



## Improving Sociology at Tribhuvan University: A Deliberation with Suggestions

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**Abstract.** *This essay serves as both a reflective piece and a commentary, weaving together my observations and experiences emanating from my long engagement with the Central Department of Sociology at Tribhuvan University (TU). The comments outlined here emerge from a series of formal and informal interactions with colleagues within the department and university, rather than relying on any hard data. Hence, this needs to be understood as my process of retrospection and introspection, which are essential for reappraising institutional realities and requisite reforms. There is no claim here that there was a golden age at some point during the 45-year history of Sociology at TU. Nonetheless, the downslide is dated roughly to the 2006-2007 national political transition, which led to a powerful regime of unionization among teachers, administrators and students that, in turn, has led to normlessness as well as a serious loss of professional and managerial standards at TU. Choosing a suggestive stand, I mark the swift decline in the quality of teaching and learning in the discipline of Sociology at TU and propose the necessary reforms that the Sociology Subject Committee, along with various Departments of Sociology within TU, ought to realize to take corrective actions to improve teaching and research in Sociology.*

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## Introduction

I have had a long career teaching Sociology at the Central Department of Sociology, Tribhuvan University (TU). This long career, in part, has also enabled me to gain a broad overview of the academic and governance aspects of the university. I do not focus much, despite its enormous significance, on the funding and financial aspects of the department and the university. My primary concern is the rapid erosion in the quality of teaching and learning of the discipline of Sociology at TU, a trend that began to emerge with the political

transition of Nepal during 2006-2007, triggering widespread institutional uncertainty and inconsistency. In the context of higher education, and particularly within the field of Sociology, this led to the dilution of academic norms, weakened institutional oversight, and a fragmentation of professional commitment—all of which have had enduring consequences for the pedagogical and intellectual vitality of the discipline. I must, however, immediately register two caveats here.

While it is for others to judge, I do not consider myself a member of the old guard blaming the new generation for spoiling the present. Nor do I seek to allude to any golden age or even a silver age at some specific point during the 45- year history of Sociology at TU. Finally, even as I argue that the extensive and intense cultivation of a political spoils system by political parties lies at the roots of this downslope, I do not believe that this kind and level of political spoils system is inherent to a democratic and republican political system. Nonetheless, I believe that this timeframe is widely (though not generally) accepted by observers both within and outside TU. As supportive evidence, I refer to a remark made by one of the senior-most faculty members during a long conversation last winter on the preparation of a course plan for the Bachelor's and Master's programs in Sociology. It was a mere snippet of the conversation there, but his words were telling: he wondered if Sociology faculty members at TU five years into the future would be willing and able to prepare course plans as we had been doing all along. There is, of course, a risk that this might be regarded as a lament of the old guard as well. But I do fear that course plans in Sociology five years hence will become less a well deliberated and discussed output than one that more or less fully relies on a distant university or the ubiquitous AI (Artificial Intelligence).

I should also note that inasmuch as a university is a single integrated organization, many of the problems Sociology is facing at TU today may well be characteristic of many other disciplines there. While a few institutions – such as the Institute of Medicine at TU seem to have been able to step away from the downslope, we have not heard anything that impugns the story of the downslope generally. If so, the scale of the accumulated and accelerating erosion over the years – mostly during the last two decades – must be enormous. On the other hand, I also believe that with proper diagnostics and determined and sustained reforms, most of the problems that plague the university today could find a resolution. Given the situation, it may be unwise to hope that the required reforms will be implemented. But hopelessness kills agency and I find it impossible to shed it.

### **The Degeneration of Sociology and Sociologists at TU**

Building a better and stable framework requires reforms at multiple levels and corners. My intention here is to focus on a particular level of teaching and learning of the discipline of Sociology, as well as the associated Sociology

Subject Committee of the TU, its allied campuses (where Sociology is taught), and the teachers and students of Sociology there. In other words, my focus here is primarily, though not exclusively, on the micro level, owing to my predisposition as a sociologist.<sup>1</sup> Bringing the university into the discussion based on the granularity of personal observations and experiences may accentuate the necessity for reformative initiatives for university colleagues and aspiring sociologists, paving the way for future directions.

My prime intention in this essay is to put the onus for reforms on and thus regenerate the Sociology Subject Committee, Sociology-teaching campuses and departments – and, of course, those serving as the heads of the committee – as well as all of the teachers and students of Sociology themselves at the hugely sprawl that TU has become.<sup>2</sup> This, of course, includes the responsibilities to reform the house of Sociology at TU, as well as to reach out to all those whose help is required to engage in such reforms. The point is that for too long, the teaching body of Sociology, and may be the faculties of all other disciplines at TU, shirked their responsibilities for what they are supposed to do academically in their respective workspaces.

