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## **Paradigm Shift in Nepalese Education: Transition from Modernism to Postmodernism in Policies and Practices**

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### Abstract

The aim of the review is to assess the major educational policies and reform initiatives of the country, and the provisions from the perspective of the shift from the modernist to the postmodernist approach, and their implications for the country's current educational system. For the review, researchers purposively selected 52 sources from the pool of national policy documents, the country's constitutional legal provisions, government education policies and plans, and journal articles published between 1956 and 2025, based on thematic relevance. The research concludes that the shift from the modernist to the postmodernist approach of the education system of the country has taken place in three phases of the introduction of Western-style formal education by the Rana regime, the expansion and privatization of education from the year 1950, and the establishment of a monolingual, nationalist, and centralized education system as embodied by the National Education System Plan of the country in the year 1971. The shift from the modernist to the postmodernist approach to the education system of the country has become possible from the year 1990, and the major developments of the period include the promotion of linguistic diversity and the decentralized system of governance of the country's education system, the provision of inclusive education, the decentralization of the curriculum of the country's education system with the help of information and communication technology. The review concludes that the country's education system has shifted from a modernist to a postmodernist approach and continues to evolve within that framework.

**Keywords:** paradigm shift, modernism, postmodernism, inclusion, decentralization, critical pedagogy

# **Paradigm Shift in Nepalese Education: Transition from Modernism to Postmodernism in Policies and Practices**

## **Introduction**

Paradigm shift is a concept first discussed by Kuhn (1962), referring to a fundamental change in a set of assumptions within a particular field. This set of assumptions is known as a paradigm, and such paradigm shifts can occur in any field, including education. Modernism and postmodernism in education are two successive paradigms that have influenced the education system in distinct ways (Giroux, 1990). To answer the question of how these paradigmatic changes manifest in Nepal's educational systems, this research article reviews published works on the topic and examines how modernism and postmodernism have emerged in the history of Nepalese education and how they have influenced the education system in different ways.

Modernism is not a historical period, but a cultural, artistic, and philosophical movement that emerged during the historical modern period. There isn't a fixed timeline of the modern period in world history. It is generally agreed that the modern period in Europe began around 1500, gained momentum with the industrial revolution in the late 18th century, and lasted until shortly after the end of World War II in the mid-20th century (Barzun, 2025; Chen, 2025; Modern Era, 2025).

Modernism is a Western concept that means different things across fields such as art, architecture, literature, music, technology, and education (see Kuiper, 2025). Whatever varying ideas it may suggest in various fields, the common characteristics that define modernism are innovation, progress, technological advancement, and scientific methods. Any shift from traditional to novel, scientific, and technology-supported practices can be understood as modernism. Moreover, "claim for the superiority of high culture over popular culture", "affirmation of a centered subject", "faith in the power of rational, conscious mind", "belief in the unequivocal ability of human beings to shape a better world" and "celebrating Western culture as synonymous with civilization" (Giroux, 1990) are other tenets of modernism. In addition, modernism includes the rise of capitalism, facilitated by industrial development: investment, profit-making, business expansion, and the neoliberal economic system (Regmi, 2021).

The educational system in Nepal has witnessed major political, social, and cultural transformations in recent times. However, there is a limited understanding of how these transformations relate to the global paradigm shift. In recent times, debates on decentralization, inclusion, linguistic diversity, and identity politics in Nepalese educational systems have highlighted clear theoretical contradictions related to the global shift from modernism to postmodernism. These changes have led to fragmented policy formulations and implementation in various parts of Nepal. In this context, it is imperative to analyze how some fundamental concepts of postmodernism help explain changes in the Nepalese educational system. Such an analysis is imperative, as it helps determine whether earlier modernist concepts have changed or been replicated in new forms. It is also essential to understand how modernist and postmodernist concepts have been embedded in Nepalese educational policies and to what extent recent changes in these policies have been influenced by them.

In other words, postmodernism is what follows modernism, beginning in the mid-twentieth century and continuing to the present day (Harvey, 1989; Simon, 2023). There are a few key thinkers associated with postmodernism, and it is from their works and theories that the postmodernism used in this study is informed. Derrida (1976) postulates that meaning is not fixed, as the way we express it is always fluid and subject to change. Similarly, postmodernism is also wary of grand narratives such as patriarchy, Marxism, religion, nationalism, and other isms, as knowledge and information become localized and fragmented (Lyotard, 1984). Foucault (1990, 1995) also postulates that identity is not fixed but is created through power relations within discourse, and that as those power relations change, identity changes accordingly.

