hierarchical relationship between spiritual authority and temporal power” (Madan 2009: 303). In addition, Madan takes secularists to task for denying the legitimacy of religion in the social life of people.

In his forceful criticism of secularism, Nandy (2009) distinguishes between religion as faith and religion as ideology. By faith, Nandy means a way of life and tradition that is “definitionally non-monolithic and operationally plural” and by ideology, he means religion as “a subnational, national or cross-national identifier of populations contesting for or protecting non-religious, usually political or socio-economic interests” (Nandy 2009: 322) For Nandy, the politics of secularism is equivalent to the practice of religion as ideology and the modern nation-state prefers the latter to the former. Nandy portrays secularism as modernism and an intolerant ideology because the whole secular project of public-private separation does not make sense in the Indian context.

The Madan-Nandy thesis or the anti-modernist opposition to secularism is critiqued by writers such as Sen, Bilgrami, and Bhargava. Sen (2009) disagrees with the invalidation of secularism on the ground that it represents modernism. For Sen, the heart of secularism is the symmetric treatment of different religious communities in politics and there is no reason why symmetric treatment should be wrong in principle. Similarly, Bilgrami (2009) argues that Nandy's critique of secularism is driven by his nostalgia for bygone modernism and a sweeping rejection of all forms of nationalism without taking into account its merits. For Bhargava (2009), the Madan-Nandy thesis's fundamental flaw is its inability to grasp the distinctiveness of Indian secularism and its exaggerated claims about the cultural inadaptability of secularism. Bhargava contests that both Madan and Nandy are wrong to interpret secularism as "a gift of Christianity" and they fail to take into account other distinct models of secularism other than the 'church-state model. Bhargava believes that unlike the church-state model of secularism, the "religious strife model" of secularism is accommodative of diversity, has its roots in India, and is therefore valid as well.

Bhargava also makes a case for contextual secularism rather than absolutist secularism. Hyper-substantive and ultra-procedural secularism are two variants of absolutist secularism where the former is "obsessed by its own substantive values, wishes to change the world in accordance of its own idea of the good", and the latter is "indifferent to the conceptions of the good, is concerned solely with order and conflict management" (Bhargava 2009: 514-16). In contrast to its absolutist counterparts, contextual secularism does not demand an absolute exclusion of religion from politics but calls for a principled distance between the two.

More recently, while reevaluating the history of theory and practice of Indian secularism, Vishvanathan has stressed the need for a rethinking of the idea of secularism that can go beyond the more conventional and parochial reading, which understood secularism as "a form of ritual correctness rather than an epistemic model to minimize violence" (Vishvanathan 2016: 16-17). He argues for a re-invention of dialogic secularism that "creates a dialogue between myth and history, science and religion, democracy and pluralism" (Vishvanathan 2016: 16). The author sees the solution to the crisis of Indian secularism in the pluralism of Sadat Hasan Manto and U.R. Ananthamurthy rather than the mediocrity and tyranny of Modi.

## 2.3 Secularism in Nepal

Letizia (2012) still serves as a best introduction to the discourse of secularism in Nepal. She analyzes various understandings of secularism that emerged from her fieldwork because secularism in Nepal means different things to different people. She pays attention not just to the discourses favoring secularism but also anti-secular ones. The Hindu activists' perspective on secularism is different from the Muslim perspective, the former interpreting it as anti-religious and the latter understanding secularism as "equality of all religions". Letizia concludes that the secularism that is in the making in Nepal is distinctive and cannot be understood simply as the unproblematic separation between the temple and the state. In contrast, the court cases that Letizia analyses shows how enmeshed religion and politics/state are in secular Nepal. "Secularism has not prevented the state from financing Hindu religious institutions, but has instead been seen as an opportunity for religious minorities to claim equal support" (Letizia 2012: 95). She concludes that the meaning of secularism in Nepal is still under negotiation, which will continue for some time to come.

Toffin (2013) states that the declaration of secularism in Nepal has radically changed its political landscape and he links the birth of secular state in Nepal to "the crisis of kingship" between the years 2001-7 (Toffin 2013: 48). In his article, Toffin also traces the long history of a link between kingship and Hinduism in Nepal that goes back to the early history of Kathmandu valley. He contends that "Hinduism and Buddhism have cohabited within this small valley for over two millennia. The result is a syncretistic religion, in which Buddhists, *buddhamargis*, worship Hindu gods and participate in Hindu festivals, and vice versa" (Toffin 2013: 53). Toffin identifies kingship as the primary institution that ensured a symbiotic relationship between Hinduism and the Nepali state and also claims that in contemporary South Asia, secularism covers two meanings. The first meaning calls for "the separation of two realms, the secular and the religious, in the civic affairs", while in the second meaning, "secularism relates to tolerance and to equal respect for all faiths" (Toffin 2013: 67-68).

Even when Nepal was constitutionally a Hindu Kingdom, Sharma (2003) had made the claim that Nepal was neither secular nor Hindu. Sharma argued that despite its constitutional identification as a Hindu Kingdom, Nepal was not a theocratic state. Furthermore, three years before Nepal was declared secular, Sharma argued that Nepal was a *de facto* secular state.

Sharma had also suggested to delete the word 'Hindu' from the constitution but without inserting the word 'secular' on the ground that secular kingdom would have been a contradiction in terms. Similarly, Sharma (1996) stated that the Hinduness of the post-1990 Nepali state was "window dressing" retained for political purposes, because the most distinctive component of the Hindu state i.e. the caste system was absent in the Nepali legal system and kingship was the only "core" Hindu institution that prevailed in Nepal. He asserted that the post-1990 Nepali state tried to consolidate its Hinduness by focusing on ancillary issues such as proselytization, cow protection and festivals. However, proselytization and cow slaughter are very critical subjects even in secular Nepal and not at all peripheral.

Sijapati, while discussing the case of Muslims in *Naya Nepal*, argues that rather than an evolution towards non-religiosity, secularism in Nepal can be better understood as "a demand for equal recognition of all faiths", which calls for "a state that treats all religions as equals without discrimination" (Sijapati 2012: 29). She also notes the fact that despite being a secular state since 2006, the Nepali state's preference to Hinduism "is evinced by continuous accolade provided to Hindu insignias such the cow as a national animal, higher recognition to Hindu festivals by celebrating them as public holidays as opposed to other religions" (Sijapati 2012: 29). The idea of treating all religions equally brings its own set of practical problems. Onta (2015) suggests that equitable distribution of resources to religious groups in Nepal can follow the PR logic followed in elections, where each religious group will be allocated its share of resources based on its population presence. Onta notes that this might offend minority religious groups, but that's the price one has to pay for adopting the logic of proportional representation.

Mulmi (2013) presents a case study of Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS) while dissecting the rise of Hindutva in secular Nepal. He deals with development of the Hindu nationalism in Nepal and its linkages with the larger South Asian Hindu nationalism. As the case of HSS shows, the demand for a return to Hindu state again does not necessarily mean a return to monarchy, in contrast to RPP-N, which stands for the twin agenda of Hindu state and constitutional monarchy. Notably, HSS also carries out its organizational work and preaching Hindutva ideology in Hindu Schools (Mulmi and Kharel: 2011).

Dahal(2011) discusses the contested meaning of secularism in Nepal with reference to Pashupati Area Development Trust (PADT) and the debate surrounding the appointment of main priest to

the temple. PADT is a statutory body formed under the PADT Act of 1987 and its objective was “to maintain, preserve and develop the Pashupatinath Area because of the significance of Lord Pashupatinath temple as a centre of reverence of Hindus solely”. In addition, contradictory to the every meaning of secularism, “the prime minister of the country is the patron of the Trust, minister of culture is the chairperson of the governing council of the PADT, and other government bureaucrats and certain members of Legislature-Parliament are ipso facto members of it”. The secular state of Nepal still has deep ties with the temple of Pashupatinath, raising questions about the meaning of secularism and whether Nepal can be a secular state at all.

Khanal (2013) believes that even in a secular Nepal, the state’s involvement in religion cannot be completely eliminated. He also adds that even those who are against the secular state cannot ignore the minority religion’s demand for equal treatment. Khanal outlines several challenges to secularism in Nepal that deal with tourism, the issue of conversion, state recognition of different festivals and national holidays. He also relates secularism and its impact on education system while talking about these challenges and calls for the revision of school curriculums in line with the secular principles, and the removal of “traditional cultural and moral values” from education. Furthermore, he states that students should either be taught about all religions or they should be guided without any of them. Surprisingly, the author is quiet about the issue of denominational schools in secular Nepal.

## **2.4 Religious schools in Nepal and the case of gurukuls**

In addition to public and private schools, some religious institutions such as gumbas, vihars, madrasas and gurukuls also provide formal education in Nepal alongside their own brand of religious education (CERID: 2007). Gumbas and vihars offer courses mostly on Buddhist philosophies while gurukuls offer courses on Hindu philosophies, *karmakanda*, and Vedas. CERID (2007) found that the government had taken initiatives for “mainstreaming” religious education in Nepal as a part of its goal to provide education for all by 2015. Religious schools are different from other schools in terms of the curriculum and textbooks they use, but a few of them have also have English, Nepali and mathematics in their curriculum and are under government’s purview. Most but not all religious institutions are autonomous and function without government support, but the government has decided to mainstream those institutions as well.

A recent news report showed that there are a total of 78 gurukuls/ashrams in Nepal, with 56 primary level, 9 lower secondary level, 5 secondary level, and 2 higher secondary level schools. (THT: 2007)<sup>1</sup>. There are two types of courses offered in schools that conduct formal courses. The first one deals with the Hindu philosophy, *karmakanda*, and Vedas while the other course deals with secular subjects like language including English and Nepali, Social Studies and Mathematics. Many students are provided with free uniform, textbooks and hostel facilities in such schools. However, in some schools, girls, dalits and janjatis are deprived of such facilities citing the reason that the Hindu culture does not allow girls, dalits and janjatis to study Vedas, despite the fact that the management committee of such schools constitute the representatives of secular state and is economically supported by statutory body formed by the government as in the case of Nepal Ved Vidhyashram (CERID 2007: 29). It raises a question about whether a secular state should be involved in institutions that not only provide religious education, but practice discrimination in doing so.

## **2.5 Conceptual framework**

The emergent meaning of secularism in Nepal is a result of interaction between various factors that end up attaching not always a progressive meaning to secularism, but sometimes strange and contradictory ones as well. However, we need to accept that what secularism means in Nepal is not just guided by what the concept entails globally or even regionally, but the social history of the nation itself, a nation that had Hinduism as its state religion until very recently. In this study, I used interactions between three institutions, the secular state of Nepal, Pashupati Area Development Trust, and Nepal Ved Vidhyashram, as one conceptual frame to track the semantics of not just secularism but caste, inclusion and “Nepali Identity” at large that are empirically grounded in those institution and their histories. However, in this research it is individuals associated with the latter two institutions and their relation to each other that acquires the central place in this meaning-making game, rather than the reified idea of “institution” and its activities that takes individuals out of the picture. NVV, and people associated with this institution have been identified as main agents involved in multiple interpretations of secularism that do not necessarily conform to the idea of secularism propagated by the state and its actors, including the Supreme Court. Therefore, it is fair to say that this research is agency-focused rather than structure-centered and the focus on their continuous interaction attempts to overcome the unhelpful dualism between the two.

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<sup>1</sup>Similarly, there are 745 madarasa (719 primary level, 14 lower secondary level, 9 secondary level and 4 higher secondary level) and 78 gumba/bihar (71 primary level, 6 lower secondary level, and 1 secondary level).