Many of these individuals have sheltered themselves for a long time at a level of performance that is barely enough to assure them a wage or a salary. They head to their workspace, take 3-6 classes a week, sign their thumbprints and hurry to leave. Within this set culture, the Sociology Subject Committee itself has long been a moribund entity—meeting irregularly, starved of resources and reduced to producing a course plan or curriculum in an extended period of absence. Above all, the prevalent *jagire* mindset<sup>3</sup> that runs across TU denudes all personal engagement from one's profession. The profession often turns into a routine ritual.

Within this established academic structure and atmosphere, TU faces two seemingly intractable and mutually connected challenges that stifle reform. The first is the overpowering tendency to normalize a *jagire* level of performance

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1 As a sort of compensation, I have recently published an article on the problems and resolutions at the macro level, covering TU, government, and politics (see Mishra, 2023).

2 Throughout Nepal, around 48 campuses offer MA-level Sociology courses under TU.

3 *Jagire* is a colloquial Nepali term derived from *jagir*, which traditionally referred to a state-granted position or a source of income, often linked to land tenure or bureaucratic appointments and roles in the past. Here, in the university context, I prefer to use the term, *jagire* culture, denoting a deep-seated institutional mindset associated with job security, bureaucratic complacency and minimal accountability. It embodies a sense of agency within a structure where holding a position becomes an end in itself, rather than a meaningful engagement and contribution. In the university setting, *jagire* culture is manifested in the ritualistic fulfillment of attendance requirements, routinized conventional delivery of classroom lectures and absence of commitment to innovation, critical inquiry and scholarly research, where the institutional roles are treated as entitlements rather than responsibilities.

that accepts the lowest level of performance as the norm, and the second is the absence of agency in confronting and resolving such problems. The faculty, staff, administrators and students experience a decline in their rigorous vitality and must adjust to the dynamics of the institutional culture. The logic is straightforward: Why would one want to upset the order of things and confront backlashes from various corners that are inevitable to acts of reform? It is, as such, far easier to go with the flow and make an exhibit, at the end of the tenure, of a fairly long list of relatively inconsequential “gains.” Worse, many of us cop out with the refrain, *maile/hamile garera ke hunchha?* (“It does not really matter what I/we do, does it”)?!

At the heart of the systemic dysfunction lies a deeply contradictory role assumed by its most powerful background agents—the chancellor and pro-chancellor of the university, who are currently occupied ex officio by the prime minister and the minister of education of Nepal, respectively, and who are far more powerful than the rest of the agents. These actors exhibit a double deal—on one side, they bear the formal responsibility to improve the university’s academic standards—on the other side, they are responsible for the recruitment of unions, teachers, students, and administrators. As is well known, all such unions function as fronts of political parties, factions and even individual leaders thereof. The unions have long systematically waylaid the university from achieving its primary mission—that of educating future generations by largely succeeding in hijacking the workings of the university to political parties as well as personal benefits.

The teachers’ union, for example, is exclusively concerned with pecuniary and other benefits for teachers and, as far as my experience goes, never with regularity of classes, quality of education, and so on. It has misused university resources and commandeered and rented out university property for the benefit of its group. The administrators act likewise. The unionized student leaders, in turn, remain least concerned about whether students become competent graduates. They merely wish to make political and pecuniary ladders out of students. Student union leaders systematically threaten university officials and teachers, vandalize property and lock teachers and officials out of their workplace. This routine has become common since the last decade, thus, among others, rendering the university calendar haywire. Nor is violence unknown. That a teacher in the Department of Sociology, where I work, was beaten up by a student goon squad and had to stay in a hospital mending his multiple fractures of his upper leg made the headlines for months. In a twist of irony, the government, in a stark show of utter politicization, sought to take the case back from the legal courts, which also made headlines for months. The chancellor and the pro-chancellor, as party leaders, in turn, leave no stone unturned to cultivate all these unionized forces – rather than cultivating a future generation of competent citizens, for political and electoral ends. Reforming the university, thus, does remain an arduous challenge.

I must note here that not all teachers, students and administrators are unionized. But the power and clout of those who weigh heavily over the rest persuade the structure and the proceedings of almost the entire university system.

Of course, it might be a valid excuse, on the side of the ruling parties, that all or almost all other political parties keep such squads in reserve. That is where the legislature and law could come in and make a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate politics. Hopefully, one can fairly expect that all political parties in the parliament could come together to specify the sphere of operation of such unions within the Constitution and within the objectives and ambit of a university, which is, of course, an independent academic and research institution. A narrower specification of the spheres of operation of such unions, I think, would also take care of the often glibly made argument that union membership is an inalienable right within a democratic polity.

