Towards a reconceptualisation of family literacy: exploring religious literacy learning and practices in two communities in Nepal

ABSTRACT

For many centuries, intergenerational literacy learning outside formal educational institutions has been an important part of everyday family life in Nepal. Yet, educational policy continues to focus on promoting 'schooled' approaches to literacy for both adults and children, overlooking informal learning and indigenous literacy practices in many communities today. Through exploring intergenerational religious literacy learning in Nepal, this paper develops new understandings of 'family literacy' and proposes how these could be integrated into current educational policy. Ethnographic-style research was conducted with families in a Muslim community, where teenage girls were teaching Urdu literacy to siblings, and in a Gurung community where intergenerational learning had become central to the development of Tibetan Buddhist texts. In these two communities, literacy was viewed as collaborative as well as individual, helping to shape shared identities, languages and values, and challenging instrumental notions of functional literacy that underlie much national and international policy.

Keywords: religious literacy, indigenous, gender, Nepal, intergenerational learning

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1. Introduction

Teaching and learning beyond the formal school system has long been of great importance in Nepal, particularly in relation to religious knowledge. Today, informal teaching of languages and literacies takes place in many homes and community spaces, with women, men, girls and boys coming together to learn, pray and interact around religious texts. Such intergenerational and multilingual literacy learning is highly valued by Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist families and communities, yet is rarely recognised by formal educational providers as a resource and can even be regarded as in conflict with the goals of Western-style education.

Family literacy programmes have been implemented in Nepal since the 1990s, with the aim of supporting children's learning, and seen as a route for parents into adult literacy. Such programmes have tended to focus on facilitating 'school-like' literacy, texts and interactions within families – encouraging parents to come into schools, for instance, to learn to read their children's textbooks. The rich tradition of intergenerational and indigenous religious literacy learning in Nepal presents an exciting opportunity to reconceptualise family literacy. This is not just a question about how literacy providers can better engage with a greater diversity of languages, scripts and texts. It is also about recognising and building on different meanings of literacy: understanding how identities, values and roles are changing within families and communities through religious literacies.

This paper sets out to explore informal religious literacy learning in two communities in contrasting areas of Nepal - a Muslim community in the Southern Terai region and a Gurung community in the Western hills practising Buddhism and Bon religion. Through ethnographic-style research, we investigated how adults and children were engaging with religious literacy practices, including who was teaching whom and in what spaces. An important aim was to observe ways in which religious literacy practices were changing, including investigating gendered assumptions and roles. As this paper concludes with reflections on how providers in Nepal could draw on these findings to rethink approaches to family literacy, we also review current Government policy on adult literacy and development more broadly.

2. Religion, language and education in Nepal: understanding the context

Nepal has a long history of diversity in terms of religion, ethnicity and languages. Though for many years regarded as a Hindu kingdom, the country now recognises all the major religions. According to the 2011 census, 81.3% of the population is Hindu, 9.04% Buddhist, 4.4% Islam, 3.05% Kirant, 1.42% Christian and 0.76% other religions (CBS, 2012). As many people have lived together for centuries in mixed communities, religious practices often become intertwined – such as Buddhists and Hindus worshiping at each other's temples, and some Nepali Muslims have 'adopted the marriage, birth and death ceremonies of other religions' (Siddique, 2001: 341). We found evidence of such changed religious practices in both research sites: for instance, Muslim women were adopting Hindu cultural practices, such as the Hindu mark on the forehead 'tika', and Gurung religious rituals had elements of Hinduism and Tibetan Buddhism.

Regarding linguistic diversity, 59% of the country's population is monolingual but 41% speak at least one second language. Nepali, the official language, is spoken as a first language by less than half the population (44.64%) - yet continues to be the medium of instruction in government schools and adult literacy programmes. Altogether, 123 languages are spoken as mother tongues in Nepal (CBS, 2014), and several have their own writing system, which differs from the Devanagari script used for Sanskrit, Nepali, Hindi and several other languages spoken in Nepal and India. In recent years, English language has become more dominant, particularly in higher education, and the private school sector has expanded dramatically to meet parents' demands for English language medium schooling.

Of particular relevance to this paper is the Islamic school system operating in many areas of the Terai. So far 911 Madarsas have been registered as community schools and entitled to government funding (CEHRD, 2020), though it is believed that more than 4000 Madarsas may be operating (Taylor, 2021) and some also seek support from municipalities and donations from the Muslim community. The government-registered Madarsas must offer maths, science, Nepali, English and social studies along with religious courses, such as Diniyat, Arabic language and Urdu. Muslim families have been found to admire the Madarsas that offer Islamic courses, Urdu language and other regular curricula (Rajbanshi, 2019; Kandel, 2019), meaning children are multilingual from an early age. Although Madarsas were brought under the umbrella of the government school system, compared to other community schools, they suffer from inadequate staffing and few trained teachers (Kandel, 2019). However, an educationalist working with Muslim communities observes that most Madarsas do not want to register because they would then have to follow government rules and might 'lose their culture' (personal comment).

