Lower Mustang's Regional Schooling:

The shifting landscape of rural education in Nepal

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Abstract:

Education in Nepal has come a long way since 2000. From 1999 to 2016, net enrollment in education through grade five surged from 66.3% to 97% (Dilas, 2024). However, following the end of basic education in 8th grade, secondary school enrolment drops to 46.4%, with just 16.8% in grades 11–12 (National Planning Commission, 2025). Over the past 25 years, the Lower Mustang region of Nepal has undergone a transformational shift in the structure of its public education as part of addressing these challenges. This shift began with the private development of Lubras Chasey Kengtse Hostel in 2001, which allowed students from across the region to consolidate at Lupras adjacent public school. Over the following 20 years, three more publicly funded youth hostels were built across the region. This had two major impacts on local public education: First, the consolidation of students into four major schools has greatly improved the quality of free public education available in the area. Second, the mass preference of students to attend these schools, along with the external factor of outmigration from villages across Nepal, has slowly caused the region's village-level schools to shut down. This systemic shift in the type of rural education offered has vastly increased local students' opportunity for educational success while remaining close to home, yet in doing so, has introduced new dynamics to the fabric of village life across the region.


Tiri
Chusang
3920
3700
Kāgbeni
F166
Phalyak
Dhagarjun
NH48
Pangling
Ekle Bhatti
Puchchhardanda
3971
Khingga
Putak
Jhong
Jhong Khola
Chongur
Purang
Jharkot
Ranipauwa
Dhangladanda
3918
Panda Khola
Lupra
Kali Gandaki
Jomsom

Introduction:

Growing the public education system in Nepal has been a central focus of nationwide development over the past thirty-plus years. Large investments have been made by Nepal's government and foreign investors alike to improve nationwide access to basic and secondary education. With new schooling facilities and improved education resources spreading across the country, positive results have emerged. For example, National literacy rates have jumped from 48.6% to 71.2% between 2001 and 2021[1] (ICA, 2025). However, despite this clear growth, there are still many people voicing frustration towards the current state of the Nepali education system. Nepals 2015 Constitution states in article 31 (2) that, "Every citizen shall have the right to get compulsory and free education up to the basic level and free education up to the secondary level from the State." (Constitution of Nepal, 2015) This section of Nepal's decade old constitution envisions compulsory education through grade eight and free education through grade twelve. However, many rural schools across the country end at grade five, and few reach grade ten. Furthermore, according to Nepal's last census, of children in the basic education age group (age 5-12), 3% are currently not in the school system. (Ghimire, 2024) I think the dichotomy present here is a fitting way to begin this paper since it is consistent with the story I found in my research on public education in Nepal's Lower Mustang region. Both are characterised by sweeping successes, while remaining far from perfect.

The basic framework of Nepal's education system is divided into primary and secondary education. Primary education in Nepal covers formal schooling from grades one to eight. Before Nepal's primary education begins is the compulsory Early Childhood Education or Pre-Primary Education (ECED/PPE) program for students to attend before entering class one. As I was conducting my research, it was regularly referred to as "Nursery" by locals. ECED imploys a Montessori-style learning approach where students split the day between play and learning basic reading, writing, and math skills to prepare

[1] Change in male and female National Literacy Rates 2001 to 2021:
2001: (Male: 62.7% and Female: 32.9%) 2021: (Male: 81% and Female: 63.3%)
(ICA, 2025)

them for first grade. The combination of the EDED level and primary education in Nepal is referred to as ‘basic education’ and is often offered together within the same school, especially in rural areas (NUFFIC, 2025).

Following the completion of primary school in Nepal is secondary school, which covers grades 9 to 12. Secondary education is split into two parts, beginning with Lower Secondary Education, which covers grades 9 and 10. After grade 10, students must complete Secondary Education Examinations, which are administered by the National Examinations Board (NEB). The exam covers all school subjects, including English, Nepali, mathematics, science, social studies, and health. Upon passing the Secondary Education Examinations, students are given a diploma that grants them access to Upper Secondary Education or Vocational Secondary Education. Upper Secondary Education, often referred to as “plus two,” is the final phase of Nepal's secondary education. It covers grades 11 and 12, is usually conducted in a separate school from Lower Secondary Education, and includes students focusing on a more specific academic focus. Upon the completion of grade 12, students take another exam administered by the NEB titled the ‘Migration Certificate - School Leaving Certificate Examination.’ The function of this diploma is to grant students access to apply to institutions of higher education, either in Nepal or abroad, and marks the end of their secondary education in Nepal (NUFFIC, 2025).