For reforms to take hold, the agents on the foreground, i.e., principally the professors, heads of department and heads of subject committees, campus chiefs, deans, the registrar, the rector and the vice-chancellor, on the other hand, must dedicate themselves to fulfill their professional duty as laid down in the university act and other regulations. If they cannot, either for personal, professional, or any other reason, such as the overwhelming pressures from the unionized and rent-extracting (*hafta uthaune*) political party squads, they should vacate their seats sooner rather than later and go to the courts of law as well as the public.<sup>4</sup> The consequences of neglect are stark—if this culture continues to entrench within the university and remains unchanged, the quality of our education will undoubtedly deteriorate, impacting future generations for a long time who depend on higher education institutions like TU.

### **Thoughts on a Subject Committee and the on-going Course Plan**

The following has long been a matter of concern for several of us in the Sociology Subject Committee and the various Sociology departments at TU, including in Kirtipur. The experience during the recent round of preparation of new or updated courses in Sociology has, in particular, heightened my concerns. (A couple of the subject committee members have told me likewise.) Perhaps the fact that I was rather minimally involved in this round – where I commented on a couple of courses and helped finalize one – perhaps allowed me to stand back and become more reflective.

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4 I have argued previously in my several newspaper writings that the institution of a board of trustees that houses ownership and agency – and is supported by the government in a sustained manner – can move toward achieving the goals of the university. I have also noted earlier that the TU alumni, who happen to be in all the centers of political, economic, cultural and bureaucratic power in Nepal, could be mobilized to help the reform efforts.

Before I begin, I should go back quite a few decades to recollect past practices in course plan preparation in Sociology. In the same breath, take in as well as express a fairly large dose of mea culpa. I was an official member of the Sociology Department at Kirtipur for nearly four decades and, as noted earlier, continue to teach MPhil-PhD students there. More importantly, I have been a member of the Sociology Subject Committee for over four decades.<sup>5</sup> There has not yet been a significant difference in the way course plans have been prepared through the years. The process has remained broadly consultative. Noticeably, a salient emphasis has been given on metatheory, methodology, inequality and poverty and development and change. As far as the course plan goes, all through the years and in terms of class hours allocated, there has been a definite emphasis on “practicum.” Special focus on Nepal, on the other hand, has remained relatively weak. Combining Nepal, along with metatheory and theories, has remained quite weak, although it has been implemented during specific periods. (This remains perhaps the most regular and salient motif of actual classroom discussion in some departments, particularly those in the Kathmandu Valley and, perhaps, Pokhara.). The list of required texts remains at par with most universities, although some of the texts tend to be rather completely delocalized and dated.

A significant concern, however, is the growing discrepancy between course plans as prescribed and their actual implementation. Most campuses do not teach or discuss the required set of texts and instead rely on summarized “capsule” or “key” texts that could invite memorization but not engagement with ideas. Readings related to Nepal and texts on metatheory and theory, as noted, remain weak in most campuses, including during classroom discussion. Moreover, the practicum component of the course plan is widely neglected and unimplemented. This shows that the level of engagement of faculty members is declining sharply. Finally, it is perhaps telling that faculty members who used to lead the course preparation two decades ago are largely the faculty members who lead the process now. For a variety of reasons, the flow of “new blood” with competencies in Sociology and most social sciences, I would think, has been rare. On the other hand, where such a capable person has made an entry, the old guard seems tough to share the responsibility.

Sociology is not merely what top sociologists in the USA, Europe, etc., have designated and continue to designate it to be. The longstanding regime of an overemphasis on metatheory and theory is, to a salient extent, misplaced. Nor should the course plan overemphasize substantive domains that have remained dominant in Europe, the USA, etc., and in consequence, remain profusely covered in international Sociology texts. I am emphasizing this point here because I think we now must much more adequately cover aspects of the

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5 I must also note here that I was the head of the committee and the department for just one year.



Nepali society than we do. Of course, I am proud that we have consistently emphasized meta-theoretical and theoretical or explanatory thinking in our courses and departments. A metatheory, in particular, is a vantage point that lets us peer through a society or societies in specific and distinctive ways. Drawing on philosophical traditions—from Kant’s distinction between “noumenon” and “phenomenon” (Kant, 1966), to Advaita Vedanta and Buddhist notions of Maya—we understand that our perceptions of the world are shaped by our predilection to world-historical explanations and theoretical engagements. Nevertheless, the current emphasis on metatheory and theory, and exclusively non-local substantive structure and experience, increasingly looks to be an overemphasis to me.