The Constitution promulgated in 2015 marked a major change in terms of governance structures, dividing Nepal into seven provinces, 753 local governments, and a federal system, where decisions about resources and policies became decentralised to local and provincial levels. Each province could choose one or more additional official working languages and in 2021, the National Language Commission of Nepal recommended 15 official languages alongside Nepali (the official language at federal level) at provincial levels. The responsibility for school education and adult literacy has been assigned to the local government and ensures the right for every Nepali community to 'preserve and promote its language, script, culture, cultural civilization and heritage' (Fundamental Rights and Duties, 32-3). The 2019 Education Policy supports this direction through strengthening Community Learning Centres, so that local governments could provide continuing education through such hubs. Local Governments are also required to make arrangements to conserve and develop local languages, scripts, literature and culture, as well as teaching in local languages. In the same year, the National Science Technology and Innovation Policy (2019) advocated transferring, professionalising and modernising indigenous knowledge and technology, through integrating such skills and knowledge into the school curriculum.

This recent shift in educational policy discourse – signalling a space for indigenous knowledge, local languages and the importance of lifelong learning – needs to be understood in the context of previous educational policies. For over 50 years, Government and NGO adult literacy programmes targeted rural women, taking a functional literacy approach and centred on their roles as mothers and wives (Acharya and Robinson-Pant 2017). Most literacy courses were delivered in Nepali language with didactic stories about topics such as nutrition, family planning and child marriage. A series of national literacy campaigns was rolled out with the aim of meeting the 50% increase in adult literacy by 2015 (EFA Goal 4) though had limited impact on literacy rates. Responding to the diversity of the population, the 2012 campaign ('Literate Nepal Mission') opened opportunities for NGO partners to develop materials drawing on local languages and cultural practices. Intergenerational learning had been promoted through earlier literacy campaigns which took an 'each-one-teach-one' approach, where a schooled young person or child would teach literacy to a neighbour or relative. Several family literacy projects were piloted from the 1990s, including a partnership with UNESCO, which involved mothers learning literacy from their children in a classroom and sharing their knowledge about local traditions (UIL 2015). The Government launched a continuing education programme in 2015, responding to the international commitment to lifelong learning for all – though they only targeted adult non-literates. The 2019 National Education Policy aspires to make 'Nepal totally literate and develop a culture of lifelong learning through non-formal, alternative, traditional and open education modes' (8.6).

Despite these developments, as in other countries, the overall national educational policy and resources remain focused largely on children and schooling. For instance, the National Framework for Sustainable Development Goal 4 (MOEST 2019) is more specific about the roles and responsibilities of Local Governments in relation to schools than nonformal education. Within the formal sector, there is still a disconnect between schooling and indigenous knowledge, and schools continue to promote a centrally-prescribed Nepali language curriculum and English language, in mutual agreement with the parents. Faced with the challenge of limited resources – particularly to produce materials in languages lacking a script – provision of a multilingual and localised curriculum incorporating indigenous knowledge remains an aspiration rather than a reality.

It can be seen that the national adult literacy policy has historically taken an instrumental and monolingual approach, focusing on functional literacy. Although recently educational policy has broadened to recognise lifelong learning, multilingual approaches and indigenous knowledge, adult literacy still remains similar to children's schooling with a centralised curriculum in the national language, Nepali. Regarding religious education, as observed in other country/religious contexts, there is a tension between the opportunities for girls to receive an education, and the realisation that 'religious schools are often conservative institutions, established to preserve and protect traditions, many of which are likely to uphold gender differences between women and men, rather than eradicate them' (UNESCO 2003: 142). This has particular relevance for our gendered exploration of religious literacy practices.

Within Nepal, family literacy has not gained much visibility and has tended to be regarded as one-way transmission (of children to adults) and as a means to an end (to teach adults to read and write). Indigenous knowledge is less recognised in education as compared to other sectors; for instance, the health sector promotes ayurvedic and allopathic medicine. In schools and adult learning programmes, there remains a strong disconnect between literacies in everyday life and in school – and this is never more apparent than in relation to the religious practices that families engage in at home. This led us to explore how insights into intergenerational religious literacy learning might contribute to filling this gap.

3. Conceptual framework

Understanding literacy as situated in social and cultural practices

Within this paper, we are taking a social practice perspective on literacy, rather than viewing literacy only in terms of reading and writing **skills**. This understanding of literacy emerged from research conducted by anthropologists, psychologists and sociolinguists in the 1980s into how people engaged with written and oral texts in their everyday lives. Street (1984) challenged the 'great divide' theory of a binary between orality and literacy, literacy and illiteracy, proposing instead a continuum. Distinguishing between an 'autonomous' and 'ideological' model of literacy, he argued that international agencies like UNESCO often disregarded the context of literacy and promoted 'essay-text' literacy (ibid). By contrast, an ideological model draws attention to the ways in which literacy is shaped by and embedded in relationships of power, identity and culture. Contesting the notion that there is one neutral literacy, Street analysed hierarchies between the multiple literacies and languages that people engage with. All too often, one literacy dominates – referred to as 'schooled' literacy (Street and Street 1995) – the kind of reading and writing promoted in formal institutions which tends to be valued above local literacies.