Since the early 90s, Nepal has made remarkable strides in expanding and improving its education system, achieving significant successes in enrollment and gender equity. Net enrollment in education through grade five surged from 66.3% in 1999 to an impressive 97% by 2016, while gender parity saw a transformative shift—rising from a low gender parity index of 0.17 in 1973 to 1.08 in 2016, indicating that girls now enroll at slightly higher rates than boys (Dilas, 2024). These achievements are the result of a combination of strategic government policies, such as the 1971 National Education System Plan and the 2016 School Sector Development Plan, both of which focus on improving access and quality nationwide. International organizations, including UNICEF and the World Bank, played a crucial role by supporting initiatives to lower dropout rates and target marginalized communities (Dilas, 2024; Anand, 2024). Legal guarantees of free secondary education further encouraged enrollment, although indirect costs such as a

lack of local secondary schools remain a barrier for many families. Additionally, the growing recognition of education's link to economic growth, particularly the positive impact of secondary and higher education on GDP per capita, has reinforced Nepal's pursuit of educational expansion (Nowak, 2016). Despite ongoing challenges such as poverty, difficult geography, and the setbacks caused by the 2015 earthquake, Nepal's educational progress stands as a testament to sustained policy commitment, global partnership, and targeted social investments.

However, despite these advancements, systemic challenges continue to hinder Nepal's broader goals of educational equity and quality. One major issue is the significant drop in enrollment beyond primary education as net enrollment plunges to 46.4% in secondary school and just 16.8% in grades 11–12 (National Planning Commission, 2025). These declines reflect both affordability issues and geographic inaccessibility, especially in rural regions where few schools go beyond grade five (Asian Development Bank, 2023). Quality deficits are also evident: only 68% of students reach minimum proficiency in mathematics by the end of primary school, and 80% in reading (Ministry of Education, NASA Report, 2024). Structural shortcomings such as insufficient infrastructure, undertrained teachers, and political interference further erode learning outcomes. Socioeconomic disparities exacerbate these problems as students from the poorest fifth of Nepal's population show a stark attendance drop in higher grades, with only 7.6% in grades 9–10 and 1.6% in grades 11–12, compared to 56.5% and 30.5% among the wealthiest fifth (MICS, 2023). Thus, while access has improved in measurable ways, Nepal's public education system remains constrained by issues of retention, quality, and inequality. These are the main obstacles that must be addressed as Nepal strives to realize its constitutional guarantees of free and compulsory education.

Nepal's Remittance Economy:

To fully understand the current landscape of public education in Nepal, it is important to look beyond statistics relating to schooling itself and consider several relevant external factors, firstly, remittance. Nepal's remittance economy is deeply intertwined with the current wave of outmigration in

Nepal. In 2023, remittances amounted to approximately US$11 billion, constituting 26.6% of Nepal's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Lohia, 2024). This large-scale presence of remittance in Nepal's economy is relatively new, almost completely materializing in the early two-thousands. This began with an initial spike in personal remittances from 2.4% in 2001 to 11.2% in 2002. The rate continued to rapidly increase until 2009, when it hit 23.2% (World Bank Open Data, Personal Remittances Nepal, 2024). Since then, the percentage has floated around the low to mid twenties for the past fifteen years, showing there is now a reliable and large share of Nepali people working abroad. This influx has brought many benefits for Nepali families, including improved living standards back home, access to better education for children, and the ability to build homes or invest in land. Remittance is also having an impact on household income across the country, especially in rural areas where remittances now account for about 80% of smallholder farm households' income (Lohia, 2024). Due to the financial benefits and the social influence that come with a nationwide trend, pressure to participate in the remittance economy for many Nepalis is unavoidable.

While remittances provide crucial financial support to households and contribute significantly to Nepal’s GDP, the country’s reliance on labor migration comes with several long-term disadvantages. The sustained outflow of young and working-age citizens, particularly skilled and educated individuals, leads to a depletion of human capital, weakening key sectors such as healthcare, education, and industry. This “brain drain” hampers domestic productivity and innovation, making it harder for Nepal to build a self-sustaining economy (Thapa, 2024). So, while remittance and outmigration have helped increase general wealth within Nepal, they have also introduced new challenging dynamics for the country to face.

Private Education in Nepal:

One crucial way that the national focus on remittance is affecting Nepal's education system is the link between the remittance economy and Nepal's private education. The rates of private school usage have been high in Nepal for decades. In 2015, private schools accounted for 19% of the country's schools, housing the same ratio of enrolled students. This trend has only continued to increase, as in 2024, 23% of

Nepal's schools are privately owned, and they house over 30% of all students (Ghimire, 2025). From 2015 to 2024, the total number of government-funded schools has fallen by around 1,900, while about 2,000 new private schools have opened over the same time period (Ghimire, 2025). These numbers tell the story of a large and continually growing number of Nepali families opting out of free public education and choosing to send their children to private schooling instead.