## **Chapter Three: Research Methodology**

### **3.1 Study site description and rationale for the selection of the study site**

The research presents a case study of Nepal Ved Vidyashram (NVV) situated in Bankali, Kathmandu. Therefore, the unit of study in this research is an institution and by extension, individuals associated with that institution as teachers, students and management committee members. According to CERID (2007), Nepal Ved Vidhyashram was established in 1969 and it got the permission for SLC examination in 1986. Until 1999, Guthi Sansthan took care of all its expenses but now the Pashupati Area Development Trust (PADT) bears the expenses and is responsible for its overall management. PADT is a statutory body with the prime minister of Nepal as its patron. Furthermore, in case NVV, other government personnel including the representative of the District Education Committee are members of its management committee. The research site was selected because of its physical proximity and close social/political/economic involvement with the temple of Pashupatinath and the PADT. The state is involved in this institution through PADT and that raises questions about what it means to be secular for the state. Nepal Ved Vidhyashram is also different from the majority of gurukuls in the country because it offers formal courses on subjects such as Nepali, Maths, Social Studies and English as well as courses on Hindu philosophy, *karmakanda* and Vedas. Furthermore, this school appears more engaged with the secular state than other small gurukuls and ashrams, thereby offering a good case to understand the theory and practice of secularism in Nepal.

### **3.2. Research Design**

The purpose of a sociological research is not just to describe a social phenomenon but to explain it. Following this basic sociological dictum, the research adopted both descriptive and explanatory research design. In addition, qualitative techniques were used for data collection. This research presents a detailed description of the selected institution and focuses on the analysis of its relation with the state. Furthermore, explanations for that relation and its bearings on theory and the practice of secularism will also be sought.



### **3.3. Nature and sources of data**

The nature of the collected data was largely qualitative with occasional uses of quantitative data from both primary and secondary sources. The research also made an ample use of both primary and secondary data. Primary data was gathered using semi-structured interviews with the members of the management committee, teachers, and students. Additionally, data was collected by participating and making audio recordings of various school functions such as its annual day program and an elocution contest. Similarly, secondary data was collected from NVV's publications that included a journal named *Om Brahmabindu*, documents and reports related to PADT, and government's policy reports.

### **3.4. Sampling procedure**

The research followed different sampling procedures to collect data from different groups of respondents that included teachers, students and management committee members. Stratified random sampling was used to select students for interviews. Here, I stratified students according to their class, from class 4-10, and selected two students from each class by using simple random sampling. A total of 14 students were selected for interview using the process. This sampling also helped to ensure the reliability of the collected information by making it more representative. Similarly, I adopted simple random sampling to select interviewees from teacher and management committee members, interviewing eight teachers and two management committee members. Although the sampling was not a statistically accurate simple random sampling, the researcher avoided all purposive and biased elements while selecting the interviewee. All respondents were involved in the everyday affairs of the gurukul in one way or the other, whether as management committee members, teachers, or students.

### **3.5. Data collection techniques and instruments**

The primary data was collected through participatory observation and semi-structured, open-ended interviews. I made notes on my notebook while carrying out the participant observation. Observation helped me to know about courses taught at NVV and also the pedagogic styles used in the school because most observations were carried out during the class periods. Audio recordings were also made while doing the observation and making notes. Similarly, interviews

with teachers and management committee members revealed their perceptions of changes NVV has gone through over the years. Interviews with students helped to collect data related to their interest in Sanskrit education, their views about Hinduism, caste, secularism and other concepts popular in contemporary Nepali politics. Finally, audio recordings made while participating in events organized by the school were instrumental to collect data related to various other topics of researcher's concern. In such programs, speakers ranged from people currently affiliated with the school to its former students and management committee members. The techniques of data collection were determined by the specific research objectives. Historical ethnography that relied heavily on published sources was useful in tracing the continuity and change in the gurukul education before and after the declaration of 2006. Similarly, in-depth interviews provided insight into NVV's interpretation of secularism and the secular state, from the perspectives of actors involved in various capacities.

### **3.6. Methods of data analysis**

At first, qualitative data collected from interviews were transcribed, and then they were categorized according to different themes they addressed that ended up becoming chapters or subchapters in this thesis. Later, such categorized data was followed by the interpretation of qualitative data, and the researcher's arguments based on those interpretations. I have paid significant attention to the Weberian concept of "*verstehen*" or the empathetic understanding of social phenomena without precluding subjective interpretations of the involved social actors themselves. Therefore, the analysis in this research is hermeneutical rather than positivist. The focal point of the analysis is the NVV members' ideas about secularism and the school's relationship with the secular state and its representative bodies such as the Supreme Court of Nepal. Furthermore, I also used historical analysis to trace the continuity and change in school's relation with the former Hindu state and now with the secular state. Secondary sources published by NVV were of great importance while doing the historical analysis.

I took an interpretive approach to data analysis and my research in general rather than a positivist one because like most other interpretive researchers I also used participant observation and field research and relied mostly on transcripts of personal conversations. I proceeded with an idea that "the goal of social research is to develop an understanding of social life and discover how people construct meaning in natural setting" (Newman 1997: 68-69). In my research, NVV provides a

natural setting for its members, teacher, management, and students, to construct a meaning of secularism and social inclusion among other things. Furthermore, faithful to the interpretive tradition in sociology, I stuck to the study of “*meaningful social action*, not just the external or observable behavior of people” (Newman 1997: 69).

## Chapter Four: NVV, PADT and the state

### 4.1. Background

This section introduces Nepal Ved Vidhyashram (NVV) and Pashupati Area Development Trust (PADT) and analyses their relationship with each other and with the Nepali state over the years. NVV started its full operation in 1974, on the birthday of the then-Queen, four years after construction of buildings for the school began. The autocratic Hindu monarchy of the day had a big role in the birth of NVV as King Mahendra ordered the Guthi Sansthan<sup>2</sup> to do all preliminary work required to set up a Sanskrit school and the Guthi selected the temple premises of Pashupatinath, the patron god of the Hindu state, to start the school. Therefore, the drive to start a Sanskrit school with direct backing from the state was guided by an idea of Nepali national identity derived heavily from hill Hindu upper caste culture and the *bir* (brave) history that celebrated battlefield bravery of yesteryears (Onta, 1996). The state-sponsored nationalism that had Hinduism as one of its pillars saw the possibility of a Sanskrit school as a vehicle to promote its nationalist ideology. As the present Principal of the school writes in a journal called *Om Brahmabindu*<sup>3</sup>, “The school was established after intellectuals of that time realized the need to develop culture and rituals that would secure Nepal and Nepali’s identity in the future” (Adhikari 2060vs: 54). This idea of Nepali identity would be dominated by loyalty to the king, Hindu religious imagination, Pahadi ethnic culture and anti-Indian nationalism. The government, through the Guthi Sansthan, bore a financial responsibility to set up the school and the Sansthan continued to look after the logistics and administration of the school until 1999. Hindu idea of piety, sin and repentance also played their part in school’s foundation. According to the principal:

There are many ways to repent in this world and one of them is by teaching and chanting mantras from the Vedas. We can imagine that from the selection of this place, Pashupati area that is the holiest site for Hindus, to start a Vedic school when there were other more

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<sup>2</sup> Guthi Sansthan (Guthi Corporation) was established in 1964. Guthi, a form of institutional landownership, is “the endowment of lands for the performance of religious and charitable functions” (Regmi 2014: 49).

<sup>3</sup>The journal was published by NVV during the years 2003-6 A.D. but has since ceased publication

suitable places for gurukul education. One of the earliest objectives of this school was also to produce priests for various temples in Pashupati area.

Similarly, in the same journal, the former chairman of the NVV management committee as well as the PADT, Ram Prasad Dahal pointed out five objectives of NVV:

1. Produce authorized intellectuals on Vedic literature
2. Develop Ved Vidhyashram as an international center of Vedic learning
3. Run and preserve education system based on gurukul tradition
4. Produce students who practice religious customs and manners of the Hindus
5. Produce authorized intellectuals on *karmakanda* (Dahal, 2060 vs)

For the first 10 years of its institutional life, NVV functioned outside the domain of formal education system and with a curriculum that required 11 years to complete. Dissatisfied with the state of education at NVV, school management committee under the Sansthan decided to reform the educational structure. Eventually the school entered formal education system, and students started taking SLC<sup>4</sup> exams from 1986. Apart from being part of the formal education and examinations system under the government and following the government-prescribed curriculum, NVV does not have a direct contact with the government at present. This is in contrast to its early days, when the monarchy was involved in its affair and the school itself was under the supervision of a royal head priest.

## **4.2. PADT and NVV**

The management responsibility of NVV was passed over to PADT in 1999, with the Sansthan in a declining financial state largely due to changes in landownership pattern as well as private encroachment of guthi lands and PADT rising as a prosperous and autonomous institution supported by the monarchy. Previously, the Sansthan had handed over management responsibility of the school to Vishwa Hindu Mahasangh (World Hindu Federation)<sup>5</sup> for two years but the Federation could not manage the school in a way the teachers would have liked and the Sansthan took back the responsibility. As one teacher remembers:

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<sup>4</sup> SLC is the abbreviation for School Leaving Certificate which is the final exam in Nepal's secondary school system.

<sup>5</sup> World Hindu Federation is an umbrella organization of various Hindu organizations in different parts of the world and was established after a World Hindu Conference held in Birgunj, Nepal in 1981. The Conference itself was inaugurated by the Hindu monarch, King Birendra of Nepal and before 2006, Nepali monarchy actively supported this non-governmental organization.

The Federation took charge of NVV for two years but it was still within Guthi Sansthan's overall control. The Federation had committed to certain conditions such as teachers' remuneration and more investment in the school before taking over the responsibility, but as it was unable to meet those conditions, teachers at NVV requested the Sansthan to take the management responsibility back.

PADT was established under a special royal act in 1987 as an autonomous body. At the time of its founding, the king was its *sanrakshak* (patron/protector) while the queen was its first chairperson. PADT was also set up a tax exempt institution and it continues to be so. When absolute monarchy ended in 2006, the interim government amended the statute of PADT to delink it from the monarchy (Michaels, 2008). The prime minister became its patron and the Minister of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation is chairperson. This organizational structure has continued even after Nepal ceased to be a Hindu state and became a secular state. The management of NVV is one among many responsibilities of the PADT.

According to its former chairman Dahal, three major decisions were taken after PADT took over the management of NVV:

1. The ownership of 31 ropanis of NVV land owned by Guthi Sansthan should pass over to NVV and PADT and there should be an official agreement between the Sansthan and PADT.
2. The governing committee of the PADT should be policy maker, evaluator, protector and controller of NVV.
3. PADT governing committee should form a separate management committee to run NVV for its educational, and administrative reform, area expansion, educational quality development, and also to mobilize donors to collect financial resources. (Dahal, 2060 vs)

Furthermore, Dahal also points out the decision to provide residential facilities to 75 students from all 75 districts of the country was taken by the PADT in 1999, with "blessings" from the Queen, the chairperson of the PADT back then.

PADT's tension with the secular state became conspicuous during a controversy over an appointment of the Pashupatinath's head priests, raising questions about whether a secular state

should have such deep ties with religious institution and the implications for secularism's meanings in Nepal (Letizia: 2012). A PIL was filed against the patron of the PADT, then-prime minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal (Prachanda), after Nepali priests were appointed to the temple in violation of the tradition of appointing priests from South India. The petitioners interpreted this as a violation of the principle of separation between the state and religious institution and also called for the non-interference of the state on religious matters. Responding to public pressure and the court's order to return to the status quo, the prime minister revoked his decision and things were allowed to continue as before regarding the appointment of priests. However, the case did raise questions about PADT's legal conflict with the idea of secularism, the everyday management of Pashupatinath Temple and demanded more transparency in its organizational setup.

NVV depends completely upon PADT for its everyday functioning and finances. The management committee of the school is chaired by a representative from the PADT and at present PADT's Treasurer is the chair of the eight-member school management committee. Other members of the management committee include a School Inspector from District Education Office; Head of the Religious Department from Guthi Sansthan; Executive Director of PADT, NVV's Principal and three independent Sanskrit scholars. Notably, all of them are high-caste men.

**Table 1. Current members of NVV management committee and their positions:**

S. No.	Name	Positions held
1	Taranath Subedi	Chairman, NVV Management Committee. Treasurer, PADT.
2	Prof. Dr. Rishiram Pokhrel	Member, NVV Management Committee.
3	Yogeshwar Bhattarai	Member, NVV management Committee. School-Superintendent, District Education Office.
4	Dipak Bahadur Pandey	Member, NVV Management Committee. Head of Religious Department, Guthi Sansthan.
5	Ramesh Kumar Upreti	Member, NVV Management Committee. Executive-Director, PADT.
6	Rurda Prasad Mishra	Member, NVV Management Committee.
7	Bishnu Prasad Pokhrel	Member, NVV Management Committee.
8	Keshav Prasad Adhikari	Member, NVV Management Committee. Principal, NVV.