It is now high time to seek a balance and weigh the scales evenly within the next two to five years. In fact, we had agreed a long time ago that meta-theoretical and theoretical strands had to be woven together around the literature on Nepal and, indeed, had begun to include key literature on social sciences on Nepal in our courses regardless of the overt sociological or anthropological underpinning of such literature. We also agreed that, to the extent that a key literature focused on the society in Nepal, we will take such literature in and make efforts to “sociologize” it by centering upon and exploring the nature of social relations and social structures, social differences and social inequality, and social change implicated in such literature. As examples, we taught, for quite some years, Mahesh Chandra Regmi (Regmi, 1978) and a few other writers on Nepal, although they were not designated sociologists. This emphasis underpinned both the facts that social science research on Nepal was scarce and that it was fundamentally necessary to “teach Nepal” in a theoretically conscious manner.

Similarly, I think, in the early 2000s, when we developed and taught for several years a couple of courses, for example, Gopal Singh Nepali’s *The Newars* (1965) and dissected functionalism there, while Piers Blaikie, John Cameron and David Seddon’s *Nepal in Crisis: Growth and Stagnation at the Periphery* (Blaikie, et al., 1980) evinced elements of Marxist and conflict theories there. Over time, however, these courses gave way to others that did not respect this balance. Of course, we do continue to teach texts on Nepal today. But the relative weight remains decidedly on meta-theory and theory and non-local substantive domains, including in the introductory and substantive course plans. This is also the case in methodology.

### **Reorientation in courses**

To enact a decisive curricular shift, the Sociology Subject Committee should require that 25 to 35 percent of the materials in the meta-theoretical, comparative-substantive and methodological courses must relate to Nepal. The material, in addition, must intersect with meta-theory and theory with substantively comparative frames. In other courses, the requirement should be upped to 40 to 50 percent – again in an “intersecting” manner. Courses that

focus on Nepal, on the other hand, should be required to contain at least 25 to 35 percent. Such shifts would benefit not only students but also teachers, academicians, and public policy researchers, leading to a more frequent and denser presence of sociologists in public education and media in Nepal.

An introductory course (25 to 30 percent) should focus on substantive explorations of Nepal. Similarly, a minimum of 25 to 35 percent of a meta-theoretical course plan, as well as a course plan on methodology, should draw upon or excavate specific meta-theoretical and theoretical underpinnings of texts on Nepal. (The proportion focused on Nepal ought to be higher at the BA level.) On the other side, courses on Nepal or other societies could be rendered sociologically sharper by braiding the texts together with specific metatheories or with substantively comparative literature from other places and times.

There are many more texts and references on what could be called Anthropology, Economics, Political Science, Demography or Population Studies, Geography, Environment and Ecology, in the context of Nepal than on Sociology proper. Some publications on these disciplines may indeed be rather “far off” from the dominant threads in Sociology. However, many other publications in these disciplines would also readily fall within the ambit of Sociology. In addition, in many other instances, such publications could be interpreted in a sociologically relevant or interdisciplinary manner. Sociology – and any other discipline for that matter – is at least as much a specific vantage point as a set of designated subject matter. Further, all disciplinary walls are tentative rather than fixed. And a given discipline can be at least partly enclosed within another discipline. The enclosed component can then, at least for some time, serve as a designated interdisciplinary frontier.

My point here is not that the subject committee and the Sociology departments have not covered any of this literature. It remains, however, that the relative coverage of “Nepal material” in the course plan must become much higher. The level of students engagement with the texts and classroom discussions will be effective with the expanded insertion of “Nepal materials.” I suggest members of the larger Sociology Subject Committee and teachers in Kirtipur, Kathmandu Valley and all across TU campuses “specialize” in a couple of or more sociologically relevant Nepal-related themes. For this, we could immediately prioritize some key themes and move on from there. In essence, the Sociology subject committee members and teachers, collectively, would cover most sociologically relevant literature on Nepal.

### **Final points on course plan**

The point of all this, as I have noted, is to enable the subject committee – and eventually– all Sociology teachers across all campuses at TU, first, to learn to seamlessly integrate metatheory, theory, methodology and substantively comparative world knowledge on the one hand and substantive knowledge on



Nepali society on the other. Second, it is to help each teacher prepare course plans that they wish to teach. This emphasis stems from the recognition I emphasize this last point here in particular because many teachers – of whom most are paid in a measly manner according to the hours they teach and even those who are under “course contract” – continue to think of Sociology as something that is unlinked with living life and society, including their own life and society – or that of their students. Indeed, some teachers teach sociological metatheory and theory – and even some of the substantive components – as if they were reciting the *Puranas*, a la “Markandeya *ubacha*” (even though it is very often “Talcott Parsons *ubacha*,” “Karl Marx *ubacha*,” and so on; the expression highlights the now-archaic value of relying not on critical reasoning but on memorizing which big name said what). As we all know, this mode of reading a text and teaching it goes fundamentally against the grain of modern scholarship. Teachers must not become parrots and, for that matter, priests.