Within this body of research (known as the 'New Literacy Studies'), the concepts of 'literacy event' and 'literacy practice' became important tools of analysis (Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic, 2000). 'Literacy event' provides a starting point to observe/describe what is happening in any situation that involves reading, writing and texts. However, Street (2001) highlighted its limitations, suggesting 'it does not tell us how meanings are constructed... The concept of *literacy practices* attempts both to

handle the events and the patterns around literacy and to *link* them to something broader of a cultural and social kind' (ibid: 11). In this paper, we take the concept of 'literacy practices' to analyse what religious literacy events revealed about processes of cultural change, meanings of literacy and social identities. Barton et al (2000: 8) highlight the importance of institutions in shaping literacy practices: 'different literacies (are) associated with different domains of life' and 'literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships and some literacies are more dominant, visible and influential than others.' The concept of 'literacy domains' encouraged us to explore, not only practices within the religious literacy domain, but also the relationship with other domains, particularly with development projects (often referred to as 'bureaucratic literacies') and schooled literacy.

Women's empowerment and literacy

The aim of 'women's empowerment' has underpinned adult literacy policy in Nepal and elsewhere – the assumption being that ability in reading and writing is required before a woman can become economically active or challenge social norms. This dominant policy discourse connects strongly with an autonomous model of literacy and has led to a focus on 'schooled' literacy and a 'literacy first' (Rogers 2010) approach in programmes, as we observed in our fieldsites. Within the religious domain, a similarly instrumental approach has been noted: 'as agents of socialization within the family, their [women's] schooling in religious beliefs and tradition may be considered more important than promoting their own educational advancement' (UNESCO 2003).

We draw on a conceptualisation of empowerment as going beyond planned development interventions and propose a lens for looking at the complex processes of social change. Cornwall and Edward's (2014) concept of 'hidden pathways to empowerment' provides a way of analysing informal learning and spaces through which women learn new ideas – and this includes religious literacy practices. Arguing that 'empowerment is a process, not a fixed state, status or endpoint, let alone a measurable outcome to which targets can be attached', they conceptualise empowerment as a 'journey' rather than a destination (ibid: 7). White (2010: 336) identifies two broad approaches to theorising empowerment – the first based on 'conventional development indices' (the 'measurable outcomes' mentioned above). She adopts the second approach, characterised by Rowlands (1997) who identified a 'personal' dimension of empowerment, extending this to 'include a more social orientation which is community rather than family focused' (ibid). We also take this relational understanding of empowerment to move beyond the functional and instrumental aspects of literacy. This involves looking at how literacy practices are gendered and can challenge power relationships within the family - the 'symbolic value of literacy' in relation to processes of women's empowerment (Rockhill 1993). The concept of literacy as constructed and embedded in social interactions and institutions provides a framework for analysing religious literacy practices. An understanding of empowerment as relational and spontaneous, rather than planned, offers a lens for investigating relationships between literacy, identity and social change in the religious domain.

4. Methodology

This article draws on a larger UKRI-funded project on family literacy and indigenous learning in Nepal, Malawi, Ethiopia and the Philippines. This comparative study emerged from a long-standing collaboration between five universities (including a UK partner) with expertise in adult literacy. Our overall research question was: 'What kind of (inter)generational literacy and learning practices are families engaged in?' In Nepal, the team investigated intergenerational and indigenous learning in various literacy domains, including health, agriculture, religion and rural livelihoods. This paper focuses on findings from two of the four project fieldsites in Nepal with different religious practices – Kapilvastu (Muslim community) and Lamjung (Gurung community, which followed both Buddhism and Bon religion). The sites were purposively sampled to provide insights into different areas of

Nepal – a hill district (Lamjung) and the Terai region near India (Kapilvastu) – with minority ethnic or religious groups who did not speak Nepali as their first language. In each community, we met with families who had expressed interest in participating in the research[1]: in Kapilvastu, 12 households of at least two generations (each with around 10 members) and in Lamjung, 6 households (with around 5 members). With them, we also visited spaces and institutions outside the home where they engaged with different literacies and talked with a wide range of people – in a temple and community centre in Lamjung; in Kapilvastu, a residential Madarsa, women's empowerment project and a religious festival site.

Our fieldwork took place in 2020-21, consisting of two or three-week visits to each fieldsite by a team of two university researchers and follow-up discussions by phone or in person. The study took an 'ethnographic-style' approach (Green and Bloome, 1997), combining participant observation, informal interviews and documentary analysis. In Openjuru et al (2016), Street explained that 'an ethnographic style goes much further than just using some ethnographic tools. It means adopting an ethnographic perspective, a de-centring, removing power from the researcher...' (ibid: 23). Although unable to conduct long-term ethnographic fieldwork, we adopted an ethnographic 'mindset', to develop emic-etic perspectives within participant observation, informal interviews and the analysis. Both (female) researchers in Kapilvastu were from outside the community (and one from the UK partner university) so communicated in a mixture of Nepali and Hindi, with assistance from a local community worker for interpreting data in Awadhi (the local language) and Urdu. In Lamjung, the two university researchers (one female, one male, both non-Gurung and based in Kathmandu) interacted with respondents in Nepali. Whilst some interviews were audio-recorded, translated and transcribed into Nepali, many interactions and events observed were more informal and captured through fieldnotes. The data was analysed manually through coding and categorising themes across the fieldsites.