Source: Field Work, 2015-16

However, only representatives from PADT and the Principal are active members in the committee, who are involved in everyday school's everyday affairs. PADT allocates about 1% of its total budget to the school and the year 2014-15 the school received 15 million rupees from the Trust. It is because of its relationship with the PADT that NVV is financially secure and is the most prestigious Sanskrit secondary school compared to other gurukuls in the country. NVV is connected to the state only in matters directly related to education such as curriculum, textbooks and examinations, while in administrative and logistical department NVV is solely dependent upon PADT.



**Table 2. NVV's income for the fiscal year 2062/63 vs.**

S.No.	Source	Nepali Rupees
1	PADT	3, 600,000/00
2	Income from the previous year	269,555/55
3	Support from Mass <i>bratabandha</i>	200,000/00
4	<i>Swasti</i> chanting	99,000
5	Bank Interest	12,000
6	Others	95,444
	Total	4,275,999/95

Source: *Om Brahmabindu* (2063 vs.)

Ever since it took over the management of NVV, PADT has been the largest source of income for the School. PADT's financial support to NVV has grown over the years as expected. In the fiscal year 2062/63 vs, NVV received 3.6 million Rupees from PADT. One major source of income for the school in 2062.63 vs was support from mass *bratabandha* and *swasti* chanting. The school used to organize mass thread wearing ceremonies with involvement of its teachers and students as priests. Similarly, *swasti* chanting involved students and teachers attending various ceremonies and functions and reading mantras from the Vedas. *Swasti* chanting is a typical Hindu way of inaugurating a public ceremony.

**Table 3. NVV's income for the fiscal year 2070/71vs.**

S. No.	Source	Nepali Rupees
1	PADT	11,000,000/00
2	District Education Office	602,000/00
3	School's internal source	578,218/00
	Total	12,180,218/00

Source: Field Work, 2015-16

For the fiscal year 2070/71 vs., the amount increased to 11 million Rupees. For the year same year., the school also received Rs. 602,000 from the District Education Office. School's internal source includes income from its bank interests, and earnings from *swasti* chanting among other things. The total income of NVV for the year 2071/72 vs. was NRs. 12, 180, 218.

**Table 4. NVV's income for the fiscal year 2071/72vs.**

S. No.	Source	Nepali Rupees
1	PADT	11,000,000/00
2	District Education Office	623,000/00
3	School's internal Source	1,064,338/00
	Total	12,687,338/00

Source: Field Work, 2015-16

For the year 2071/72 too, the school received 11 million rupees from the PADT. Similarly, it received Rs. 623, 000 from the District Education Office and earned Rs. 1, 064, 338 from its internal source. As of 2072, the school has a bank deposit of Rs. 731, 471. The total income for the year 2071/72 was Rs. 12, 687,338, a significant rise of Rs. 8, 411, 338 from the 2062/63. Meanwhile, in terms of expenditure, more than half of the school's income is spent on teachers' salary and allowances and for 2071/72vs it was approximately 7 million Rupees.

### **4.3. Interpreting secularism and the secular state**

As can be expected, the school is not in favor of the secular state and most of its teachers and students stand in favor of the reinstatement of the Hindu *rastra*. According to one teacher, who also was NVV's former principal,

As the school is committed to religious and Sanskrit education, and all the individuals who study and teach here are Hindus, it is obvious that they are in favor of the Hindu *rastra* and not in favor of *dharmanirapekshyata*. Regardless of the laws and constitution, they will be in favor of Hindu *rastra* personally. Similarly, PADT is an institution that is committed to the preservation of Hindutva, to develop Pashupatinath as a centre of pilgrimage for Hindus all over the world. Therefore, it is obvious that the school and PADT will be in favor of Hindutva as are many ordinary Nepalis. But we won't be politically active to achieve our end and will only give our suggestions when sought.

The declaration of Nepal as a secular state has not affected the everyday running of the school and it has not faced any significant intervention from the state to reform/alter the way the school

is run. Furthermore, it does not appear that there will be any serious difficulties for the school to adjust itself with the changed political context. Another teacher stresses:

Even when Nepal was a Hindu Kingdom, people of other religions too lived in this country, and there was no religious strife because one religion respected another religion. Hindu religion respected other religions as well. After the declaration of secularism, we have seen the rise of conflicts in the name of religion. Religion wouldn't have been a source of conflict if Nepal had stayed as it was [Hindu state]. It is one thing that the state is declared secular, but in practice majority of our people are Hindus and conduct their life rituals according to Hindu practices. Making the state secular does not mean Hindu religion will decline because although the state might be secular, society's Hinduness will not go away. And it won't make any difference to learning and teaching here.

The running of the school has remained autonomous like it was before 2006; therefore the teacher states secularism has made no difference to learning and teaching at NVV. He also refers to society's "Hinduness" and non-secular character to justify school's support for the Hindu *rastra*. However, these ideas so far are limited to personal beliefs and have not taken any political valence, and are therefore not in conflict with the state and politics.

The school is also linked with Nepal army because graduates from the school are recruited as priests by the Army and these recruits do the regular *pujas* in army as well as on special occasions such as Dashain and Tihar. In a way, the school also serves as a center for production of priests required by the Army. It is not clear whether the Nepal Army supports the school financially or by other means. The teachers of the school point out society's "Hinduness" and practical importance of Sanskrit education provided by NVV to assert the relevance of Sanskrit education and a significant role played by NVV towards that end.

Although the state can be constitutionally secular, society and individuals themselves cannot be secular. They have one or another faith. And as our society is predominantly Hindu, our customs, rituals, and life styles are basically religious and unless those rituals are carried out people are not satisfied. Those rituals and *pujas* need to be done and we need skilled resources to conduct them. They have mostly been produced in non-

institutional settings such as family till now. Such resource is dwindling and they are scarce in our society. This is why the education we provide is relevant for our society.

Similarly, there are those who make a distinction between Hinduism as such and what they call “*Vedic Sanatan Varnashram Dharma*” although it is not clear how one is different from the other. However, the implication is to resist any attempt at reforming practices associated with Hinduism because once everything is lauded as *sanatan* (eternal), any effort to change or reform would appear not only superfluous but also as interfering with “culture that has been practiced since the ancient times”. According to the current Principal of the school:

More than Hinduism as such our school is related to the preservation and promotion of *Vedic Sanatan Varnashram Dharma*. And because we teach subjects related to it, our school is seen as promoting Hindutva. It is compulsory to study Ved here so it is no surprise that our school is seen as an institution that preserves and promotes Hindu dharma. Study of Ved follows the same procedure everywhere and our school is no different.

It can be argued that most Hindus are more upset with the word *dharmanirapekshyata* that with the political and legal meaning it carries i.e. the state having no religion of its own. Such reaction can be attributed to a seemingly untranslatable character of the word *dharma*, which for most Hindus means duty, ethics, moral law, character, and responsibility rather than religion in conventional sense of the term. As one teacher states:

*Dharmanirapekshyata* came out of nowhere and it was imposed overnight because leaders we have were funded by Christians. Nothing can be *nirapekshya* from *dharma*. For example what is the dharma of fire? To burn, isn't it? Can fire not burn? In the same way, everything has its own *dharma*, and *rastra* to have dharma too. This is the reality and when we grasp this reality, it isn't hard to understand that there cannot be *dharmanirapekshyata* anywhere, not even in western countries. In Nepal we have a high level of religious tolerance. Hindus go to Buddhist temples, Buddhists go to Hindu temples. Humanity is our common religion.

However, it remains unanswered by the opponents of *dharmanipekshyta* why the state should be a *Hindu rastra*, and what will such *rastra* stand for if *dharma* means duty and responsibility more than religion.

#### **4.4 Conflict between NVV and PADT**

The conflict between PADT and NVV is most evident when it comes to promotion and tenure of teachers and staffs in the school. Since PADT took over the management of NVV, not a single teacher has received a tenured position, and the school has only three permanent teachers now out of a total of 23 teachers and school staff. There are approximately 250 students in the school at present whereas when PADT took charge of the school in 1999, there were only 20 students in total. Classes too were run from grade 6-10 only. When I started my field work at NVV in August 2015, many teachers were on strike against the trust, demanding tenured positions instead of temporary contracts that are reviewed every six months. Interestingly, this phase in teachers' protest against the Trust was preceded by a different form of protest that consisted of chanting Vedic mantras for peace outside the Trust office. The teacher who sat on a hunger strike against the PADT states:

PADT discriminates against staff working in their office and teachers working at NVV though we too are working under it. Our job is to teach and it is PADT's job to take care of our promotion and welfare as well as recruitment of teachers. When the Trust gave permanent positions to other staff in PADT, it did not bring any policy or programme aimed at NVV and its teachers.

Another teacher adds,

PADT discriminates against staffs working in PADT office and in NVV. No tenured job has been conferred to NVV teachers since PADT took over. PADT should recommend it to the Education and Culture Ministry and they should pass it but PADT is only delaying the simple process. Only three teachers have tenured jobs and even they haven't been promoted for 17 years. Teachers' strike ended after they agreed to teachers' demand but nothing has happened even after a month. For those on contract job, the contract is renewed every six months but if we get tenured jobs, then we will have various benefits like provident funds and insurances.

The then-Minister of Culture also visited the school to listen to teachers and their demands. Therefore, though not directly involved in this conflict between NVV teachers and PADT, the Nepali state is not totally uninvolved owing to its complex ties with PADT and the school. When the teachers released a list of their protest programs, it was addressed not just to PADT but to the office of the President, Prime Minister and Ministry of Culture (among others), suggesting a curious continuity between religious and secular as well as the Hindu state and the secular republic. As NVV will continue to be managed by PADT, its relation with the state will be mediated by the trust and as PADT has adjusted itself with the secular republic without any significant organizational and statutory restructuring, the Nepali state's Hindu inclination will remain clearer than its secular credentials.

## Chapter Five: Curriculum and teaching at NVV

### 5.1 Introduction

NVV's struggles to keep alive the ancient Vedic and Sanskrit learning tradition and its need to adapt itself to modern demands and politics are most visible when we explore changes in subjects and curriculum taught there and the uneasy tension surrounding such changes. Among eight subjects taught in every class from grade 4-8, four are Sanskrit related subjects whereas the other four are non-Sanskrit subjects: namely, Nepali, English, Mathematics, and Social Studies<sup>6</sup>. These non-Sanskrit subjects are parts of the formal education program at other religious schools such as viharas and gumbas as well (CERID, 2007). It is also a part of Nepal government's efforts to mainstream religious education provided in various institutions throughout the country. All non-Sanskrit subjects except English are taught in Nepali language, and both Sanskrit and non-Sanskrit subjects follow curriculum and textbooks prescribed and published by the government-controlled Curriculum Development Committee (CDC) except for some religious texts and primary texts related to Sanskrit grammar. There are also several books published by the Gita Press, Gorakhpur such as Bhagavad Gita, and *Laghusiddhantakaumudi*. According to CERID (2008), traditionally, gurukul education constitutes the study of four Vedas (*Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda, Atharvaveda*), six *Angas* (*Shikshya, Kalpa, Nirukta, Chhanda, Vyakarana, Jyotish*) and four *Upaveda* (*Purana, Nyaya, Mimamsa, Dharmashastra*)

**Table 5. Subjects taught at NVV (2072vs.)**

S. No.	Grade	Subjects
1	IV	English, Mathematics, Nepali, <i>Karmakanda, Sanskrit Vyakaran, Rudri, Sanskrit Sahitya, Gita/Anuvaad,</i>
2	V	English, Mathematics, Nepali, <i>Karmakanda, Gita/Anuvaad, Sanskrit Vyakaran, Sanskrit Sahitya, Rudri</i>

<sup>6</sup>Social Studies and Population Studies is taught as a single subject in grade 8.