Third, a close familiarity with “Nepal materials” enriches a teacher’s repertoire of information as well as frame of thought, in addition to exciting their imagination at exploring a substantive issue right before their eyes, so to speak. The better teachers will, of course, seek to integrate theory and substantive empirics in Nepal. The rest, even if they do not make the integration, will prepare informed case studies of various scopes and depths, which may be valuable in themselves. Fourth, engagement in public issues, including public policy, will become much more possible and intense with an enhanced engagement of teachers. For many, Sociology will then cease to be limited to what old-time and even contemporary sociologists said and become abstruse in what metatheory, theory and methodology say. Profuse and intimate examples of meta-theoretical vantage points, theoretical concepts, methodological rules and techniques, and comparative-substantive domains are helpful in exciting the imagination of students and engaging them. Without such examples, even the capable students would read without really learning much. But we could keep offering such examples even as we require students to actually read “Nepal materials” in all their complexity and nuance.

Finally, TU needs to stop introducing new or revised courses once every 5-10 years. Instead, at least a couple of new courses ought to be introduced every year at all three BA, MA and MPhil levels. Moreover, there should also be many more “optional” courses that could be alternated annually or biannually in a given campus than is the case at present.

An attempt is made here to scan a few aspects of the course plan (Table 1). The question asked is: What is the relative emphasis in the courses in TU Sociology on the general, theoretical and meta-theoretical domains on the one hand and the domain of social life in Nepal on the other? Before the comparison, however, some important caveats are in order. First, the focus is on the MA-level course. Second, the basic intent here is not to weigh and compare the general, theoretical and meta-theoretical against the Nepal focus.

The ideal, of course, is to braid the general together with the specificities of social life in Nepal and, in the process, refine both and enrich the encompassing – that also comprises Nepal. This aspect, on the other hand, cannot be readily discerned from the course plans, as it is also a matter of pedagogy. The Sociology Subject Committee is currently working on finalizing the course plan. As of now, 28 course titles have been agreed upon. (The final credit-worthy unit in the MA course plan is thesis writing.) So far, 10 course plans, which will be offered for the initial two semesters, have been finalized. The rest remain on the drawing board. I will, as such, focus only on those finalized 10 course plans. A fuller assessment, thus, will have to wait till next year.

It should be noted that there is only one course title, Madhesh Studies, that focuses specifically on Nepal. This fact, however, may or may not be taken as proof that the MA course plan lacks an adequate level of focus on Nepal. As noted, course titles do not need to contain a full and explicit Nepal focus inasmuch as it is the extent and quality of braiding together that we value. Yet, it seems odd that out of 10 courses, only one is fully focused on Nepal. (This is also the reason we cannot, at this time, measure the extent to which a Nepal-focused course plan comes braided together with general, theoretical and meta-theoretical sociological strands.) A sensible observer may argue that a TU, which has a Nepal-wide geographical coverage, would have at least a few courses that focus on specific regions (as Madhesh Studies does), and perhaps cities and localities.

Let us now scan the course plan in a more refined manner with the help of Table 1.

**Table 1**

Ratio of Nepal-Focused Components in General, Theoretical and Meta-Theory-Focused Courses

Course Title	Ratio of		
	Nepal-focused Course Units	Nepal-focused Texts	Nepal-focused Class Hours
Introduction to Sociology	2/8	8/40	12/48
Quantitative Research Methods	1/6	5/31	7/48
Theories of Social Change and Development	1/6	10/31	13/48
Structural-Functional Perspective	1/6	6/31	11/48
Studies on Caste and Class	3/9	14/32	21/48
Marxist Perspective	1/6	9/34	15/48
Research Design and Proposal Writing	0/6	1/33	2/48
Practices of Development in Asia	2/6	9/32	15/48
Sociology of Urban Life	1/7	10/35	13/48
Sociology of Environment and Climate Change	1/6	11/34	15/48

*Source: Sociology Subject Committee (2025).*

Two points must be made at the outset. One, this new edition of the course plan is a considerable improvement over the previous one, most prominently because it covers a wider range of social life domains. Two, the courses contain more texts and class hours on social life in Nepal than was the case with the previous course plan. Overall, this time around, there is some ground for becoming optimistic regarding the balance of course plan emphasis on general, theoretical and meta-theoretical domains on the one hand, and the domains of social life in Nepal, on the other. Four out of the 10 course plans contain at least an adequate number of texts on Nepal. It should also be noted, on the other hand, why the number of units, except for the course plan on Studies on Class and Caste, remains consistently low.<sup>6</sup>