Hegemony is another useful concept for postmodernism, describing a situation in which a subordinate group acquiesces to the dominance of the hegemonic group, perceiving it to be in their own interest (Gramsci, 1971). While the modern mindset is content to linger in a hegemonic state, postmodernism is always questioning it and moving beyond it. Therefore, postmodernism is about decentralizing and localizing power and knowledge, and it is about diversity and multiple identities, and as such, it is a force for good, providing space for otherness and diversity, and as Giroux (1990, p. 19) states, it “provides an important theoretical and political service in assisting those deemed ‘Other’ to reclaim their own histories and voices.”

## Methodology

This review paper employs a qualitative research design grounded in document analysis (Bowen, 2009) to investigate the transition from modernism to postmodernism in the Nepalese education system. The data corpus comprises significant national educational policy documents, including the Nepal National Education Planning Commission (1956), All-Round National Education Committee Report (1961), National Education System Plan (1971), the Education Act (1971), the School Sector Reform Plan (2009–2015), the School Sector Development Plan (2016–2023), the National Curriculum Framework (2019), and the Constitution of Nepal (2015), alongside pivotal international frameworks such as the Dakar Framework for Action (2000) and Nepal’s Education for All Plan (2001–2015). Furthermore, peer-reviewed journal papers, book chapters, and scholarly sources not published in journals pertinent to modernist and postmodernist educational perspectives were examined. These encompassed publications pertaining to Westernization, Nepalization, decentralization, inclusivity, ICT integration, critical pedagogy, and curriculum development.

A total of 51 texts were deliberately selected for their direct relevance to understanding the philosophical, historical, or policy-oriented aspects of the paradigm shift in Nepal. The inclusion criteria mandated that documents (a) pertain to educational policies or practices in Nepal; (b) explicitly connect to notions of modernism, postmodernism, or associated constructs such as centralization, inclusion, pluralism, or decentralization; and (c) provide conceptual, historical, or empirical insights. Documents were excluded in the context of (a) purely descriptive without conceptual relevance, (b) lacking connection to the modernism–postmodernism debate, or (c) unrelated to the national policy of Nepal.

Qualitative content analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) was used as the primary analytical method. The analysis was conducted through three phases:

1. **First phase coding:** Based on meaningful units related to modernist and postmodernist features, the documents were identified across the documents.
2. **Thematic categorization:** Available codes were grouped into broader themes such as Westernization, Nepalization, centralization, decentralization, linguistic plurality, inclusion, and critical pedagogy.
3. **Interpretive synthesis:** On the basis of patterns, shifts, and contradictions across time periods, the patterns were interpreted to explain how educational

paradigms evolved within Nepal's political, socio-cultural, and educational context.

This systematic process enabled the review to trace Nepal's historical trajectory of educational transformation while providing an analytically intensive account of the shift from modernist to postmodernist orientations.

## **Result and Discussion**

### **Modernism in Nepalese Education**

Though the modern period in Nepalese history is said to have begun from the conquest of Kathmandu Valley and creation of the Kingdom of Nepal by King Prithvi Narayan Shah in 1769 (Shaha, 1990), modernism in Nepalese Education began only with the establishment of Durbar High School, the first formal school, in 1854. Jung Bahadur Rana, the first Rana Prime Minister of Nepal, visited Great Britain and France in 1850 and, upon his return, was impressed by European civilization and power and began administrative reforms after the European model (Whelpton, 1983; Paudel & Pokharel, 2022). To educate his people in European civilization, he opened Durbar High School, which modeled the British education system and adopted English as the medium of instruction. (Shrestha & Gautam, 2022).