3	VI	English, Nepali, Mathematics, Social Studies, <i>Karmakanda, Anuvaad, Sanskrit Sahitya, Sanskrit Vyakaran, Sukla Yajurved</i>
4	VII	English, Nepali, Mathematics, Social Studies, <i>Karmakanda, Anuvaad, Sanskrit Sahitya, Sanskrit Vyakaran, Sukla Yajurved</i>
5	VIII	English, Nepali, Mathematics, Social Studies/Population Studies, <i>Karmakanda, Sanskrit Vyakaran, Sanskrit Sahitya, Anuvaad, Sukla Yajurved</i>
6	IX	English, Nepali, Mathematics, Social Studies, <i>Sanskrit Vyakaran, Karmakanda, Jyotish, Sukla Yajurved</i>
7	X	English or <i>Sanskrit Sahitya</i> <sup>7</sup> , Nepali, Mathematics, Social Studies, <i>Sukla Yajurved/Samved, Karmakanda, Jyotish, Sanskrit Vyakaran</i>

Source: Field Work, 2015-16

## 5.2 Gurukul system

In the school journal *Om Brahmabindu*, Dr. Swami Ramananda Giri, who himself runs a gurukul named Mahesh Sanskrit Gurukul Vidhyapith in Devghat, Tanahau explains how gurukul education and teaching system is and should be different from other schools. After discussing in length about the etymology and significance of the word *guru*, Giri writes, “A teacher should keep students under his control. In gurukuls, students learn under guru’s supervision. If the student is allowed the freedom to do whatever he wants then that is no gurukul. These days, may be because of influences from Western Culture, we can see students behaving badly, which is really sad” (Giri 2062vs: 4). Giri believes that only the education system where the *guru* has full control over his students (students’ minds?) can be called gurukul system. For him, creative and critical freedom of students is something to be prohibited rather than appreciated. In the same journal, a former student of NVV and currently an Associate Professor at Nepal Sanskrit University claims that the major characteristics of gurukul are its focus on strict discipline, good manners, respect for elders and teachers, and self-control (Kattel 2060vs: 29). Such preoccupation with controlling students is evident in the sitting arrangement of students in classrooms. Students need to sit on mats on the floor whereas the teachers sit on the chair in front of the classroom. However, the non-Sanskrit teachers at the school are uncomfortable with such sitting arrangement and demand the introduction of desks and benches. One teacher pointed out

<sup>7</sup> English will be a compulsory subject for SLC students from 2073vs and no longer an optional subject along with *Sanskrit Sahitya*.



that NVV students have a difficult time during the SLC examinations, which take place outside students' own school, when they have to sit in desks for three hours because their bodies are not used to sitting in desks.

### **5.3 Focus on Vedas and *karmakanda***

NVV is dedicated primarily to the teachings of *Vedas* and *karmakanda*, and it is based on teachings of these subjects that school administrations and teachers claim that the education offered at NVV is a practical education that is useful in everyday life as a priest and even a householder. Notably, many students join the Nepal Army as priests after the school is over because the Army announces vacancy for priests every year. This is one reason why Ved and *karmakanda* are the most popular subjects among students, and also the focus of curriculum at NVV. The other reason might be because there aren't other institutions of higher education (after SLC) that offer training in *karmakanda*.

NVV's focus on this aspect of religious education can be traced back to its founding objectives. As most teachers shared with me, one of the founding objectives of NVV was to produce a human resource, priests who are precise, skilled, and competent to officiate Hindu rituals practiced in everyday life such as *rudri* and *shraddha*<sup>8</sup>. The introduction to a grade 8 textbook on *karmakanda* states, "Ved Vidhyashram was established to impart knowledge about Ved and *karmakanda* to students, and it is expected that the gurukul tradition will be continued and that teaching and learning will adhere to traditional norms and values."

However, recent political changes in Nepal have not left the study of Vedas and *karmakanda* untouched. Riding on the progressive wave of post-2006 changes with issues such as social inclusion, dignity, and representation debated passionately, the government issued a circular prohibiting the use of words in textbooks that were deemed offensive to various social groups in Nepal. One such word was "*shudra*", a derogatory term used towards Dalits in Sanskrit literature. The school has not gone to the extent of completely avoiding the use of the word, and it is often mentioned in Sanskrit subjects. This is how the principal of the school, who also teaches *Vedas*, recounts the whole affair:

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<sup>8</sup>*Rudri* and *shraddha* are among the most common Hindu rituals. *Rudri* is usually done at the start of anything new such as business, marriage while *shraddha* is a ritual conducted in memory of a person's ancestors.

Education is not tied to religion or political system. It is sad that our leaders tie education with politics. It does not affect us what kind of political system there is. But I recall some minor difficulties like in writing textbooks when government issued a circular not to use the word '*shudra*'. But Ved is not something we can change.

NVV should follow curriculum and textbooks prescribed by the government. However, since the government's Office of the Controller of Examination is not directly involved in conducting examinations in lower classes, NVV teaches the Bhagvad Gita from grade 4-7 even though it is not included in the gurukul curriculum. As the principal states,

We teach the Gita in our school although it is not in the curriculum designed by the government. It is taught up to class 7 and we manage it by cutting down the marks weight of other subjects like social studies. We have included the Gita because it will be helpful to our students to live a moral life but we can do that only up to class 7 and not beyond that. I have taken permission from the management committee for this. I believe it would be more helpful if government education system includes the Gita in its curriculum, not just for Gurukuls but for other schools too because now it is possible to teach the Gita in any language.

The management committee of NVV has supported the school's decision to teach Gita. Students first need to memorize Sanskrit verses from the Gita in grades 4 and 5 and then translate those verses into Nepali in the next two grades. It is worth noting that the school and its principal assert that rather than being a religious text associated with Hinduism, Gita is a manual on morality and duty that will be helpful to everyone in order to live a good life.

Realizing the insufficiency of Sanskrit education that focuses primarily on *karmakanda*, in recent years, the school management has included *jyotish* subject for grade IX and X. The rationale for this is that knowledge of *karmakanda* alone is not enough for students and astrology will add another practical dimension to students' education. Along with *karmakanda*, astrology is seen as another subject that will help students to make a living after graduating from school.

## **5.4 Challenges and Changes**

Challenges from modern ideas are more apparent in some of the course content in social studies and population. Social studies has been the part of school curriculum ever since the school entered the government examinations system in 1986. Sometimes, there is a direct contradiction in terms of fact between what is taught in social studies and Sanskrit subjects, while at other times it is more of a challenge to moral values endorsed by the school. The social studies teacher pointed out how students are taught that sun is a star in his subject, while in astrology the sun is called a planet. The astrology teacher defended this anomaly stating that it didn't matter what we call it as long as it didn't affect mathematical calculation. However, he also notes another type of conflict that has come up in recent years:

“Brahminical values taught at the NVV in Sanskrit subjects are in contradiction to values of equality, freedom and inclusion taught in social studies.... In social studies, I have to teach about equality and justice while in Sanskrit subjects it is taught that *Karmakanda* should be studied by only Brahmins. In topics related to discriminations, I have to teach that caste-based differences and discriminations are bad, but in Sanskrit subjects they learn that some occupations like that of priest should be caste-based.”

The notion of caste purity and pollution, cloaked in the discourse of cleanliness, and hierarchal caste-based division of labor are the Brahminical values to which he is referring. Students and teachers at the school observe strict rules related to food within the school and are also expected to practice them outside the school. However, another teacher believes that the difference and conflict between “modern” subjects like Social Studies and traditional Sanskrit subjects aren't as irreconcilable as they appear to be,

Whatever conflict there exists is related to the understanding of discriminations and untouchability. Unlike in Sanskrit subjects, in Social Studies, we understand them as social evils/problems to be eliminated. But what should also keep in mind that reading and teaching of Sanskrit itself does not lend support to or promote caste discrimination and untouchability.

Another teacher who teaches Sanskrit literature and Vedas, downplaying the conflict between things taught in Social Studies and Sanskrit claims that nothing helps students to be good members of society more than the learning of Sanskrit language and literature:

Social studies is taught here to give students some understanding of their society, and how to be integrated with the society. I believe nothing helps in such social integration like Sanskrit because in Sanskrit subjects students get ideas about right life and conduct through *slokas* (verses) in *hitopadesha* and other *neeti shastras*. In that sense Sanskrit education is more relevant to everyday life of students.

Interestingly, CERID (2008) also mentioned reactions similar to that I found at NVV during the course of my research, from various gurukuls in the country, including the NVV. As the report notes, “Gurukuls were saying that as Mathematics and Social Studies were also covered by the religious courses only English and Nepali should be taught under the formal curriculum”, (CERID 2008: 65).

Secularism is another uneasy matter to teach at NVV and it is understandable that in an institution whose primary objective is to preserve ancient learning tradition, most teachers and students are against the idea of a secular state and in favor of the reinstatement of Hindu Rastra. However, students do need to study the fact that Nepal is constitutionally a secular state and teachers have to teach it. In NVV, this complication is tackled by interpreting secularism as “equal faith” of the state in all religions and believes and supports all religions equally. According to the social studies teacher, who says he himself is not in favor of *dhramanirapekshyata* as are his students and fellow teachers:

Secularism should mean that the state is not related to any religion but we have to teach our students that state will have “equal faith” in all religions and supports all of them equally.

Discussion on sex is a taboo and frowned upon within the premises of NVV, as celibacy is highly regarded and also taught as one of the most important *dharma* of students. Texts related to sex and reproduction come regularly in the government-mandated population studies curriculum and even in non-religious educational institutions, teachers tend to gloss over these subjects because they are uncomfortable with thoroughly explaining them to students. The Social Studies teacher, who also teaches Population Studies, shared that contents related to sex and reproduction are the most challenging topics to teach at NVV. During the interview, the principal

of the school was clearly uncomfortable with what was taught in this subject and told me that it would be better if his students were not exposed to such *asli* (vulgar) words and content:

We also have to teach things that are not necessary for education that we provide here. Our system is based on *brahmachari* tradition. Ved teaches us that except for one woman, all other women are like our mother and because we were studying the *Vedas* it was not necessary for us to learn those things again. This is why I suggested the CDC to not include population studies in our course but we cannot do everything we want.

Since 2069vs, CDC has brought a different Nepali textbook for gurukul students all over the country called Gurukul Nepali for grade I to V. Following this change, NVV teaches Gurukul Nepali in grade IV and V. The preface of Gurukul Nepali for grade IV reads as follows:

Today's need is to generate feelings of unity towards the nation and nationality and promote social and personal qualities such as morality, discipline, and self-reliance as well as elementary skills related to language and mathematics. This will give basic knowledge related to science, information technology, environment and health will arouse interests in art and aesthetics. The need is also to give rise to respect for and solidarity with various caste, ethnicity, gender, religion and language and develop commitment to social values and norms.

.Slightly different from Nepali textbooks used in other public and private schools, Gurukul Nepali's course content consists of texts related to religious figures, religious pilgrimage, festivals, moral stories from Hindu epics and also Hindu prayers devoted to various gods. However, similar to Nepali text books used in public and private school, Gurukul Nepali also has a heavy dose of texts that aim to inculcate nationalist feelings and patriotism in students as well as respect for various ethnicities, religions and genders.

## **5.5 Introduction of English**

NVV included English in its curriculum for the first time in 2005, starting from grade 6 and eventually in other grades too. English was an optional subject until 2015 for grade 9 and 10 and from 2016 onwards it has been made a compulsory subject for all students. The English textbook taught at NVV is the same as that taught in other public and community schools. The incentive to

include English in the school came from the need to help students adapt easily to life after school and not suffer from the disadvantage of not knowing English. The English teacher, who is the only female teacher at the school, notes that Sanskrit teachers in the school rue the fact that they didn't get chance to learn English when they were in school and few teachers now teaching at NVV are NVV graduates themselves. The school's emphasis on at least some degree of acquaintance with the English language is also because since the last few years the Public Service Commission requires its candidates to pass a paper in English worth 100 marks to be eligible for a job in civil service. However, the English teacher also points out that certain contents in the book related to consumption of meat and fish while talking about food and nutrition clashes with school rules because NVV students are not allowed to consume meat and fish. The astrology teacher notes the significance of English to students at NVV and also underscores the desire and responsibility of the school to produce modern and scientific students who are grounded in "our ancient classical tradition":

As English is spoken all over the world, it will be difficult for students to adapt to the outside world if they don't have basic understanding of English and with this realization we incorporated English in our curriculum. We should use English to translate our traditional knowledge rather than to replace the learning of our ancient knowledge and tradition. It does not mean Englishizing everything traditional. English should be used as a medium to understand and explain our ancient heritage. This will make education we provide in our school more effective and there won't be conflict.