As discussed earlier, we used the concepts of 'literacy event' and 'literacy practice' to structure our interactions and data analysis. The idea of relationships between 'literacy domains' helped to extend this analysis into implications for policy. At this stage, we combined the analysis with an in-depth review of policy and programme documentation from the education sector, as well as comparing how indigenous and local learning was addressed in agriculture, health and women's development.

5. Introducing the field-sites

The two districts were selected to give insights into different religious, cultural and linguistic practices and focused on two communities considering themselves to be 'minorities' in the context of Nepal's majority Hindu population. Intergenerational learning is central to how these groups sustain their cultural and religious heritage. We have introduced the term 'indigenous' into our analysis of the knowledge and learning taking place within the family and community, though realise this is a complex and contested term in Nepal. Whilst the Gurung community might consider the religious practices described below as 'indigenous', it is unlikely that the Islamic literacy practices in Kapilvastu would be referred to in this way. Within Nepal, the meaning of 'indigenous' has come to be associated with specific ethnic groups (including Gurungs) and political movements working for greater equality and linguistic recognition (Acharya, Jere and Robinson-Pant, 2019).

In Lamjung district, we conducted the research in Ghale Gaun, a village with around 95 households situated at the top of a hill. The families are almost all from the Gurung ethnic community, where traditionally, older women are the key decision makers in the family. Most Gurung women form mothers' groups, giving them access to resource generation and opportunities for community development work (Rauniyar, 2022 and Gurung, 2004). They speak their own language (Gurung) and their religion is based on the Tibetan indigenous religion, Bon, which preceded Tibetan Buddhism

[1] Ethical protocols approved by both collaborating Nepal and UK universities were followed.

(Kvaerne 2013). In Ghale Gaun, we found that the religious rituals and texts were also influenced by Hinduism – particularly the Hindu Vedas. The community were traditionally sheep farmers and engaged in weaving carpets. Recently, a community-based homestay has been established, so tourists can stay with 37 households, and English-language signboards and menu cards could be found throughout the village. With the younger generation migrating to cities or abroad for work or study, homestay businesses are generally run by older men and women.

We selected Kapilvastu district for our study, because it has a high proportion of Muslim communities (18.2%, CBS 2014) and the strong presence of Islamic educational institutions, alongside Nepali state schools and colleges. In the fieldsite, Awadhi was spoken by most families, though Nepali was the medium of instruction in state schools and Urdu and Arabic were used for religious literacy. As India was only a few kilometres away, Hindi and Urdu were also widely spoken in the community. There was not only trade across the border, but also teachers and students came to the residential Madarsas and brides were sought in India. A major issue for the Muslim community here was land ownership: since they originally migrated from India, it took many years to obtain the Nepali citizenship required to own land and a house. Large numbers of the Muslim male population spent the year working in labouring jobs in the Gulf, meaning that we visited several households with far more women than men. Within this community, women were predominantly busy in the home with childcare and cooking responsibilities and had limited mobility. They regularly went out to the market with other women and children (wearing a hijab or khimar) for food shopping and to neighbouring houses, but they did not travel further afield without male relatives.

6. Findings

In this section, we present ethnographic vignettes constructed from our fieldnotes and interview transcripts, developed through the analysis of recurrent themes and selected on the basis of 'telling' rather than 'typical' cases (Mitchell 1984). We have focused on specific 'literacy events' in each vignette to explore different meanings of literacy and how families interacted around religious literacies.

6.1. Literacies and indigenous intergenerational learning in a Muslim community: a gendered perspective

In the homes and institutions visited in Kapilvastu, we were particularly struck by the ways in which religious literacies were being shaped by and were influencing changing gendered roles, especially for women. It is worth noting that more generally, new spaces have opened up for women in traditionally male Islamic cultural institutions. For instance, Imran and Munir (2018) observed that women have begun to organise *mushaira*[2] and many *mushaira* are now mixed. *Mushaira* is an institution that provides 'an opportunity for the younger generations to learn a lot, not only the language or the craft of poetry, but manners and decorum as well' (Parekh, 2008).

Performing literacy

The first vignette gives a glimpse into religious literacy learning organised informally at home by families. Rosa, the 'teacher' in this context, was herself a 14 year-old student in grade 7 at the Madarsa. Yet, she taught her siblings and neighbours' children Urdu and Arabic literacy at home from 7 – 11 every morning and in the evenings. Most of these children also attended a government school during the daytime, where they were taught in Nepali, and some English literacy.

Down a small narrow street off the main road, we came to a large house opposite some open land with goats and chicken in a cage. The entrance had an Urdu prayer written over the door and several hand-written texts and drawings on the wall. It was 7pm and in the front open porch of the house, a young woman sat on a huge bed surrounded by children. Seven little girls and five boys were taking it

in turn to read aloud to Rosa from their Arabic alphabet books, pointing at each letter as they said it. 'Rosa api' (meaning 'big sister') corrected them as they went along. Then she read aloud herself from a religious text – rocking back and forth - and a small girl imitated her movement too. An older boy stood up to read a longer passage and his elder brother explained to us that he memorises the whole text first, then learns the separate letters, then the joined-up letters. Older women from the household were watching and shouted at the boys if they forgot to put on their hat when they read (even if this was just the hood of their jacket). A young boy stood up to read a prayer from his exercise book, saying 'it is my own writing'. By this, he explained that he had written it down from memory after hearing it, rather than that he had composed it. The older women joined in with the boy reading as they knew the prayer. Then they asked Rosa to recite the devotional prayers, urging her to stand on a mat (she had begun by standing on her shoes). Rosa stood tall, singing loudly and confidently with hand movements. The other women then joined in with the prayers. They were clearly impressed and proud of Rosa's abilities.