This is particularly notable in two methodological courses: (a) Quantitative Research Methods and (b) Research Design and Proposal Writing. While the substantive aspects of these two course plans would appear to be more general or universal than local, it is important that the experience of researchers, including the serious trials and tribulations of thesis-writing students at TU, be included in the course plan. Also, it may be good to invite sociologists into the classrooms to share their research experience.<sup>7</sup> Students could be invited to compare the quality of data, research process, results and conclusions in a couple of datasets, MA or PhD theses, articles, research reports and books on Nepal. Similarly, reviews of data sets and books on Nepal could be included as texts. Once again, the point to emphasize is that a text should be valued not only for its cognitive value but also for the engagement it elicits from the students.

Once again, in terms of class hours, there is an improvement in the hours dedicated to Nepal materials compared to those in the previous course plan. But there is also an inconsistency on this across the courses. The research methods-related courses, in particular, ought to take care of this deficiency in the next round.

### **Academic Management**

Pervading and serious problems of academic management are perhaps the key reasons for the downslide of quality of academics at TU. My earlier assertion that academic downslide may not be limited to Sociology is partly based on this issue of university-wide management problems. Such problems do not

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6. One possibility for this lower ratio of units could be that, although there is a widely shared consensus within the Subject Committee that a course plan must include Nepal, there is no consensus on the extent to which the emphasis should be given. Thus, some subject committee members make it a point to include enough Nepal materials while others do not.

7 Such presentations, I would suggest, are best videoed and put up on YouTube for wider viewing, not the least including students of Sociology at TU who are scattered across very many campuses.

spare any specific discipline from damage. A bare prioritized list, I think, may well fill a whole page. Let me identify and describe a few that come to my mind immediately.

### **The notion of *tala* and *maathi* (down and up) and the excuse**

Similar to some of the worst bureaucratic organizations, a severe lack of communication, mistrust and conflict among hierarchical managerial layers, result in difficult coordination problems at TU. It is enough to remind one of the Madan Krishna-Haribansa skit on mastira master and *muntira master* (a skit by a comedian duo on hierarchy), except that the university's problems are much too consequential. One way to frame the problem is to dwell on the halo of "the central office." This halo blocks communication, coordination and reforms by rendering the top insular and the bottom simultaneously alienated and scared. There is a palpable fright and sense of separation – instead of a professional relation, among the professors, department heads, and the subject committee in Sociology on the one hand and the designated dean, and the various divisions and layers of the "central office" on the other. It is important to note that the exact functionary at "the central office" often remains unidentified and unnamed. "The central office," in this way, has acquired the aura of the impenetrable "palace" during the years gone by.

I have myself lost count of occasions when the *tala-maathi* discourse has occurred during meetings in Kirtipur and the Sociology Subject Committee. Such frequent invocation of *tala* and *maathi* is a clear admission that there is nothing a *tala* could initiate to remedy a problem it faces. The *tala*, under this framework, absolves itself of the responsibility of fixing problems it faces except for the most routine ones. In general, a *tala* generally freezes over and enters into a hibernation, but refuses to initiate the required change. This freezing over has led the Sociology Subject Committee as well as the various Sociology departments at the university to shun the most essential professional obligations, including a lack of enforcement of the regularity and quality of teaching. More generally, and with the undefined and ponderous "*maathi*" hanging heavy, the subject committees and departments regard themselves as puny and agency-less pawns. The subject committees and the departments also unprofessionally and slyly blame the *maathi* categories as a self-serving defensive device to hide their own professional disengagement from reforms.

On the other hand, it is a fact that the Sociology Subject Committee and all the Sociology departments across the university will not be able to effect most reforms on their own and without sustained support from all layers of the *maathi*. It should be noted that attempts to reform efforts over the past few years at TU have focused on regulating general administration, i.e., appointment of deans, campus chiefs, heads of departments, etc. and have not addressed the problem of academic downslide. The reformers may argue that the

appointment of the dean itself manages academics. But it certainly does not address the kinds of issues I have been classifying under the rubric of academic downslide.

The disciplines taught at the university, and thus the respective subject committees, constitute the academic and intellectual souls of the university. Such committees are the most consequential committees at the university. Yet, the subject committees at TU may well be the most “invisible” and feeble of all committees within the university. For one, the subject committees are starved of requisite responsibilities, facilities, as well as funds. In a large and spatially sprawled university, such as TU, a subject committee, much more than specific departments, ought to be empowered by the management at TU to enhance its academic and intellectual prowess.