Traditionally, education in Nepal was provided informally through religious institutions: Gurukuls, Viharas, and Gompas (Pandey et al., 1956; Sapkota & Kafle, 2024). Though Durbar High School introduced formal, modern education in Nepal, it was initially only for the children of the Ranas and their courtiers (Saptota & Kafle, 2024). The common Nepali people did not have access to modern education. For this reason, actual modernization of the education system can be said to have begun only after the establishment of democracy in 1950, with the formation of the National Education Planning Commission, its report, and its implementation. The Nepal National Education Planning Commission (NEPC) Report of 1956 was the first educational policy in the history of modern Nepal, prepared under the leadership of an American Professor, Dr. Hugh B. Wood (Regmi, 2021; Shrestha & Gautam, 2022). Since it was led by a Western scholar, it is not surprising that the policy formulated was of the Western model. Accordingly, schools were made to adopt the course content, textbooks, and instructional methods practiced in the West (Regmi, 2021). The most important change, however, was that the common people got direct access to education for the first time. Education was not only

communalized but also privatized, as various educators and capitalists opened schools and invested in education for both profit-making and public welfare. Thus, along with Westernization, privatization, and the commodification of education, these characteristics also began to emerge as characteristics of modernism in education in Nepal (Bhattarai & Khatri, 2021).

King Mahendra seized power in 1960 and imposed a partyless Panchayat system under his own headship. According to Regmi (2021), the Panchayat era is marked by “nationalist modernism,” which is “a hybrid of nationalist ideology influenced by the USSR and modernist ideology influenced by the Western capitalism” (p. 3). The National Education System Plan (NESP), formed in 1971 under King Mahendra’s directive, formulated the first education act of Nepal, the Education Act, 1971. The Act thoroughly modernized Nepal’s education system, but within the framework of nationalist ideology. It not only imitated the Western education system but also promoted Nepali identity, language, culture, and kingship. It designed the curriculum in accordance with the Panchayat slogan of oneness: “ekbhasa, ekbhesh, ek dharma, ekdesh” meaning ‘one language, one way of dress, one religion, one nation,’ and made Nepali the medium of instruction in schools (Caddell, 2006; Regmi, 2021; Shrestha & Gautam, 2022). Thus, NESP (1971) consolidated the process of Nepalization, which refers to national integration through the promotion of the Shah rulers’ Khas language (Nepali) and culture (Nepali Hindu culture) at the cost of other ethnic languages and cultures (Bista, 1982). The Panchayat government upheld Hinduism, the Nepali language, and the monarchy as the foundations of Nepali national identity (Poudel et al., 2022). The Nepali language was already established as a national language by the first constitution of Nepal in 1947. Then, after King Mahendra’s All-Round National Education Committee (ARNEC) of 1961 designated it as the MOI, and later the NESP of 1971 consolidated it as the primary MOI, relegating English to secondary status (Poudel et al., 2022). Panchayat government’s one culture and one language policy definitely made the country unified and stronger, but on the dark side, it marginalized hundreds of indigenous cultures and their languages (Regmi, 2021). Since the king’s vision of unified Nepal and his decision were at the centre, NESP also established a centralized education system. In line with Westernization, the English language began to be taught as a subject from primary school through university (Khadka, 2022). These centralized education systems, single national identity, and Western model of education are all characteristics of modernism, as discussed above in the Introduction section.

The Panchayat government introduced a lot of important reforms in the Nepali education system; however, it also got heavily criticized for its infamous Nepalization process that marginalized hundreds of indigenous ethnic cultures and languages. Overall, the Panchayat era education system has been criticized for its “centralized education system, national curriculum and monolingual mode of instruction” (Bhattarai & Khatri, p. 51). Moreover, it is also criticized for continuing to use teacher-centered pedagogical practices, despite a few pedagogical reforms introduced in the curriculum (Shah, 2020; Shah, 2024). Traditionally, the education system in Nepal has been teacher-centered, with teachers, masters, or gurus as authorities who imparted knowledge to their disciples or pupils, who patiently and passively received whatever was given to them. This banking model of education (Freire, 2000) was carried over into the modern period as well. Regarding the use of technology in education, there wasn’t any significant changes. While the Panchayat era saw the development of early mass media technologies such as printed materials, audio-visual cassettes, radio and television programs, and the early stages of computer use, there was no significant national policy regarding the use of Information and Communication Technology in education. The concept of ICT and its development took place only after 1990 (Karki, 2019).

Thus, periodically, modernism in education in Nepal can be traced in three phases: first, the beginning of the formal education in Western model from 1854 onwards (during Ranarchy); second, liberalization, commodification and privatization of education after 1950 (during democracy); and the third, centralization and dominance of Nepali language and culture in education through the process of Nepalization (during Panchayat rule).