Our observation of Rosa's evening sessions revealed a strong emphasis on 'performance'. The children were learning more than simply decoding texts or even understanding of the meaning in Arabic or Urdu – they learned that literacy was integral to their religious identity and that there were accepted ways to behave (and dress) when reading or reciting prayers.[3] When we later visited a girls' residential Madarsa, we found a similar emphasis on oral performance as girls stood up one-by-one to recite religious texts in front of hundreds of their peers. Noor, another young woman in this street, explained that the Madarsa where she taught had one day a week reciting *naad* (Urdu devotional poetry): 'Many girls are good at this like Rosa but not me! Their *naad* performance is so sweet!' It was striking that Noor and other women appreciated this kind of religious reading in aesthetic terms, talking about how beautifully someone read. For them, literacy was not just about gaining new knowledge, but also about connecting with their emotional and spiritual side and strengthening their shared identity as Muslim women. Reading here was a collaborative activity, bringing people together, including women who could not read individually, but they could still join in orally and offer instructions about appropriate behaviour and dress.

By contrast, reading and writing in local schools and formal institutions was seen in more functional terms and as an individualised practice – usually in Nepali language and Devanagari script. For instance, a local development organisation required women to write a business plan in Nepali before they could gain funding for an income generating project. This unfamiliar bureaucratic literacy practice was introduced to the women in this street through twice-weekly evening training sessions led by community workers. The training room walls were covered with posters giving advice in Nepali and pictures of Hindu gods. We talked to Noor about the NGO's approach to learning, and she observed that by contrast in her Madarsa and home, 'the book is central'. These families had a commonly-agreed body of knowledge/texts that they wanted to learn to recite, and reading rather than writing was the focus of the informal classes held at home. Rosa engaged with an impressive range of literacies and switched readily between different scripts, according to the context. After attending a tailoring course, she sewed clothes for friends and family – and we noticed that she wrote down the measurements in English (Roman) numerals. She worked out a system of writing down the measurements vertically to represent the top to the bottom of the garment she was making. For Rosa, literacy was self-generated, creative, multilingual and integral to her multiple identities – in contrast to the NGO and school, where new literacies were imposed from outside with little space for adaptation.

There were gendered assumptions about literacy within this community: girls rather than boys should lead the home (unpaid) religious literacy classes and teach younger siblings. Through such opportunities, some girls were gaining confidence, mobility and status within the family which led to

[3] See Masquelier, 2015: 186 on 'how faith literally resides in the Muslim body' through movements during *salat* prayer.

what the local NGO might term 'women's empowerment'. On a later visit to Rosa's house, we found she had left for India with her parents the previous day. The family explained that a relative had died and 'they took Rosa as she is good at reciting the prayers.' Rosa's religious literacy abilities were recognised and valued by her family, and this was an important part of her identity within the community. For other young women, proficiency in religious literacy had led to paid teaching work – like Noor, who taught in the local girls' Madarsa. She herself had studied in an English medium private school, the government Nepali school and the Madarsa, then had private tuition to learn Urdu and Arabic to the equivalent of grade 5. Though her father wanted her to study further, her brothers did not agree, so she found a job at the Madarsa teaching from 9 – 2 pm every day. This also meant she could go out alone to the bazaar and she had her own mobile phone, unlike the women in Rosa's household who only had access to a shared mobile phone. Through learning and teaching Islamic literacies, these young women were 'taking hold of literacy' (Kulick and Stroud 1993), challenging and transforming gendered roles and practices to some extent within their community.

Lifelong learning through religious literacy

Lifelong learning has become a strong discourse within educational policy in Nepal, and as illustrated above, in this community religious reading was seen as not only for the young. Our second vignette illustrates how a culture of reading is embedded in this community, with young and old people, women and men, reading together daily.

Sahin led us into a very nice room, with a sewing machine in the corner, lots of pictures, even a family photo taken in Kathmandu, certificates, religious pictures and some sewing she had done including a bedsheet saying 'welcome'. She said she became very skilled at making her own clothes and this is why she is interested in setting up a sewing centre here with her daughter. She took a short sewing training and also taught herself. She kept emphasising that her husband gave her permission to start a business, now that the children are at school

Showing us the books on top of the wardrobe, Sahin explained that the family all read together each day: 'after reading these 30 books, it means we can read the Quran'. We asked, 'then what is next?' She said, 'there are no books after that, so we read it again and again'. She explained there are 16 parts inside each book and 30 books in the Quran, saying they used to sell each book separately but now the Quran comes as one book. When she is menstruating, she has to keep far from the books, for seven days, and this is when she cannot read them. 'There is a reading technique, which we have to learn, morning and evening. As we feel lazy after food, we have to read before eating'.