In the same vein, the Nepali teacher adds:

English is taught here only as a language that is necessary to move ahead in life, not as a philosophy or a worldview. Moreover, it is taught to help students translate things they've understood in Nepali and Sanskrit so that they can explain it to other people, Nepali and foreigners. English was included in the course after we realized that it is difficult for students to move ahead in life without basic understanding of that language. It won't fulfill the objective of this school if our students are unable to explain and describe what they have learnt in Sanskrit to other people who don't know Sanskrit language. This is why teaching of English is important.

## 5.6 Conclusion

The increasing importance given to non-Sanskrit subjects like English and Social Studies suggests a nascent ‘secularization’ of education at NVV, despite the fact that it is still predominantly a center for learning *Vedas* and *Karmakanda*. NVV’s plan to give its students the best for both ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ knowledge, as most of its teachers pointed out also indicates the school’s struggle to make education offered there relevant to broader social need and ensure that students will be employable after graduating from the school. There is also a desire to prove to the people outside school and even those outside Nepal the importance to traditional Hindu learning and Vedic knowledge. The pride in being Hindu and educated in Sanskrit, the language of the god as the teachers and students kept reminding me, is unmistakable. Moreover, the modernity and modern citizens that the school seeks to produce draws its ideas and even jargons not just from contemporary discourse in Nepali society and politics but also from what it calls “Vedic Sanatan Varnashram Dharma”. The emphasis on secularism as equal faith in all religions is seen by NVV teachers not just as a commitment to contemporary ideas like *sahisnu* (tolerance) and *sadvav* (harmony) but also the practice of Sanskrit dictums like *sarva dharma sambhava* (all religions are possible) and *basudaiva kutumbakam* (the world is our family).

## Chapter Six: Inclusion, Exclusion, and Change

### 6.1. Context

In 2066vs, a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) was filed against NVV in the Supreme Court (SC) for its exclusivity in admitting students. The admission criteria of the school required the applicant to be a Brahman boy of no more than 11 years and have already had his *upanayana* or thread ceremony. These criteria disqualified all girls and students from other castes/ethnicities. The applicant also needs to mention the name of the place where his thread ceremony took place. Moreover, as it is mentioned in the admission form, “students interested in studying (at NVV) must present the document of his *bratabandha* ceremony and a recommendation from the VDC or municipality office clearly stating the names of his ancestors going back three generations.”

The SC decision attempted to alter this practice in the School and ordered NVV and PADT to work towards making the school open for students from all background. In seeking to explore how NVV has dealt with the SC decision that has a potential to change the fundamental character of the school, I demonstrate how NVV understands that it cannot ignore the court’s order altogether while also highlighting the uneasiness among the teachers and administration surrounding its eventual implementation and how they defend the way NVV is run currently, shedding light on a big gap that exists between the SC decision and the way things actually run in practice.

### 6.2. Response

The teachers I interviewed at NVV did not have strong objections against the court decision but were prompt to point out that several limitations in the school and other *niyam/anusasan* (rules/discipline) related matters should be taken into account before implementing the court decision. According to one teacher:

The respected SC ordered us to not discriminate against any caste, ethnicity, gender, religion and allow all of them to study at NVV. We should respect that decision but the question is how to implement it properly. The decision has also noted the need to expand



school infrastructure, and proper management of teachers and staffs. We should take account of that aspect too. Infrastructures that we have are not enough to admit other students to the school. We need more buildings, classrooms, and teachers. I also believe that we should not discriminate against anyone from studying Sanskrit, Veds and *Sanatan* culture in our school. We should implement the SC's decision sooner or later in a well-managed way.

The principal of NVV reiterates the same point that the school is open for all but argued that students from other background will not be able to cope with rules of the school:

Everyone is allowed to study but first we have to stick to the school's objective. SC court ordered us to open this school for all and we don't stop anyone from studying here but no one has come to study here so far because students should live within certain rules related to diet, hygiene, and other personal habits which might be difficult for students from other castes. No one has come to our school but even in other schools they haven't stayed for long. For example, in Nepal Sanskrit University, janajatis are provided with more scholarships than other people but there aren't many janajati students studying there.

However, it would be wrong to say that every teacher at NVV is uneasy with the idea of opening the school for everyone interested in joining the school. Some teachers, like the Social Studies teacher quoted below is even critical of the school's orthodoxy,

Many teachers here think Sanskrit is property of bahuns. Here it is really difficult to teach issues related to women's rights and gender equality. I would say that every interested person should be allowed to study here but many other teachers think that it will be detrimental to the tradition that NVV upholds.

NVV management is well aware of popular discourse on social inclusion but maintains its position that inclusion is not possible everywhere and that "everyone cannot be accepted everywhere." Notably, some teachers brought in the concept of *swadharma*, meaning each caste has its own specific duty, to defend the school's position vis-à-vis court decision and to protect the Brahman hegemony over several aspects of Vedic learning. Some even refer to vague "*shastras*" (scriptures) to justify the existing state of affairs, "*shastras* say that females are not

allowed to read the Vedas and others should have had their *upanayana* before they read *rudri* and Vedas.”

### **6.3. Tradition and Preservation**

Social tradition and the main purpose of the school are often invoked to counter SC’s decision. Here, teachers refer to the primary objective of the school, which is to produce priests and provide training in *karmakanda*. As one teacher put it:

The school continued for a long time with this basic objective. But with changes in society, politics, and in ways people think, voices were raised [asking] why girls and students from other castes/ethnicities can’t study in our school. We tried to address these recent demands with changes in curriculum and subjects we teach. The basic purpose of this school is still to impart *karmakanda* training. It is one thing to talk about it theoretically but even today our society does not accept a woman as a priest. Slowly, the society has accepted women as *kathabachak* but still does not accept as priests. It’s not that women are incapable of doing it but our society does not accept them.

Two things come out clearly from this interpretation of the SC’s decision. First, they believe that the physical infrastructure in the school at the school is not enough to take more students and those conditions should be met before the School can take ‘other’ students. Here, more buildings and classrooms also mean separate learning space for girls, students from non-Brahman castes, and Brahmins. There is a vague uneasiness about co-education and teaching Brahmin and non-Brahmin students in the same classroom and keeping them in the same hostel.

The school’s strategy is to resist complying with the order from the court as long as these preconditions aren’t met. Furthermore, the school administration and teachers are worried that the entry of female students might bring different set of complications in the school, particularly romantic relationships as one teacher mentioned. However, they didn’t say they were openly against the admission of female students but were quick to point out prevalent social traditions that do not accept women as priests, which will make their knowledge of no practical significance.

Even if they come here, study and acquire knowledge they won't be employed by anybody. This is one reason why there aren't other students here. It won't be any problem if they want to come and study here but what use will it be? Society does not accept women and janajatis as priests. It is not useful for them.

The notion of purity and pollution related to caste and gender is also behind school's reluctance to admit non-Brahmans and females. It is a common sense at the school that "they," meaning females and students from other castes and ethnic groups, won't be able to follow strict rules at the school and will make also create difficulties for Brahmans studying there. The only female teacher at the school suggested that separate classrooms and hostels will be necessary for girls because of rules regarding pollution and menstruation. She is also unsure whether students from different caste/ethnic backgrounds will be able to cope with rules set by the school, suggesting that their admission will only create troubles:

There is a huge difference between culture of people from other castes and ethnicities and the culture promoted in the school. People from other culture don't usually have thread ceremonies. They won't have required knowledge about Hindu religion and will find it very difficult to cope with school rules and disciplines. This might even be harmful to school environment.

Repeating the argument made by several other male teachers at the school, she further adds:

I think it is ok if other castes want to come and study here for knowledge but they can't go to homes of other people for rituals and *pujas*. It won't be useful for other castes like it is for bahun boys. It is okay if girls study Sanskrit and Vedas for knowledge but we haven't seen any girl performing rituals as priests and according to Hindu religion, they aren't accepted as priests in homes of other people. Therefore, in my opinion whatever it is happening at NVV is right. I too am a religious person so I think it is right (that only bahun boys are admitted to the school).

The Brahman monopoly on a formal gurukul-based study of Vedas and *karmakanda* is not unusual, given a long history of exclusion in education in South Asia. However, the school's and even PADT's zeal to protect Brahman monopoly on *karmakanda* stands in contradiction with recent changes in Nepal, such as the declarations of secular republic and the abolition/

illegalization of caste based discrimination, as one Nepali sociologist has pointed out (Mishra, 2071vs). The context for Mishra's criticism was that PADT had asked all the priests working within the Pashupati area to show the proof of being a Brahman, certified by the priests' Village Development Committee. The chair of the school management committee, who is also the treasurer of PADT, told me in an interview that inclusion, reservation, and quotas can't work in institutions committed to preservation of cultural heritage and tradition. PADT and NVV both maintain that they are making the institution inclusive at their own pace by incorporating new subjects and making it possible to admit other students. However, as of now, no students except male Brahmans have been admitted to the school and it is important to remember the exclusive criteria mentioned in the school application form, which in practice prohibits other students from even applying. Therefore, the school's role in promoting Brahminical notion of caste hierarchy, exceptionalism, and caste-based occupation work to reproduce social practices that NVV refers to while defending exclusion of females and students from other castes and ethnicities.

#### **6.4. Conclusion**

Currently, NVV, like many Hindu institutions and organizations in Nepal, appears to be caught in a maelstrom because of its zeal to protect what it sees as traditional values and the need to modernize and adjust itself to dominant political and social discourses of the day. NVV interprets and explains its self-protective ways by pointing out that society is not ready for such change yet while repeating its commitment to inclusion by saying that it respects the SC's orders and is ready to implement them once the school has necessary preconditions. It is not clear when such preconditions will be ready and even more uncertain if any responsible institutions including PADT and the Ministry of Culture have any motivation to work towards it. Furthermore, the strange definition of secularism as preservation of ancient cultural practices in the new constitution only strengthens conservative elements within institutions such as NVV and PADT.

## 6. Students at Nepal Ved Vidhyashram

### 7.1. Introduction

In this chapter I explore student's perceptions and understandings of various themes that I have already raised in earlier chapters such as secularism, Hinduism, religious conversion and what it means to be a Nepali. NVV is a school which is strictly reserved for Bahuns only but Bahun students in this school come from almost all districts of the country, providing it with a semblance of heterogeneity albeit a very limited one. The following table below show the number of students in each class for the year 2072 vs. However, the table not include those students, who although give their SLC from NVV, live and study in other ashrams and temples such as Ram Mandir in Battisputali, Kathmandu.

**Table 6. Total numbers of students in each grade**

S. No.	Grade	Number of Students.
1	IV	39
2	V	56
3	VI	36
4	VII	33
5	VIII	25
6	IX	21
7	X	18
		Total= 228

Source: Field Work, 2015-6

Recently, after PADT took over the management of NVV, the school made a decision to have at least one student from each of the 75 districts of the country and provide them with hostel

facility at the school itself. So far the school has not been successful in its plan of enrolling students from all parts of the country. Currently the school provides hostel facility to 75 students with more than one student from some districts and none from some. For example, there are five students from Sindhupalchok and three from Dolakha but none from many other districts such as Pyutahan, Dhankuta, and Jajarkot among others. Explaining the enrollment policy of the school, one teacher says:

When admitting students we try to accept students from all 75 districts of Nepal as we also have 75 residential quotas in our hostel. We seek to enroll at least one student from each district and at present we have students from at least 55-60 districts in our school. There are various reasons why students come to our school that range from seeking Sanskrit knowledge to a comfortable life in Kathmandu with nice education.