### **Transition from Modernism to Postmodernism**

The Panchayat government was overthrown, and democracy was reestablished in 1990. The new political change gave way to personal freedom, subjective reality, pluralism, etc., resulting in the decentralization and wider inclusion of marginalized groups and communities in mainstream education, which can be interpreted as the period of postmodernism in Nepal (Lamichhane & Wagle, 2008; Bhattarai, 2010). The democratic constitution of Nepal-1990 provided several fundamental civil rights to the people, including the right to receive education and operate schools in mother tongues up to the primary level for the first time in Nepalese history (Government of Nepal, 1990; Poudel et al., 2022). It put an end to the hegemony of English and Nepali as languages of instruction in education (Poudel et al., 2022). The constitution opened the door to several other inclusive policies too but not

adequately, like parliamentary system was instituted but with monarchical control, the kingdom was declared as multiethnic and multilingual but exclusively Hindu, freedom to organize political parties was provided but not on the basis of religion, caste, tribe, language, or sex, and administrative power was divided among zones, districts and village development committees, but within a centralized form of governance (International Crisis Group, 2005), which were seemingly contradictory or discriminatory provisions. This inadequacy became a major reason for the Maoist revolution (Carney & Rappleye, 2011), and only after the mass movement of 2006, with the establishment of Nepal as a republic and federal state, several provisions for inclusion of poor, disabled, gender, ethnic, and linguistic groups were made in the constitution and educational acts and policies of Nepal. (UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report, 2021).

### **Postmodernism in Nepalese Education**

According to Hicks (2004), postmodernism opposes modernism's essentials; instead of an objective, single identity, it talks about multiple subjective identities, "varying radically across the dimensions of sex, race, ethnicity, and wealth" (p. 6). While nationalist modernism of the Panchayat era prioritized one particular language and culture, after 1990, there was a gradual acceptance of diversity, and educational policies were made accordingly to include all the poor, disabled, women, Madhesi, and marginalized indigenous cultures and languages. These pre-1990 and post-1990 processes have been interpreted as colonization and decolonization in Nepalese educational policies, respectively (Poudel et al., 2022; Dhama, 2024; Koirala & Khatri, 2025).

After 1990, Nepal's educational policies have been influenced by international policies. Following UNESCO's Dakar Framework for Action (2000), Nepal's Education for All (EFA) National Plan of Action (2001-2015) took social equity as one of its key strategic objectives. Accordingly, in 2001, the Seventh Amendment of Education Act-1971 provisioned free education in community schools for girls, Dalits and Janajati from poor households (Education Act, 1971, art.16, D.2). In an important step towards restructuring the education system of Nepal, the School Sector Reform Plan (2009-15) aimed to ensure all children's access, including "ethnic minorities, women, Madhesi, endangered groups and Dalits" especially to early childhood education (Government of Nepal, 2015). The Constitution of Nepal-2015 prohibited any form of discrimination on grounds of "origin, religion, race, caste, tribe, sex, physical condition, condition of health, marital status, pregnancy, economic condition, language or region, ideology or on similar other

grounds” (Constitution of Nepal, 2015, art. 18.2). Similarly, it provided right to free and compulsory basic education for “all citizens” (Constitution of Nepal, 2015, art. 31.1). Regarding the inclusion of mother tongues, the Education Act, through its 2006 Education and Sports Related Amendment Act, provisioned that both Nepali and English could be used as the media of instruction in school, whereas mother tongues could be used additionally in the primary level education. (Education Act, 1971 art. 7.2.a). Then, the Constitution of 2015 further ensured the right of indigenous people to obtain education in their mother tongue. (Constitution of Nepal, 2015, art. 31.5). In higher education, too, inclusive policies began in 2009, when an amendment to the Tribhuvan University Staff Service Regulation was enacted, providing for the appointment of administrative staff and faculty members at Tribhuvan University on an inclusive basis (Limbu, 2021).

Policies regarding the inclusion of learners with disabilities have also become increasingly progressive in the postmodern period. Education for persons with disabilities in Nepal began as early as the 1960s through special schools, established by disability type and separate from regular schools (UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report, 2021). But the progressive changes took place only after the political change of 1990. The Special Education Policy of 1996 established the provision of education for learners with disabilities in both integrated and special schools. Integrated schools were special classes within a regular school, called resource classes, where children with light and moderate disabilities were placed and taught using specialized teaching and learning materials tailored to their needs. In a further progressive move, the 2016-23 School Sector Development Plan established the provision of inclusive schools, “where children with disabilities receive education in regular settings with their peers,” having no disability (UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report, 2021).