Sahin described how their family religious reading was highly structured – both in terms of the books that they read and in which order, and the routine that they had adopted for reading together (before food). In other families we visited, reading was also an important part of people's lives. Noor's mother told us that she read the Quran in Urdu twice a day – and when we arrived at a house in a nearby village, an elderly man was lying on his bed reading a thick religious book in Urdu and Hindi. For the Quran, there was a shared understanding of what Sahin referred to as the 'reading technique' and the sequence of texts that should be read together as a family.

Whilst everyone saw religious literacy as continuing throughout life, Sahin was unusual in continuing to embroider bedsheets after marriage and using her sewing expertise to set up a business. Within the girls' residential Madarsa, we observed a strong emphasis – alongside religious literacy – on learning embroidery and sewing. The teachers were keen to show us intricate embroidered pillowcases that the girls had made as part of their lessons. In a village house we visited, the girls brought out a box of their embroidery and crafts, including fans, small mats and cloths painted with flowers. Two older women were watching, sharing tobacco, as they explained that their daughters would not do these handicrafts after marriage. But they would need to take a large box to their in-laws' house to produce as evidence of their skill. So, in contrast to religious reading which was

considered a lifelong learning practice, learning embroidery was only considered essential for women at a certain life stage, and few women drew on these skills later in life. A year after our visit, Sahin had succeeded in setting up a tailoring business and school for women in her house. This was an unusual example of how an indigenous learning practice was beginning to evolve and had the potential to transform gendered roles – as Sahin used her skills after marriage to generate income.

6.2. Literacies and indigenous intergenerational learning in a Gurung community: transforming literacies

We now turn to the hill fieldsite, Ghale Gaon, to investigate how religious literacies were being learned and developed within this community – including how religious leaders were drawing on resources outside, as well as within, the area.

Early morning, we arrived at Dil Jung's house for tea and conversation as promised the day before. His brother, Shreejung Ghale, a Ghyapreng (priest) was his next-door neighbour. They shared the same front yard. Chomo, Shreejung's wife, was busy weaving raadi[4], while Shreejung was busy in the kitchen preparing the morning meal. He joined us in a short while with two unbound books with hard covers. The books looked very neat and new. They were separately tied by white strings and wrapped in a white cloth. This way the loose pages of the books remained intact. The title of the books read Parbai Pyai [5]and Nami Pibai Pyai[6] in Gurung language using Devanagari script. Shreejung explained that both books were Gurung Vedas[7]. Gurung Vedas consisted of the Ghale Gurung's ways of life, rituals, mantras, passed down orally for centuries. Shreejung himself learned the Veda from his older brothers and father who were all Ghyaprengs. Secret mantras are still handed down orally, so they were not printed in those books. They explained that it is because of the fear that some ill-minded person might misuse the power of those mantras. Only those who learn the Vedas by heart are conferred with secret mantras, which were still transferred only orally. Shreejung, who was also teaching the Gurung Vedas to interested youths, told us that his UK-based cousin helped them computerise the oral Veda. Shreejung and other priests carefully reviewed the transcription of the Vedas for accuracy. Then only they were printed. Shreejung explained that they initiated the documentation of the oral tradition so that younger generations who are interested and committed could sustain the Gurung culture and tradition through using the book. According to Shreejung, other Ghyaprengs from nearby villages have also kept such printed Vedas.

Shreejung provided important insights into how this Gurung family were finding new ways to pass their religious knowledge on to the younger generations. Having relied on oral teaching from senior family members for many centuries, they had now decided to write down this knowledge – and even to digitise the texts, with the help of relatives abroad. By documenting their rituals – including birth, death and marriage ceremonies – Shreejung hoped that the younger generation would be able to follow the text and perform the rituals, even in the absence of a priest. They had identified some younger boys as apprentices, though they were unable to come regularly to learn from them due to their school studies. The secret mantras could not be written down nor taught and would only be given to a learner once they had memorised the whole Veda.

Shreejung's account showed how sensitive the decision was to write down knowledge that had previously only been shared orally. In particular, the 'secrecy' associated with oral transmission of the mantra contrasts with their work in digitisation and opening up the Gale Gurung's religious texts to new audiences. Writing – particularly digitisation - here seemed to be associated with reaching

[4] Traditional woollen carpet

[5] After-death rituals.

[6] Releasing the bird: after-death ritual.

[7] Veda literally means 'knowledge'. In Hinduism, there are four Vedas which impart knowledge about divinity, rituals, rites, philosophy, spirituality. Veda, which is considered the oldest religious text was orally transmitted until the Vedic period (c. 1500 - c. 500 BCE) when it was transcribed in written form.

out to a wider world and younger generations. It was interesting that they looked **outside** the community – a cousin in the UK – for help in supporting the learning and continuity of religious learning **within** the community. Having learned Nepali literacy in school, they chose to use Devanagari script to transcribe the oral texts, but they used Gurung script too. They inserted symbols between the words on the page to represent the secret mantras – creating multimodal texts. Switching easily between Gurung and Devanagari scripts even on the same page, Shreejung demonstrated a flexible and confident approach to writing multilingual texts.