The committees ought to carry the academic weight of the university. This, however, is far from the case. As noted earlier, the committee meets seldom; indeed, it may not meet for a stretch of years. These committees possess neither a filing cabinet nor a bank account of their own. The committees, the soul of the academic and intellectual life of the university, have for very long years been relegated to a highly shadowy zone – in the extreme periphery of the university structure. This severe mismatch between very high academic significance and the invisible and puny presence of the committees must be immediately rectified.

Once more, regarding the *tala*, not the least because most of the time I broach the subject of reforms with my colleagues in the Sociology Department and the Sociology Subject Committee, I am told that the *maathi* is highly unlikely to cooperate. The exact expression is: Who will listen to us? (*kasle sunchha ra?!*). But there is really no way of knowing – including by the public-at-large – until the *tala* makes the requisite first steps in initiating reforms and seeking sustained cooperation from *maathi*, is there? One could also ask whether or not *tala* is reacting to my concerns based on a large and sustained portfolio of tried-but-failed attempts at reform? On the other hand, in the absence of such a portfolio, “*maathi*” may, in part, become a scapegoat rather than a managerially incompetent villain. Now I am certainly not protecting *maathi* as “clean and faultless,” But initiatives at reforms in the discipline of Sociology must begin with the Sociology Subject Committee and Sociology departments at TU. (This applies to other disciplines, subject committees and departments as well.) I strongly hope that at least a few of the heads of the disciplinary subject committees and departments will come together to form a “coalition of the willing” to push this struggle forward.

Of course, disciplinary problems and the relations between *maathi* and *tala* are not something new to TU. But the problems and the complexity and impenetrability of relations there has accelerated within the last couple of decades. That some of the problems have a longer history cannot be either a

solace or an excuse to those who occupy seats of authority at TU today. All in all, my plea, in particular to the Sociology Subject Committee, is to undertake unceasing good-faith attempts to raise the flag of professionalism.

I agree that this will not be an easy undertaking. And as noted, the goal could not be accomplished without the sustained help of the *maathi-walas*. But the subject committee should not go down under on account of *jagire* laziness and an utter absence of agency. It must uphold professionalism as its *dharma*.

### **Ungoverned campuses and departments**

As some of us discussed when we were out in the sun just outside of the Kirtipur department, about six months ago (around March 2025), there are campus-level blemishes, of which I will discuss bring up a few here.

Despite TU's centrally defined standardized disciplinary course plan implemented across more than 1,000 campuses nationwide, the academic experiences remain highly uneven. A significant number of campuses hold regular classes and in extreme cases - reportedly including several Sociology departments - classes are not conducted at all throughout the semester. Ironically, students' class attendance is formally recorded and final examinations are routinely passed with mass uniformity, often with students replicating identical answers. Surprisingly, the teachers who sign their thumbprints in the biometric attendance system and go on to draw their regular salaries, earn "job seniority" and get promoted. It is astounding that the professors, heads of department, and campus chiefs – along with the deans and, of course, the entire retinue of the *maathi* have remained unaware of this sorry state of affairs for years and decades in many instances. (I can, right before my eyes, conjure up the shameless grin of the teachers and campus chiefs from those campuses and departments.) Further, there is whole host of campuses that do not teach the texts specified by the subject committee.

Two, the required hours of teaching are severely compromised in many – if not most – campuses and departments. Such campuses and departments do not teach the required 48 hours of a course in a semester. Many would appear to teach 40 hours or less. Oftentimes, classes are held irregularly. Sometimes, classes are held for just about two hours during the mornings or evenings and are geared to serve full-time workers rather than fully comply with university regulations. In these campuses and departments, there is a serious lack of ownership by students, teachers, department heads and campus chiefs of university's requirement to teach the required number of class hours.

Three, almost none of the campuses honor the requirement of practicum in course plans seriously. There is almost no emphasis in Sociology – and I presume in any of the social sciences, with education-as-doing, i.e., hands-on learning or learning-by-doing. It is the practicum component of a course plan that brings a student face-to-face with a researchable social setting. It is



here that the text, the teacher and the student meet life, society and history. The campuses, in consort with the pliant teachers, almost completely shed this responsibility.

Lastly, there is little emphasis across TU on the duty to foster independent thinking among students. An initiative to this end would require a host of changes not only across the course plans but also across academic management at TU. The fundamental importance of independent and organized thinking and writing, on the other hand, cannot be overemphasized in accessing and imparting effective and trustworthy education.