## **7.2. Why Sanskrit Education?**

Sanskrit was a compulsory subject even for students in public and private schools until 2003 after which it was made an optional subject following a strong criticism from the growing *janajati* movement in Nepal. Compulsory Sanskrit education in school was seen as just another instrument to impose Hindu values on Nepal's *janajatis* and other non-Hindus, with direct backing from the state (Lawoti: 2005). At present, Sanskrit is one of many optional subjects for school level students but interestingly, "National Curriculum Framework for School Education in Nepal" published by Curriculum Development Center in 2007 recognized Sanskrit as "foundation of eastern knowledge and philosophy" and noted "emotional attachment towards Sanskrit education because of its influence on religious, cultural and social life of the majority of Nepalese" (CDC 2007: 22 Later in the same document, there is a concern about ineffectiveness of Sanskrit education in schools and lack of awareness among people about the importance of Sanskrit. The document also pointed out the need to "mainstream" religious schools such as gurukuls, gumbas and madarasas. In this context, it would be interesting to explore what students at a school that is primarily dedicated to study of Vedas and *karmakanda* think about Sanskrit and reasons they give for their preference of Sanskrit and Vedic education.

Students at NVV don't just come from various parts of the country but also with different motivations and various set of expectations. Most students at NVV identify themselves as

coming from a “lower middle class” to “middle class” family background, which was also stated by a former principal of the school in an interview with me. In terms of their prior educational education background, it is not only students who have studied Sanskrit previously that join NVV but there are also students who moved to NVV to study Sanskrit after going to Nepali medium public schools and English medium boarding schools for some years. Out of 14 students I interviewed, seven students had attended public schools before they joined NVV while four went to private schools and the other three went to Sanskrit *pathsala/ashram* in their own village.

One of the main reasons why students at NVV preferred Sanskrit education rather than formal education in public or private schools is because they have their father or some close relatives doing *karmakanda* and/or *prabachan*. According to a grade VIII student who went to English boarding school previously,

I joined NVV because of my interest in Sanskrit. I come from a family of Sanskrit learning tradition. My father and grandfather are both learned in Sanskrit and also involved in politics. Therefore, I also started studying Sanskrit from very early.

Similarly, another student who is from Sindupalchok originally adds:

My father also studied Sanskrit and this propelled me too to study Sanskrit. I am also interested in *prabachan*, and I really like hearing them. My dad does *karmakanda* to make a living and when home during holidays, I go out with my father sometimes for *karmakanda* work.

It is worth stressing that the family tradition of doing *karmakanda* or *jajmani* is a strong force behind student’s interest in Sanskrit education and if it is not father or grandfather who is into *karmakanda* then it is some close relatives, who students at NVV see as their inspirations for choosing Sanskrit education:

My maternal uncles are all pandits and that interested me in Sanskrit. I too want to be a pandit someday. My parents also encourage me to study well and become a pandit. I want to be a pandit who gives *prabachan* and also a *jyotishi*. My uncles told me even when I was very young to be pundits like them and I really felt good about it.

Another student who came from a family with Sanskrit learning tradition pointed to the need of “preserving” Sanskrit language when English language is getting more dominant in school education,

I didn't know much about this school before I joined it. My father asked me if I wanted to study Sanskrit and as I was interested in Sanskrit education, I said yes. And after that I came to this school leaving the public school in my village. It won't help if everyone goes after English education, Sanskrit too should be studied and preserved.

However it is not just family tradition that's responsible for students opting for Sanskrit education. Some students stated that their own experiences as children motivated them to choose Sanskrit education. During the course of my interview with students at NVV, “*dharma pariwartan*” or conversion came up as a significant “cause” that led students to quit “English education” and choose “Sanskrit education”. The following quote from a 15 year old class 9 student, who hails from Kavre is very striking and representative of most students I interviewed at the school:

I grew up in a family that had a very religious environment. Even though I didn't know about Sanskrit, I had a very strong faith in our religion but after the People's Movement of 2062/63 vs, cases of religious conversion started to rise rapidly. I felt really bad about it and thought that religious conversion should be stopped. I've always wondered what that person who converted from his own religion to another religion thought at the time of his conversion and I wanted to exorcise the ghost of religious conversion that occupied such people's minds.

The opposition between what students see as “Western culture” and “Eastern culture” and the need to preserve “Eastern culture”, a code word for Hinduism against the onslaught of Christian conversion is also something that them came up regularly. Another student from class IX adds:

Even when I was young I had this determination to promote eastern philosophy and religion and stop the penetration of western culture and religion. I saw lots of people who had converted to Christianity in my village and those who were then trying to convert other people. Even the teacher who taught me in the boarding school back home



converted to Christianity while he was teaching in my previous school. I really didn't like these sorts of things that western culture is moving forward dominating eastern culture.

Therefore, I argue that it would be wrong to understand that most students who study in gurukul instead of more common public and private schools do so only because of their parents or are too young to have agency of their own to make a choice of their own. Even though family history and its influence play a major part in their decision, most students at NVV stressed that it is out of their own "interest in Sanskrit" that they picked Vedic education.

### **7.3. Hindu *dharma*, Nepali identity and *dharmanirapekshyata***

For most students at NVV, like for most teachers, the idea of Nepali national identity is intrinsically tied with the idea of being Hindu, if not hill Hindu. Furthermore, for most students, Hindu Rastra is the bulwark against the erosion of Nepali nationality and it appears obvious to them that a Hindu-majority country should by default be a Hindu state. As one grade VI student puts it:

Nepal is a country where Hindus are in majority but Hindus are ignored here and Nepal isn't Hindu *Rastra* anymore. We are Hindus. In Sanskrit it says, "Other's religion is very dangerous"<sup>9</sup>. We have large number of Hindus in our country therefore it should be a Hindu *Rastra*.

Different students have different understandings of Hindu dharma but most seem to agree that Hinduism is the "oldest" religion in the world and by that logic the source of all other religions as well as the "original" religion into which the founders of other religions were "born." According to one grade VIII student:

There is no proof when the Hindu dharma started. It has been in existence since the beginning. Therefore, it is called *sanatandharma*. Christianity came very late and Jesus Christ himself was a Hindu. He was born into Hindu religion. Gautam Buddha and Muhammad of Islam too were born in Hindu religion because there were no other religions except Hindu religion at that time. All other religions grew out of Hindu religion.

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<sup>9</sup> He cited the Sanskrit phrase "*paro dharma bhayawaha*" from the Gita.

The “ancient” character of Hinduism was forcefully stressed by other students as well, including this 10<sup>th</sup> grader:

See, Hindu dharma has been in existence in our country since the ancient times. In fact, Hindu dharma originated from Nepal itself, and Vedas and *karmakanda* that we study are true gifts of Hindu *dharma*. Hindu dharma started with the Vedas and it is still to be discovered when Vedas originated. The indigenous nature of Hinduism to Nepal cannot be disproved.

Notably, students also identify some of the more problematic aspects of Hinduism such as caste discrimination and untouchability as “social evil” and labored to dissociate it from what they saw as authentic *dharma* of the Vedas during the course of our interviews. However, even this understanding wasn’t enough for them to denounce the whole structure of caste, which like their teachers, students too saw as rooted in a necessary “ancient division of labor.”

Secularism is a prickly idea to almost everyone at NVV, and students are no exception. It arouses the strongest emotion among students regarding Hindu dharma and Nepali identity. However, the most interesting concept that appears impossible to disconnect from secularism not just at NVV but in a wider Nepali society is that of religious conversion and anxieties surrounding it. Making a connection between Hindu state and “Nepali identity”, a 15 year old 8<sup>th</sup> grader says:

*Dharmanirapekshyata* is not a good word because it is not possible to have a nation where people have no religion. It’s like having a nation without nationality. Humanity is human’s religion, so it is not possible to have a secular state. Secularism in Nepal will lead to the erosion of eastern culture. Some people are claiming now that Nepal has been declared a secular state to protect our identity but I think this will destroy our identity rather than preserving it. People are demanding ethnic states now but that’s not our identity. Our identity is Nepali; it is *dhaka topi* and *daura suruwal*. Our ethnic dress is our identity. Why do we need separate states? One Nepal is our identity.

It is easy to figure out from the above quotation that students see the social group they belong to and culture they practice as once true “Nepali identity” and this is the identity that needs to be preserved, particularly from those demanding “ethnic states” and Christian missionaries who

proselytize. According to one 9<sup>th</sup> grade student, an 18 year old who is originally from Humla, the threat posed by “other” religions, particularly Christianity is most visible in the rising number of cow slaughter and converts which can only be stopped by supporting political parties that champion Hindutva and preservation of *sanatan dharma*:

After Nepal became secular in 2063bs I have seen more cases cow slaughter in my village and also the rising number of conversion into Christianity. Missionaries are inducing and coercing poor people to convert. I think it is wrong that some people try to convert other people. It is like harming other person’s right. I believe we Hindus should support the demand for Hindu state by Hindu parties. When my parents asked me who to vote during the last election, I told them that Hindutva should be given a priority while voting because we should protect the religion of our ancestors.

Nepal’s new constitution was promulgated in September, 2015 when I was conducting my field work NVV and students were curious about the fate of Hinduism in the new constitution. It is interesting that some students I interviewed did note the contradictory definition of secularism provided by the constitution, which impressed neither the adherents of secularism nor supporters of Hindu state. According to one student,

The new constitution has kept the word *dharmanirapekhsyata* in it with a definition. What I think is that either there shouldn’t have been any definition or if the definition meant support for Hinduism then the word Hindu *rastra* itself should have been retained. I wonder if there is any difference in but think our leaders should have said Hindu *rastra* in a clearer terms.

Another student, an eighth grader, who comes not just from a family with priestly tradition but also a political one, brought a much sophisticated understanding of secularism and democracy in post-monarchy republic Nepal to our conversation. Therefore, I quote him at length:

Nepal has become a republic now and even though I am a Sanskrit student, I believe republic and Hindu *rastra* cannot go together. I don’t think Hindu state in a republic is a good idea. In a republic, every citizen can be elected as a President; it can be a janajati or a Muslim or a Christian and it is not possible for them to follow Hindu rituals. A Muslim might get elected as a president and then Hindus themselves will protest if that person

tries to enter Pashupatinath like other Presidents. It will bring up such problems regarding religion if Nepal becomes a Hindu *rastra* while remaining a republic. President is the head of the state and that person should be above religion. Therefore, Hindu *rastra* in a republic is a contradiction in itself. I am not saying there shouldn't be a Hindu *rastra* at all, but Nepal can be Hindu *rastra* only after it ceases to be a republic. Hindu *rastra* with a monarchy is the best option. Any Hindu *rastra* should have a king who follows and protects Hindu religion. Republic and Hindu *rastra* cannot go together. Furthermore, the definition of secularism provided by the new constitution is also an achievement for those who are demanding for Hindu *rastra* because other than Hinduism no religion has been in existence since the *sanatan* and no religion is eternal except Hinduism.

This quote gets to the heart of the matter regarding the politics of secularism and Hindu *rastra* in contemporary Nepal. It is a question worth asking whether a multi-religious republic that upholds the idea of legal equality of citizens equally can favor a particular religion over all others. Moreover, the constitutional definition of secularism appears Hindu state's camouflage in its commitment to preserve "religion that has existed since ancient times." Strikingly, the constitution uses the very word *sanatan* to mean ancient, as students and teachers at NVV use to mean not just eternal/ancient but also Hinduism.

#### **7.4. Prabachan and the promotion of Hinduism**

The popularity of *prabachan*<sup>10</sup> among young students at NVV has much to do with the rise of New Religious Movements (NRM) and guru cults in contemporary religious landscape of Hinduism in Nepal. According to one Toffin, "the rise of NMRs (sic) in Nepal is no doubt related to the return of democracy in the country in the 1990s and to the more liberal rules governing the creation of religious organizations and their legal registration which have been implemented since then" (Toffin 2013: 127). Moreover, this trend can also be linked with the growth of cable television, religious channels and Hindu televangelism in India and Nepal.

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<sup>10</sup> *Prabachan* in this context means lectures that are based on Hindu religious texts and epics, and they focus on themes such as *dharma*, devotion, and liberation. *Bachak* or the lecturer recites and recounts stories from Puranas, the most famous Purana being the Shreemad Bhagvad Purana that has Lord Krishna's life as its main subject, to get his/her message across to their audience. Such story telling is also accompanied by music, singing and dancing. Most *prabachan* continue for seven days and are called *saptaha*.