Comparing this vignette to the Muslim religious literacy practices discussed earlier, memorisation was similarly considered important by people to enrich their religious identity and deepen knowledge. This was not just about learning the Vedas by heart, but also key to the power of the secret mantras which needed to be memorised internally rather than shared publicly. Significantly, the apprentices were all young men, and the priests were older men, and the religious literacy domain appeared to be highly gendered. Pema, Shreejung's younger brother's wife, explained that women could not become apprentices because some rituals were performed at night and would require inappropriate dress for women. We also noted that whilst women perform the ritual dance *Ghato*, the accompanying devotional songs were sung by men only. So, though religious literacy practices in this Gurung community were being transformed through transcribing and digitising formerly oral texts and translanguaging in Gurung and Nepali, this process took place through/within traditional gendered roles and spaces. This is perhaps the greatest contrast with the Islamic literacy practices we observed in Kapilvastu, where the established gendered roles, spaces and institutions for religious literacy learning had provided some young women opportunities to develop their confidence, social status and physical mobility.

7. Discussion

Returning to our conceptual lenses, this section explores how these findings could provide a starting point for developing family literacy approaches in the Nepal context. As discussed earlier, family literacy programmes have tended to focus on 'schooled literacy' and formal literacy teaching – in contrast to the informal literacy learning spaces and practices that we observed.

In both sites, young and old people were learning religious literacy practices together as part of their shared religious and cultural identity. The focus was on collaborative literacy learning and often 'respected elders' [UEA UNESCO Chair 2021] were leading that learning. In the case of the Muslim families, this was also about individual study of the texts and learning to read aloud to an audience. The meanings of literacy here seemed to focus on reading and performing – with different kinds of texts being engaged with in different ways (such as *Naad* being appreciated in aesthetic terms). Yet there was also a strong emphasis on the responsibility of the individual to reach salvation through reading the holy books, and with the support of others, including religious teachers. Within the Gurung community, religious literacy was more for the benefit of the community, putting oral religious knowledge into print so that the rituals could be continued by a few interested individuals – rather than expecting everyone to learn to read these texts. Selected younger boys were learning from the elder priests how to read and memorise the Vedas.

Both communities put emphasis on memorisation and repetition as a means to reaching higher spiritual understanding – a very different approach to literacy learning from that used by teachers in local schools, trained in Western pedagogical approaches. In Rosa's class, the young boy spoke about his 'own' writing to refer to texts that he had copied from religious books or prayers he had heard. This was similar to the process of transcription being undertaken in the Gurung community, where oral texts were now shared in written form. The text was being transformed – in handwriting and digitally – through a community working together for the shared goal of transferring and sustaining their religious knowledge. Within the Muslim community, there were many published religious texts in every house and, consequently, it appeared that more emphasis was put on reading than writing.

Both communities engaged with a range of literacies and languages in their everyday lives, and particularly in their religious practices where multilingual literacy was a given. In contrast to school and development projects underpinned by assumptions about monolingualism, these vignettes illustrate how people were developing multilingual approaches and hybrid texts in creative and flexible ways for religious purposes. Literacy practices were embedded in and shaped how they worshiped together, becoming a source of growth (personal and social). This again seems in contrast to development programmes which promoted a 'literacy first' approach to empowerment – teaching reading and writing as a prerequisite for activities like income generation or health awareness. Functional literacy has accompanied or preceded many agricultural or health programmes, with the focus solely on the instrumental purposes of reading and writing. By contrast, we observed a broader view of literacy in these two religious literacy domains – that literacy was not only about decoding letters and finding new information, but also had a social purpose in terms of developing identities (personal and collective), strengthening relationships and sharing an enjoyment of texts. Within the Gurung community, there was also a strong awareness of what literacy could **not** do – and for this reason they resisted writing down the secret mantras. These educators took an ideological approach to literacy as encompassing different values and purposes –the Gurung priests were 'taking hold' of the public notion of writing and publishing in order to sustain their religious practices.

The current policy discourse in Nepal emphasises the need for 'Local Governments to conserve, promote and develop local language, script and culture, indigenous knowledge and practices' (National Education Policy 2019, 10.8.3). Such policy has often been framed by an 'essentialised' concept of indigenous knowledge as fixed and unchanging[8] until state actors intervene. In contrast, our findings demonstrate how religious literacy practices were spontaneously changing, as people developed new spaces and identities within these communities. Although the Gurung priests aimed primarily to preserve their rituals, the intergenerational learning involved in this process meant that the younger generation men were encouraged to bring their technologies (computers) and languages (Devanagari script mixed with Gurung) to transform these texts. The older generation appeared to embrace this process of change and recognise that indigenous practices and texts were, and needed to be, continuously evolving. In the Kapilvastu community, the religious texts remained unchanged but the practices around them were dynamic, partly due to the greater diversity of social institutions supporting literacy learning. Among these were formal schools (Madarsas and state schools) and NGO training programmes, as well as informal spaces like Rosa's class on her porch. The interaction between formal learning and informal literacy learning and texts not only influenced multilingual literacy practices, but was also a resource that women like Rosa and Noor drew on to gain status, mobility, and sometimes income, through religious literacy teaching. Whilst literacy clearly had a symbolic value (Rockhill 1993) in relation to women's empowerment in this context, it had a functional purpose too, offering new social and economic opportunities. By contrast, in the Gurung community where only young men and boys were engaged in writing and transcribing religious texts, young women saw formal education and schooling as more likely pathways to empowerment. Priesthood and religious leadership were considered to be men's domain, and women thus did not consider becoming involved in such acts. For them, learning and literacy meant formal education or non-religious literacy classes.

