

**Meritocracy** - the idea that power and privilege ought to be rewarded based on merit - is a leading social ideal. Most people - even the champions of equality of opportunity - believe it to be only fair that various achievements such as admission to schools and universities, jobs, money, etc. - should be distributed based on ability and achievement rather than social position. Conceptually, such an ideal appears to be a just alternative to hereditary aristocracy, the unfairness of which is easier to spot and condemn. In fact, when meritocracy first gained ground in the west, it did indeed lead to the democratization of education and thereby its fruits. The then aristocrats - largely a leisure class - were neither accustomed to nor valued hard-work and labor, and so the emphasis on merit naturally allowed the middle class to gain access to elite universities and jobs. The new elite – “made in the crucible of meritocracy” as Markovits puts it – on the other hand, know all too well how to use competition to their children’s advantage. Consequently, the same ideals that once promoted social and economic opportunity and undid aristocratic hierarchies now promote inequality of opportunity and erect meritocratic hierarchies in their stead.

The rich and the elite increasingly make extraordinary investments in building the human capital of their children. These children overwhelmingly receive a slew of supplemental training from after-school tutors, specialist tutors, test-preparation services, summer camps, etc. which naturally allows them to hone and develop the skills and expertise that a meritocratic system idealizes. Moreover, the rich and the educated invest more of their own time as well in educating their children. Data from the US indicates that parents with college degrees are twice as likely to read to their children every day, and take them to art galleries, museums, and historical sites, in comparison to parents with high-school degrees or less. Indeed, three-year-old children of professional parents know 49% more words than children from non-professional parents. By the age of five, children from the elite 10% of American households outperform children from the bottom tenth by roughly thirty-seven, twenty-five, and thirty-nine months of schooling according to PISA tests of mathematics, reading, and science respectively. These differences only continue to compound through childhood into adulthood. Unsurprisingly then, top American universities that once opened up elite spaces to the middle-class (during the early days of meritocratic shift), have now reversed the trend. A study by Harvard economist Chetty shows that many elite

universities now – including the Ivy leagues – comprise more students from the top 1% of wealthiest households than from the bottom 60%.

Not only are children from wealthy families trained and educated better, but they also benefit from relatively stable and stress-free homes. Poverty often exacerbates marital strife, and children who are exposed to more conflict at home often have difficulty learning and exhibit limited social skills (according to UNICEF). In fact, children do not even have to be directly exposed to stress in order to be impacted by it. Maternal stress can impede a child's development even before birth. Seven-year-olds who were exposed to high prenatal stress receive 1.1 years less schooling and achieve five points fewer IQ scores than their own unexposed siblings. Furthermore, educated mothers are more likely to be able to compensate for the effects of prenatal stress after the child is born. Children born to poor or uneducated mothers, on the other hand, not only do not recover from the effects of prenatal stress but face further impediments throughout life.

These effects tend to be more pronounced in countries like Nepal, especially when compounded with already existing hierarchies based on identity and gender.<sup>1</sup> These hierarchies not only constrain access to education but also its outcome. Dalits, who make up 12.77% of total population in Nepal, only represent 1.4% of the total students. Even among the student body, students from high-caste communities, and students in urban areas perform disproportionately better than students from marginalized communities, and students from rural areas. Boys, likewise in general, perform better than girls. These results shouldn't come as a surprise given that children from socially and economically marginalized communities often have to work – while also juggling school work - both at home and outside in order to support their families. Nearly 40% of children between the ages of 5 and 17 work in Nepal. Of these working children, almost 40% work up to 14 hours a week, 36% work 15 to 28 hours, about 15% work from 29 to 42 hours, and another 9 to 10% work for more than 42 hours. Furthermore, girls and women are not only compelled to work outside the home but are also expected to carry the burden of household chores. Unsurprisingly, those from high-caste backgrounds, especially men from

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, poverty headcount rate for Newars and Bahun-Chettris is the lowest at 14 and 18% respectively, whereas it is highest for Muslims, hill-janajatis and Dalits at 41, 44, and 46% respectively.

Bahun, Chettri, and Newar communities, disproportionately dominate higher education and the formal job sphere. While these inequalities in Nepal may not have direct roots in Meritocracy (as it arguably does in the US), meritocracy can exacerbate and justify these inequalities through the façade of being fair and just.

Moreover, the impression of meritocracy as being a fair system not only consolidates inequality, studies have shown that it often also breeds selfishness and discriminatory behavior. The beneficiaries of meritocratic inequality consider themselves deserving of their own position and power given the hard-work and effort involved in achieving them – in contrast to aristocrats who inherited their privilege passively – and are thus more unwilling to acknowledge the unfairness of their birthright lottery as recipients of meritocratic inheritance. Furthermore, adopting meritocratic ideals can also convince people of their own moral righteousness and thereby allow them to uncritically accept decisions based on their own prejudice. For instance, one study found that when meritocratic principles were explicitly implemented in private companies – for instance through performance-based compensation – managers tended to provide greater rewards to men over women with identical performance evaluations. The same kind of discrimination was not found in workplaces where meritocracy was not explicitly adopted.

It may yet be argued that all this does not conclusively prove the failure of meritocracy itself, but rather its implementation in the real world. Perhaps this flawed implementation is in fact failing the very ideals of meritocracy. Perhaps in an ideal world – bereft of existing power structures and prejudices – meritocracy can be as fair and just as its proponents may like to believe. However, notwithstanding the fact that any value that simultaneously hardens existing inequalities and prejudices is unlikely to be able to dismantle those same inequalities, the claim – or more so the pipe-dream – that meritocracy may yet be fair in an ideal world is equally questionable. Even in an “ideal” world – where no children benefit from unequal advantage bestowed to them by their location of birth, children will still continue to have differing “natural” endowments simply because of their genetic lottery, and those inequalities of birth are no fairer or deserved, in so far as they impede equality of opportunities. In other words, children who are less smart or intelligent are no less deserving of education and other opportunities than their smarter peers.

Such an argument may be harder for many to comprehend in the context of Nepal, considering the scarcity of resources to provide universal quality education to everyone. Some proponents of meritocracy in Nepal concede that providing universal equal access to quality education would be ideal. However, they are constrained by the ability to reach only so many students. In such a scenario, selecting the brightest of the bright would be the most efficient utilization of resources, which provide quality education to those who could stand to benefit the most from it. While such an argument may sound convincing at first glance, it is based on unquestioned assumptions about what “benefiting” from education is supposed to mean. While a talented individual (whether that talent is based on natural endowments or is a product of supplemental training) may benefit from quality education in achieving academic excellence and/or earning individual status. For him/her such a benefit need not be intrinsically more valuable than the benefit that a student from a marginalized community may receive in terms of quality education that may allow them to leave the cycle of poverty and gain upward mobility, even if they may not excel just as much academically. To uncritically accept one as being more valuable or fair than the other is ultimately the product of the ideal of meritocracy. This is the very ideal that leads to a vicious cycle in which wealth and educational achievement reinforce each other from one generation to the next.

Summarised from: *The Meritocracy Trap* by Daniel Markotivs, *Education and Employment: Transitional Experiences in Nepal* by Shrochis Karki