### **Student evaluation**

Evaluation, unfortunately, is not seen at TU as an instrument that can be utilized to improve student performance. The semester system was reintroduced more than a decade ago with the principal justification that it will allow frequent evaluation-based counseling of students and will, thus, lead to a rapid enhancement of the quality of education. Additionally, the evaluation system across campuses and even within a given campus is highly uneven. It has also become highly prone to grade inflation. Indeed, admission to a program is increasingly seen, regardless of the efforts put in by students, as nearly guaranteeing to a passing or higher grades. Increasingly, most teachers have taken to acceding to such expectations. The inconsequentiality of course plans, teaching, learning, evaluation and, indeed, the entire rationale of a university becomes stark here.

None of these misdeeds are secretly performed in no-name departments in no-name campuses and for one out-of-the-way semester. Much of this has been increasing in most campuses and departments in the last two decades. How come neither the *tala* nor the *maathi*, the professors, the heads of the department or the subject committees, the deans, and those at the apex levels have not come across it and implemented remedies against such misdeeds?

Any remedy, given the prolonged mismanagement in the university, will almost certainly meet widespread resistance and thus require a deliberate and dogged implementation. The remedies themselves, on the other hand, are not hard to identify. These remedies have been tried and tested within and outside of Nepal. They are part and parcel of the normal managerial repertoire. For example, one way to seek uniformity in grading within a campus and across campuses is to require all faculty members to (statistically) normalize the distribution of grades in both “internal” and “external” tests administered to students. The point, of course, is that, as it is practiced, the entire cycle of student evaluation remains deeply flawed. It must be reinvented and implemented in the interest of quality and professionalism.

It must be emphasized, most importantly perhaps, that some of those with Master’s and higher levels are brought back to the universities to work as

teachers. And when a low-quality post-graduate degree holder is brought back to a university as a teacher, the teacher will almost inevitably produce dozens of batches, possibly over 30-40 years, of low-quality graduates and post-graduates. When this cycle of hiring incompetent teachers is repeated over decades, as has happened during the last two decades in particular, the quality of students takes a freefall. Such freefall is linked not only to low-quality substantive knowledge but also to a lack of curiosity, engaged learning and devaluation of intellectual work. As a result of this freefall, mediocrity has been normalized at TU in recent years.<sup>8</sup>

### **Mentoring for teaching and research**

Mentoring geared to improve teaching and research must become an essential activity at the level of the subject committee as well as the department. There is, of course, none existing now. Monthly or bi-monthly workshops on research on larger-scale as well as local and micro features, events, processes, etc., should become an essential routine in a graduate department. Teachers could take turns making presentations there. Graduate students should be regarded as key stakeholders in such workshops. Such workshops oftentimes furnish the learning grounds not only for faculty members but also for students. For the students, this can also act as a ground for intellectual socialization.

Teachers must also be rewarded – both in pecuniary and social-professional terms, for mentoring as well as publishing articles and books by themselves or in collaboration with students. On the other hand, teachers who consistently shun professional engagements such as mentoring, presentation in workshops and publishing should be cautioned in a graded yet sustained manner.

Collaboration with national research institutions, groups as well as independent researchers must be actively sought and valued. This has become far more essential now than it was earlier because social science research has expanded much outside of the university even as such research had dwindled inside the university. As discussed earlier, there are far more social science researchers and research outputs now within and on Nepal than was the case earlier. In addition, international collaboration must become far more valued than it is now both for learning the research craft and funding. It pains me to note, on the other hand, that most Sociology teachers have entered a *jagire* cocoon and shy away from growing outwards, collaborating and learning from a larger college of sociologist and social scientists. That the tenured faculty members are salaried workers does cushion them financially but it is bound to hurt them from the domain of ideas and policy practice. This highly inward-looking gaze will, from

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8 I should note here that I have, in several previous publications, emphasized the inordinate importance of spinning off a fairly large number of universities out of the existing campuses of TU.

the standpoint of students, university as well as the production and distribution of knowledge, is bound not to end well.

In addition, the subject committee and the departments should build up networks of alumni in order to promote public education and influence public policy. In addition, such networks can be utilized to expand and locate internship and employment opportunities for graduates. It should be noted that Sociology graduates have a rather large presence in the government bureaucracy, the political parties and the legislatures, as well as in the domain of nongovernmental organisations.

### **Are Sociology and TU up to It?**

Are the above a set of goals that ought to be accomplished? And could such goals be possible to attain? I invite sociologists at TU to give these questions serious thought. Even if the goals could only be accomplished gradually, the university and all the actors involved, students and all of the *tala-walas* and *maathi-walas*, including the chancellor – please, let us make a start right now. Let us divide up the work and take responsibility to fulfill our respective duties. And let us collaborate wherever collaboration is required. Let us stem the rot.

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