The study offered insights into how very different social institutions were 'patterning literacy practices' (Barton et al, 2000: 8) and could not be seen in isolation from each other. For instance, in the Gurung community, 'schooled' literacy was influencing the ways in which religious texts were being transcribed by younger men. Within the Kapilvastu Muslim communities, the diversity of formal educational institutions – government schools, private schools, Madarsas and NGO training programmes – raised the question of 'which schooled literacy?' As the Madarsas were not

[8] See Aikman and Robinson-Pant (2019) for a general discussion of the term 'indigenous'.

promoting the 'essay text' schooled literacy that Street (1984) referred to, it was important to consider how these different institutions overlapped – such as the development programmes relying on a similar Nepali 'school-like' text to the government schools. Differing values and practices around literacy, such as the Madarsa religious literacy practices, influenced how people engaged with literacy in other institutions and informal spaces too.

Rather than considering what specific knowledge or literacies might be the basis for family literacy programmes in Nepal, our findings point to the importance of understanding and engaging with communities' ideas about how literacy, identity and social change are intertwined. The examples of Rosa's empowerment through Islamic literacy proficiency (as a teacher and leading prayers) illuminate ways in which change can be spontaneous and unplanned – in contrast to the women's development programme in this area, where proposal writing was the starting point. The findings illustrate the flexible approach that people took towards combining new and traditional literacies, formal and informal learning and towards languages – in contrast to policy discourse which often views these as binaries or sees languages as in opposition. Rather than attempting to write or teach in one language or script alone, these religious teachers engaged with learners to discuss critically about differences between literacies and drew creatively on their multilingual religious literacy resources.

Above all, the women and men teaching, learning and engaging with religious literacies built on their own and their family's or community's experiences in everyday life. This was not just about making learning and literacy relevant to everyday life but also about engaging with the meanings and values associated with different literacies (an ideological model of literacy, Street 1984). Literacies are not only different, but unequal and contested (particularly in the case of Islamic and Nepali 'schooled' literacies in Kapilvastu) and contributed to relationships of power within the community. There was also a notion of 'lifelong learning' since literacy learning did not stop after youth, but developed across the life cycle. Parents and elders in the community became important teachers/facilitators of religious literacy, learning daily with young people at home. Rather than having separately designed materials for adults and children (as in formal education), there was a strong sense in both communities of a shared text and knowledge that everyone was familiar with and wanted to learn.

By contrast, the approach to 'family literacy' piloted in Nepal has been based on an implicit assumption of hierarchies of literacies, where 'schooled' literacy is aspired to by parents and students. The aim was to find ways for parents to support their children's learning, through improving their own 'schooled' literacy skills and to use specially designed texts for children and/or adults. However, by starting from an exploration of intergenerational religious learning in the home and community, our study revealed the diversity and richness of literacy practices and texts outside formal institutions. Importantly, the findings also suggest ways in which such 'indigenous' and local literacy learning can open up opportunities for change in a spontaneous and creative way. They offer a different perspective on 'literacy' as linked to identity and social change, beyond the functional skills of reading and writing for employment or educational advancement. The findings demonstrate a need for family literacy providers to move away from a narrow concept of the family to consider intergenerational learning within the broader community.

8. Conclusion

In Nepal, much adult literacy research has adopted an autonomous model, assessing reading/writing skills and availability of livelihood skill training, with only a few studies (e.g. Singh & Sherchan, 2019) attempting to view literacy as social practice. Family literacy has remained an unexplored area, although intergenerational learning has been researched by other sectors.

Returning to our earlier discussion of policy in Nepal, we outline here specific implications of our research into religious literacies for literacy and development programmes. The findings suggest

that, rather than focusing on developing a separate ‘family literacy’ component for community learning centres, intergenerational and indigenous perspectives could be integrated into mainstream adult literacy programmes, health, agriculture, and other sectors too. In the case of the Muslim community, though religious literacy learning in the family was strengthened and built on by the Madarsa, local government schools often ignored such practices. There is potential however for schools to draw on the ways in which families actively engage in literacy learning at home and build connections through the curriculum.

Our paper thus points to the importance of moving beyond a conceptualisation of ‘family literacy’ as a package or specific component of adult learning programmes. There is already a wealth of literacy learning and teaching in communities like these – but practices such as those documented here may not be considered relevant to policy makers who are focused on functional literacy. Above all, our findings signal the potential for literacy interventions to build on the everyday literacies that young and old people are already sharing. This requires an ‘ethnographic mindset’ on the part of development policy makers in order to develop structures, teaching approaches and curriculum that build on – rather than ignore – local literacy practices. The starting point for such an approach is to develop stronger understanding of the meanings of literacy and ways in which intergenerational literacy learning takes place, through asking the following questions:

- Who is teaching who and where?
- What does literacy mean in this community and how does this differ according to gender and age?
- How do they read, individually and/or together?
- Do they put more emphasis on reading or writing?
- What spoken and written languages are used?
- What role do parents and other elders in the community play in supporting literacy and how is this gendered?

This kind of informal research engagement could be the first step towards engaging creatively with communities to support and enrich their existing religious and cultural literacy practices, and strengthen connections with other literacy domains.

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