One of the reasons that aroused student's interest in Sanskrit education and inspired them to envision a career in *prabachan* is the preeminence of *prabachan* giving Hindu gurus not just in media but also in political life such as Pilot Baba, Swami Kamalanayanacharya, and Baba Ram Dev among others. Students also mentioned the influence of famous *bachaks*, such as late Narayan Pokhrel and his son Dinbandhu Pokhrel and their interests in becoming *bachaks* themselves. According to once student who would appear in his SLC examinations later that year:

After graduating from NVV, because there aren't many places to study Sanskrit for plus 2, I have plans to go to Banaras in India. More than regular *karmakanda* work I am more interested in reciting *Bhagvat* and organizing *Saptaha*.

Another student had this to say,

I became interested in Sanskrit after watching many gurus and mahatmas give *prabachan* on TV. It also aroused my interest in learning how to give *prabachan* and for this skill knowledge of Sanskrit language and scriptures is very important. I haven't decided it already but I want enter this field and become like those mahatmas I see on TV.

Students don't see *prabachan* only as a means to make a living and become famous but they also see *prabachan* as the best way to counter the influence of other religions like Christianity by promoting and popularizing Hinduism. As other religions are "dominating" Hinduism in contemporary Nepal, *prabachan* for many students will also make Hindus more conscious about their own religion and about the need to preserve Hindu practices. Critiquing the more commercial bent in *prabachan* in recent times, a student argued that the emphasis should be on knowledge sharing rather than earning money:

*Prabachan* these days are more focuses on making money rather than explaining the stories that are in the Sanskrit literature and sharing knowledge that is in these stories and religious texts. My aim is to promote our *dharma* through *prabachan* and share religious knowledge that's present in Sanskrit texts, rather than using *prabachan* as a means of earning money.

The public nature of *prabachan* that involves mass gathering makes it a potent political instrument to get one's messages to general people and mobilize them. Moreover, political Hinduism's closeness with various gurus and babas is no longer a secret and in Nepal, even communist leaders can be seen courting religious figures. Therefore it is not surprising that one student even made a link between *prabachan* and politics and how it can be an asset to those who wish to become politicians:

Sanskrit is the mother of all languages. If a person is proficient in Sanskrit then his way of presentation will be really different to those who don't know Sanskrit because this language helps is our ability to articulate well and give speeches fluently. *Prabachan* is all about the art of speaking and this is the most important thing any politician should have.

Though *karmakanda* and *prabachan* both are popular among students, some students prefer *prabachan* and public recognition that comes with it to everyday *karmakanda*. However, it would be wrong to see *karmakanda* and *prabachan* as mutually exclusive because most students wish to be proficient in both. The school also focuses on these two aspects of Sanskrit education along with astrology in recent years largely because of their immediate and tangible benefits to students.

## **7.5. Caste, Brahmans, and Inclusion at NVV**

The previous chapter analyzed the school authority and teachers' response to the inclusion question at NVV and its Brahman only character. In this section I will present and analyze how students respond to these issues that can possibly change the way NVV is run currently. Most students take it for granted that it is Brahman's "duty" to read Vedas and do *karmakanda* while other castes have their own respective "duties". It is similar to the concept of "biological determinism" which Menon has defined as "a philosophical reasoning which legitimizes various forms of subordination as natural and inescapable, because it is based on supposedly natural and, therefore, unchangeable factors. Racism is a good example of biological determinism, as is the caste system because both ideologies are based on assumptions that certain groups of people are superior by birth, and that they are born with characteristics, such as greater intelligence and special skills, that justify their power in society" (Menon 2012: 61).

Echoing the views expressed by teachers regarding inclusion of girls and students from other castes at NVV, many students, but not all, stated that girls and students from non-brahman castes are not able to adjust themselves to strict discipline in the school and hostel. According to one student, only Brahmans are well suited to rigorous *anusasan* of NVV:

It will be okay if people from other castes and women are able to stay within the bounds of school's *anusasan*. I feel that those who are considered lower castes in our society can't follow the discipline of this school because they are more careless with their manners, eat meats and other things that shouldn't be eaten. They grew up in a different tradition whereas for Brahmans, it is instilled in their mind from the childhood that they shouldn't eat such things like meat and fish, and also Brahmans are more innocent.

Another student pointed out that it would be difficult to put the Supreme Court's order into practice; like most teachers, he too made "society isn't ready" and "lack of infrastructures" arguments to drive his point home:

I think the Supreme Court's decision is very difficult to be implemented in our school. If society is not ready to accept girls and non-Brahmans as priests, then there is no point allowing girls and other caste people to study *karmakanda* in this school. Society should change before that can happen first. If a Brahman studies *karmakanda* and Vedas then he can go to that field where he can apply his knowledge but will the society accept any other caste doing *karmakanda* and conducting Vedic rituals? I don't think so. Then what's the point of studying Vedas and *karmakanda* if the society does not validate their knowledge? Moreover, the school also is short of buildings and classrooms. It is also true that Brahmans and non-Brahmans don't study Vedas sitting together. Each caste has been assigned its own traditional occupation in the caste system and it is Brahman's duty to study Vedas and do *karmakanda*.

For some students, the Brahman-only character of NVV is what they find attractive and something that encouraged them to join the school. Here, the idea that Brahmans and non-Brahmans, especially janajatis, are two separate classes of people with different cultures and lifestyles. Student's previous experiences in other schools and their community also play a big

part in forming such opinion, as is shown by the following quote from a 5<sup>th</sup> grader who went to English medium private school in Bhaktapur before coming to NVV:

I like studies in this school more than I did in the English boarding school previously. I like this school because only Brahmans study here and there are not any Chhetri , Newar or Magar here. Even when I was in that other school, I wanted to study with Brahmans only. Other people are different; they speak in different tongue and tease us. Other students used to call me '*baje*' in my previous school because students in that school were mostly Newars and there were only four Brahman students in my class. This is one reason why I didn't want to study in that school and now I am happier in this school. If other students are accepted in this school I don't think I would want to continue studying here.

However, it would be misleading to conclude that students at NVV are unanimously against the idea of admitting and accepting girls and non-Brahman students in the school. Students who are open to that idea think it will be "fun" to study with students from different backgrounds and also make a point that it's not necessary to be Brahman in "today's world" to do a priest's job. According to a student from class 8,

In this school only Brahmans are allowed to study but I think everyone should be admitted and allowed to study these subjects here because everyone is equal and everyone should have the opportunity to study what they are interested in. Although girls and non-Brahmans are not allowed to study here, I really think they should be. Everyone can do *karmakanada* if they study it. These days, there are women in our society who do *prabachan* and recite *bhagvat*. When this school was established it was only for Brahmans and even now it continues to be so but as a student I don't think it will affect our studies if other students are given admission as well. There is no reason why Brahmans should have the monopoly of Sanskrit, Vedic education and *karmakanda*.

The question of "inclusion" at NVV, therefore, generates a mixed response from teachers and students alike, and despite the SC decision, those who want to continue the exclusive, Brahman-only character of NVV are in a stronger position. I would argue that this stems not just from an unwillingness on the part of the NVV authority to take a pro-active role in making the institution



more inclusive, but also from the deep seated “deterministic” understanding of gender, caste and ethnicity, that believes each gender, caste and ethnicity have their own essence that suits them to a certain kind of work and not others.

## **Chapter Eight: Summary and Conclusion**

### **8.1. Summary**

This study started with the research problem that in Nepal there have been few empirical studies that focused on the relationship between religious institutions and the secular state of Nepal. I also argued that a simplistic understanding of secularism as a separation of religion and state and the relegation of religious from public to private sphere were insufficient to understand the enormous complexity of secularism in South Asia and Nepal in particular. Instead, such simplistic notions would obfuscate our understandings. I also tried to make a point that focus on the relationship between a religious institution and the state would help us in getting a clearer picture of secularism in practice in Nepal. In an attempt to track the relationship between the secular state and a religious institution, a Hindu school or gurukuls, my research tried to elucidate how the school itself perceived and rationalized its relationship with the former Hindu and now secular state of Nepal. Here, the role of interpretation was of central importance because I wanted to demonstrate how Nepal Ved Vidhyashram (NVV), including its management, teacher and students interpreted the state of secularism in Nepal.

To address my research problem, I proceeded with three objectives. First, I began with a attempt to explore NVV's adjustments and accommodations after Nepal became a secular state. To meet this objective, I paid attention to the school's admission policies and curriculums and courses offered there. This also was an effort to examine the continuity and changes in gurukuls education before and after 2006. Second, I sought to find out the gurukul's interpretation of secularism and secularism. Here, I also wanted to see how the school related to the idea of social inclusion and exclusion with regards to gender and caste. Finally, the third major objective of the research was to offer an empirically situated contextual understanding of secularism that resulted from the interaction between the school and the secular state.

This qualitative research adopted both descriptive and exploratory research design to present a case study of Nepal Ved Vidhyashram situated in Bankali, Kathmandu and relied on qualitative techniques for data collection that were predominantly qualitative. Data was collected from both

primary and secondary sources. Primary data was collected largely through the means of semi-structured interviews and at times through observations. The tools of data collection were determined by the specific research objectives as in the case of historical ethnography, which was used to trace the continuity and change in NVV since the declaration of secularism in 2006 and its history before 2006. Non-purposive samplings, including stratified random sampling and random sampling, were used to collect data from students, teachers, and management committee members at NVV respectively. Interpretation and discourse analysis were the most important methods used during the course of data analysis.

The first chapter of my findings focused on the evolving relationship between the state and NVV, with particular focus on changes after PADT took over the management of the school in 1999. Here, the importance was also paid to changes since the declaration of Nepal as a secular state in 2006. When it came to the relationship of NVV with the state it was found that in contrast to the early days of NVV, when the monarchy was heavily involved in the school affair, at present the government is not directly involved but through an autonomous institution, PADT. At present, it is PADT that is responsible for the everyday management of the school and well as its logistics. The government of Nepal comes to scene only in educational department such as curriculum design, publications of books, SLC examinations of class 10 students. It was also found that the declaration of Nepal as a secular state has not affected the everyday running of the school. Furthermore, the school also has not faced any interventions from the state to reform or alter the way it is run, which has remained autonomous as it was before 2006. The only major friction between the state's representative in the school, PADT, and NVV in the everyday affairs of the school was seen in the conflict regarding promotion and tenure of teacher and staffs in the school.

Similarly, the findings also showed an emergent form of "secularization" of education and curriculum at NVV through increasing importance given to nontraditional subjects such as English and Social Studies in a place that is still predominantly a center for learning Vedas and *karmakanda*. This section of my findings demonstrated how secularism is an uncomfortable topic to teach in the school. From my findings, I also tried to argue that through a particular kind of education the school offered, NVV sought to produce modern citizens and students grounded in the ethos of what the teachers and students called the *sanatan dharma*.

Through my findings, I also showed how NVV interprets and explains its self-protective ways that are clearly exclusionary to girls and aspiring students from non-Brahmin caste groups. Here, to ward off orders given by the Supreme Court of Nepal, NVV teachers and authorities kept repeating that school didn't have required policies infrastructures to accept other students. My interviews with the school management and teachers suggested ambivalence on the school's part to accept and implement changes. In this section, I also argued that the definition of secularism provided by the constitution as preservation of ancient religious practices only strengthens conservative forces within NVV and PADT.

Finally, I presented students' perceptions and understandings of themes such as secularism, Hinduism, religious conversion and Nepali identity that came up repeatedly during my interviews with them. I found out that most students at NVV came from a "lower middle class" to "middle class" background and many but not all students preferred Sanskrit education because of their family tradition, a tradition of Sanskrit learning and *karmakanda* practice. The findings presented in this chapter also indicated how for most students at NVV, like for their teachers, the idea of Nepali national identity is intrinsically tied with the idea of being Hindu. I also explored students' anxieties regarding secularism and conversion in this chapter and highlighted what they saw as the need promote Hinduism. As my findings depict, for most students a life in *prabachan* is a preferred career choice, not just because of its fame value but also because students identified *prabachan* as a means to promote Hinduism and fight the onslaught of other religions, Christianity in particular.