Decentralization in education is another characteristic of postmodern education in Nepal. The process of decentralization began right after the fall of Ranarchy in 1950, as several private and community schools were established and run by school management committees. But the NESP-1971 of the Panchayat period snatched all the rights of SMCs and centralized power in the Panchayat government (Full Bright Consultancy, 2011; Paudel & Pokharel, 2022; Parajuli, Onta, & Upreti, 2023). As the Panchayat’s centralized system could not work effectively, after 1990, the process of transfer of school management back to communities began, and with the 7th amendment of the Education Act in 2001, the involvement of communities in school management through SMCs was consolidated, resulting in the voluntary

transfer of public schools to community schools. (Full Bright Consultancy, 2011). After Nepal became a federal state in 2008, and the new constitution was written by the constituent assembly in 2015, decentralization across every sphere of national life took place through power-sharing among the central/federal, provincial, and local governments. Accordingly, school education fell under the jurisdiction of local government, while higher education fell under the jurisdiction of federal and provincial governments (Government of Nepal, 2015, Schedule 5, 6, 8, and 9).

For the first time, the Primary Education Curriculum of 1992 incorporated the provision for a local curriculum in Nepal, allowing a school to teach one subject at the primary level, choosing either a local subject or the local mother tongue; however, its implementation was unsuccessful (Subedi, 2018; CDC, 2019b). Then, certain improvements were made through revisions in the curriculum in 2005 and 2012, and finally, in 2019, the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) incorporated local curriculum, consisting of local subjects and local mother tongue skills at the basic level (Grades 1-8). The design of the local curriculum was also entrusted to the local government (CDC, 2019a; CDC, 2019b). While we are designing and implementing local curriculum in our schools, there has also been a discourse going on internationally for some time now about glocalization in education, which is the concept of combining both global and local knowledge to create learning experiences that are both globally aware and locally relevant (John et al, 2017; Abrom, 2020; Radjuni, 2021). This is also a postmodern idea where globalization is neutralized by various localized contexts, and as many local contexts as there are, so many glocal curricula and classroom practices can there be.

Along with the move towards a decentralized, localized, and inclusive education system, the transformation has begun in the classroom as well, as critical pedagogy, which fosters learner-centered curriculum and teaching practices, has increasingly become the norm in the postmodern classroom (Paudel, 2020; Luitel et al., 2022). Use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in education is facilitating this overall transformation (Tripathi, 2024). However, the gap between policy and practice in the implementation of local curriculum, and the problems of digital illiteracy and the digital divide (Shrestha, 2018; Tripathi, 2024; Raut, 2025; Adhikari et al., 2025) indicate that the postmodern transformation of Nepali education is not yet complete. Hence, our education system is still in the postmodern phase. Nonetheless, a paradigm shift can already be felt in the increasing digitalization of education and the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI), indicating that we are heading towards digital hegemony (Naz & Mirza, 2025; Vashishth, 2025).

## Conclusion

This review also demonstrates a paradigm shift from modernism to postmodernism in the historical development of Nepal's education system. The modernist perspective is evident in the articulation of Nepalese education through its formal schooling modeled on a Western system, its expansion and privatization after 1950, and its centralization, monolingualism, and nationalism through the National Education System Plan of 1971. These modernist tendencies were evident in its promotion of Westernization, Nepalization, a national identity, and teacher-centered instruction.

The political shift of 1990 marked an important turning point, paving the way for the implementation of postmodern values. Later, the focus shifted to promoting linguistic and cultural plurality, decentralized school management, inclusion for marginalized groups, local curriculum development, and the gradual development of student-centered and critical pedagogies. Despite the progress made, the persisting gaps point to the incomplete nature of Nepal's reform process.

Moreover, the current review suggests the need to strengthen local governance capacity, provide teachers with ongoing professional development opportunities, and ensure equitable investment in technology. In addition, with the growing importance of information and communication technologies and digital technologies in teaching and learning, it is argued that Nepal is on the cusp of a new paradigm that goes beyond the postmodern, one that includes digital transformation and new forms of digital hegemony. Understanding these shifting realities is important as policymakers, educators, and researchers look to the future and what it holds for Nepal's educational landscape. As such, it will be important that there is ongoing commitment to equity, local relevance, and critical engagement, so that the aspirations of the postmodern paradigm are fully realized in Nepal's educational landscape, and the country is prepared for the realities of a digitizing world.

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