## **8.2. Conclusion**

It is debatable whether Nepal's constitutional secularism is a major departure from its Hindu past or mere Orwellian newspeak that seeks to safeguard old privileges in reality. The definition provided by the new constitution allows the state not only to engage itself with religion and culture "that has been practiced since ancient times" in Nepal, which in de facto term means Hinduism but to offer them special protections. The meanings and expectations from secularism in Nepal vary among different religious groups (Sijapati 2012). This research presented a case study of how one institution dedicated to the *sanatan dharma*, having strong ties to state formed and patronized autonomous body, adjusts itself to the demands and discourse regarding tradition, modern, secularism, social inclusion, and pluralism. In doing so, I discussed two fields of

engagement with the state and civil society where the school faces challenges in preserving its traditional Brahminical character, namely curriculum and admission policy.

The tension between the religious and secular, and hierarchical and exclusionary character based on caste and formal commitment to pluralism and equality has a broader significance to current debates on the remaking of Nepali identity and also reforms in Hindu religious practices. Interestingly, NVV points to changes in subjects taught in school as a proof of its commitment to social inclusion and acceptance of secular policies rather than the admission of girls and students from other castes. However, it is possible that non-Brahmin-male teachers could be hired in the future in the name of inclusion, at least to teach non-Sanskrit subjects, but it appears highly unlikely that this change would extend to the recruitment of Dalits and non-Hindus in the school as teachers. In NVV, one can see a huge gap between the lip service paid to inclusion and pluralism and the zeal with which the exclusive Brahmin-only character of the school is defended. However, such difference between lip service and actual practice isn't just unique to NVV and can be seen in other institutions of the state itself, such as the security forces which employ hundreds of Hindu priests. NVV is in no hurry to admit non-Brahmin-male students despite the SC decision, which raises a serious question about lack of law enforcement. There is no clear indication of where the drive for real change might come from because NVV does not seem to be willing to change from within and even the SC decisions have not been successful in forcing substantive changes, beyond the lip service, in PADT and NVV.

The state too seems uninterested in promoting an inclusive atmosphere at NVV, but here it is worth noting that the state is not a monolithic, coherent entity. On the one hand PADT, a statutory body, is financing the school and is responsible for its overall management but on the other it continues actively support the way NVV is run currently and its admission policies in disregard of the SC order. Similarly, questions can also be raised about secularism in Nepal and whether it is just a sham to silence those demanding for it while continuing de facto Hindu privilege. It is safe to conclude that the debate on secularism and social inclusion in Nepal is far from becoming a sealed deal. Various different interpretations, including very contradictory and paradoxical as well, in different institutional locations will contribute to different meanings and practices of these new but highly contested concepts in Nepal.

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## **Annex 1: Interview check list for teachers**

### **1. Researcher's introduction and purpose of the study**

- a. Explain that this study is only for an academic purpose only (Master's thesis) and that the researcher is interested in learning about the respondent's views regarding Hinduism, Sanskrit education at NVV, secularism in Nepal
- b. Explain that personal details will not be disclosed if the respondent wishes not to disclose them. Pseudonyms will be used.
- c. Ask permission for recording. If the respondent feels uncomfortable, recording is optional.
- d. The researcher explains it to the respondent that he/she can refuse to answer any question that he/she feels uncomfortable, and can ask the researcher to stop the interview at any point of time.

### **2. General Background**

- a. Respondent details:
  - i. Name:
  - ii. Age:
  - iii. Address:
  - iv. When did the respondent start teaching at NVV?

### **3. State, PADT, and NVV**

- a. What is the history of management of NVV since its early days?
- b. Why do you think was NVV started in the first place?
- c. What were its founding objectives and purpose?
- d. Was the then state and monarchy involved in its foundation?
- e. How was it like when Guthi Corporation managed NVV?
- f. How was it like when World Hindu Federation managed NVV?
- g. What were reasons behind PADT's takeover of NVV?
- h. What are PADT's responsibilities at NVV?
- i. Are you satisfied with the way PADT runs NVV?

- j. Why are some teachers on strike against PADT?
- k. How's is NVV related to the secular state?
- l. Does it receive any funding from District Education Office or Ministry of Culture?
- m. What role does the school play in the preservation of *sanatan dharma*?
- n. Has the school seen any changes in its management after Nepal was declared secular in 2006?
- o. What do you think does secularism mean in the context of Nepal?
- p. Are you in favour of secularism?
- q. Why? Why not?

#### **4. Curriculum, teaching and students at NVV**

- a. What are the courses offered at NVV from grade 4-10?
- b. How does the school find a balance between teaching of Sanskrit subjects and other formal subjects?
- c. What is the main focus of teaching and learning at NVV?
- d. Who is responsible for curriculum design of subjects taught in this school?
- e. In your experience, what are the most popular subjects among students here?
- f. Do you think things taught in Sanskrit subjects are in conflict with things taught in other subjects like English and Social Studies?
- g. If yes, Can you please elaborate a bit about it?
- h. What are recent changes in curriculum and course content of subjects taught at NVV?
- i. Why do you think was English introduced to the school's curriculum?
- j. Are they in anyway related to political changes in the country such as declaration of secularism and abolition of monarchy?
- k. What are the social backgrounds of students in NVV like?
- l. How is the education provided in this school different not just from other public and private schools but also from other gurukuls?

#### **5. Inclusion, Exclusion and Change**

- a. What are the admission criteria in this school?
- b. Why are only male Brahmins admitted as students in this school?

- c. Can you explain a bit about a case filed against NVV at the Supreme Court?
- d. Why do you think Supreme Court made that decision?
- e. How did the school react when that order was made?
- f. Is the school doing anything to implement the court's orders?
- g. What are the difficulties and challenges that NVV is facing regarding the implementation of that order?
- h. What is the response of PADT about this issue?
- i. Do you think it is necessary to preserve the school's foundational objectives and values or do you think it is prudent to change the way the school is run and admit non-Brahmans students too?
- j. What do you think will happen if girls and students from non-Brahman caste background are accepted in the school?

## **6. Conclude the Interview**

- a. Express gratitude for the respondent's time and contribution
- b. Assure the respondent that data will be used only for academic purpose and pseudonyms will be used instead of real names.
- c. Assure the respondent that the audio recording or any other data will not be misused for any other purposes.

## **Annex 2: Interview check list for management committee members**

### **1. Researcher's introduction and purpose of the study**

- a. Explain that this study is only for an academic purpose only (Master's thesis) and that the researcher is interested in learning about the respondent's views regarding Hinduism, Sanskrit education at NVV, secularism in Nepal
- b. Explain that personal details will not be disclosed if the respondent wishes not to disclose them. Pseudonyms will be used.
- c. Ask permission for recording. If the respondent feels uncomfortable, recording is optional.
- d. The researcher explains to the respondent that he/she can refuse to answer any question that he/she finds uncomfortable, and can ask the researcher to stop the interview at any point of time.

### **2. General Background**

- a. Respondent details:
  - i. Name:
  - ii. Age:
  - iii. Address:
  - iv. Respondent's position in the management committee:
  - v. When did the respondent join NVV management?

### **3. State, PADT, NVV**

- a. What is the history of management of NVV since its early days?
- b. Why do you think was NVV started in the first place?
- c. What were its founding objectives and purpose?
- d. Was the then state and monarchy involved in its foundation and management back then?
- e. How was it like when Guthi Corporation managed NVV?
- f. How was it like when World Hindu Federation managed NVV?
- g. What were the reasons behind PADT's takeover of NVV?

- h. Is the management different now compared to the days when Guthi Corporation managed it?
- i. What are PADT's responsibilities regarding NVV's management?
- j. What does the management think about teachers' strike against PADT?
- k. What is your role in the management of NVV?
- l. How's is NVV related to the secular state and?
- m. What role does the school play in the preservation of *sanatan dharma*?
- n. Has the school seen any changes in its management after Nepal was declared secular in 2006?
- o. What do you think secularism means in the context of Nepal?
- p. Are you in favour of secularism?
- q. Why? Why not?

#### **4. Inclusion, Exclusion and Change**

- a. What are the admission criteria in this school?
- b. Why are only male Brahmans admitted as students in this school?
- c. Can you explain a bit about a case filed against NVV at the Supreme Court?
- d. Why do you think Supreme Court made that decision?
- e. How did the school management react when that order was made?
- f. Have the school management and PADT done anything to implement the court's orders?
- g. What are the difficulties and challenges that NVV is facing regarding the implementation of that order?
- h. Do you think it is necessary to preserve the school's foundational objectives and values or do you think it is prudent to change the way the school is run and admit non-Brahmans students too?
- i. What do you think will happen if girls and students from non-Brahman caste background are accepted in the school?
- j. Does the management think it is consistent with democracy and secularism if the school maintains such exclusive criteria for admission in the school?

## **5. Concluding the interview**

- a. Express gratitude for the respondent's time and contribution
- b. Assure the respondent that data will be used only for academic purpose and pseudonyms will be used instead of real names.
- c. Assure the respondent that the audio recording or any other data will not be misused for any other purposes.



## **Annex 3: Interview check list for students**

### **1. Researcher's introduction and purpose of the study**

- a. Explain that this study is only for an academic purpose only (Master's thesis) and that the researcher is interested in learning about the respondent's views regarding Hinduism, Sanskrit education at NVV, secularism in Nepal
- b. Explain that personal details will not be disclosed if the respondent wishes not to disclose them. Pseudonyms will be used.
- c. Ask permission for recording. If the respondent feels uncomfortable, recording is optional.
- d. The researcher explains to the respondent that he/she can refuse to answer any question that he/she finds uncomfortable, and can ask the researcher to stop the interview at any point of time.

### **2. General Background**

- a. Respondent details:
  - i. Name:
  - ii. Age:
  - iii. Address:
  - iv. When did the respondent join NVV management?

### **3. Sanskrit Education**

- a. Where and which school did you study before coming to NVV?
- b. Why did you choose Sanskrit Education?
- c. What encouraged you to join NVV?
- d. How is this school different from your previous school(s)?
- e. What do your parents do?
- f. Are they happy that you study Sanskrit?
- g. Do you come from a family with Sanskrit learning tradition?
- h. Had any of your close relatives studied Sanskrit and *karmakanda* previously?
- i. What do you like about the study in this school?

- j. Do you live in school hostel or outside?
- k. What are your favourite Sanskrit and non-Sanskrit subjects?
- l. What do you think about school's unique uniform, *daura suruwal*?
- m. What do you want to do after graduating from this school?
- n. What do you want to do after completing your studies?

#### **4. Hinduism, Hindu state, and Secularism**

- a. What do you study about Hinduism in this school?
- b. What do you think about Hinduism yourself?
- c. What do you think are good things about Hinduism?
- d. What do you think are bad things about Hinduism?
- e. What do you think about caste system in general?
- f. How are Sanskrit education and Hinduism related?
- g. Do you talk about contemporary politics and things such as Hindu state and secularism with teachers and fellow students in school?
- h. Are there anything related to these things in subjects you study here?
- i. Are you in favour of Hindu state or secular state?
- j. What does it mean to be a Nepali to you?
- k. What do your teachers say about it not just while teaching but also in other conversations?

#### **5. Caste and Inclusion at NVV**

- a. Do you know that only Brahman-boys are admitted in this school?
- b. Why do you think the school has such policy regarding admission?
- c. Does it seem right to you that only Brahman boys are admitted in this school?
- d. Are Brahmans different from other castes?
- e. Are you happy with such policy or do you think the school should accept students from all backgrounds?
- f. Do you think your study will be affected if girls and students from other castes are accepted in this school?

- g. Have you heard about the order that the Supreme Court of Nepal has given to the school?
- h. Do you think other students can study in this school and cope with its rules and regulations?
- i. Do you think the school should continue the way it is or should it change it according to times and accept non-Brahmans students too?

## **6. Concluding the interview**

- a. Express gratitude for the respondent's time and contribution
- b. Assure the respondent that data will be used only for academic purpose and pseudonyms will be used instead of real names.
- c. Assure the respondent that the audio recording or any other data will not be misused for any other purposes.