There has been some public frustration about the firm grasp that privatization has on Nepal's education system. In a 2018 interview with the Kathmandu Post, Binaya Kusiyat, a professor at the Tribhuvan University and an independent researcher, said, "Allowing private schools to function as they have been for all these years is making a mockery of the socialism-oriented constitution" (Ghimire, 2018). Kusiyat here points out the irony to be found in the dissonance between Nepal's stated politics and the on-the-ground reality at play. In response to these criticisms, former Minister of Education Giriraj Mani Pokharel had stated that Nepal needed the privatization of schooling because the government did not have the budget to take ownership of the entire schooling industry by itself. He said, "Both private and public schools can go hand in hand and complement each other" (Ghimire, 2018). Both of these points hold true, as Nepalis have the private sector to thank for the increase in high-quality education available. However, truly equitable education will never be possible until the public sector expands its reach and quality to become a more viable option.

It is worth noting that the choice families make to send their kids to private education goes deeper than a desire for 'higher quality,' it is woven together with the simultaneous growth of Nepal's remittance economy. This correlation was explored in a recent study from Tribhuvan University titled: Remittance-Driven Educational Choices: Trends in Nepal's Private School Enrollment. The study presents two main factors driving this correlation. First, due to the current prevalence of the remittance economy, many families now have access to more wealth and are using it to invest in private education for their children. On top of this, there is a clear nationwide desire to move abroad and take part in the remittance economy, and many consider a strong education the simplest way to do so. This creates a cycle where Nepalis are investing past remittances towards private education for their children, with the hopes

of producing future remittances down the line (Bisna et al. 2025). This means remittance is contributing to people's means and desire to pursue private education.

Decreasing Rural Populations:

Another thing to mention at a national scale is the nationwide phenomenon of dwindling rural populations. Along with people leaving the country to participate in the remittance economy, Nepal is also seeing a more general flight out of rural areas to the country's cities. Unilaterally, villages in the hills have seen a depletion of local populations in recent years. A 2023 article from the Nepali Times on the topic states, “The latest figures from the National Statistics Division show that more than a third of Nepalis are now living in a place away from where they were born. Nepal’s overall population growth is now down to 0.93% per year, but the mountain areas have near negative growth, while the Tarai has 1.56% growth” (Dahal, 2023). This shift is due to the aforementioned dynamics of remittance and outmigration, along with people seeking better education, healthcare, and employment within the country. Speaking strictly on education as a motive, this is because the schooling available in the cities is generally viewed as of higher quality than what is available in the villages. This means that families with the means from villages often send their children to school in either Kathmandu or Pokhara, where they live with relatives or at private youth hostels (Tareque et al. 2024). These generally decreasing populations have added another layer to the struggle to provide quality education to rural areas due to depleting class sizes.

Research Methods:

My research on Educational Nepal specifically focuses on the changes and development of education in a specific region of Nepal's Mustang district. I spent 18 days in part of the Lower Mustang region of Nepal, on the eastern side of the Kali Gandaki River, specifically isolated to the parallel Jhong and Panda river valleys. These adjacent valleys hold nine distinct villages between them, where I conducted my research.

I spent my first ten days of this period staying with a host family in Lubra, on the banks of the Panda Khola (river in Nepali), at the hostel they owned and operated. In Lubra, I applied a mixed methods research approach with both formal and informal interviews. My research focus was split between gaining specific information on the successes, failures, and available resources of the local school, as well as gaining an understanding of community opinions on education and the local schooling available. For the former, during my stay in Lubra I conducted a series of interviews with with staff of the local school and youth hostel. However, to learn about community opinions, my research was conducted informally through casual conversation with community members on the topic of local education, along with where they or their children had attended school, and why.

Central to my ability to be successful in the community research process was my attempt to integrate within the community as best I could throughout my stay in Lubra. The best way I found to do this was to spend lots of time within my host family, and from there have them connect me to the rest of the village. I did this by hanging out in the kitchen, eating the same food they ate (instead of ordering off the menu like the other travelers), and helping with chores around the house. For the latter half of the week, I served as a pseudo staff member for the hostel, regularly doing tasks like taking food orders, cleaning rooms when travelers moved out, and washing dishes. I tried to be helpful however possible, like how one evening my host brother sent me to go chat with some travelers to keep them distracted from the fact that he had forgotten part of their order, and the food would be a bit late. I had lots of fun in this role, and believe that engaging in work with my family was a key mechanism through which we were able to build relationships. Over the course of my stay in Lubra, the relationships I built with my family spread intro relationships with other members of the comunity. This happened as I joined each of them around the village, got to know their friends, and was invited to community gatherings. The relationships I built in Lubra proved very helpful for gaining insights in my research, and more so, were a deeply meaningful aspect of this experience for me.

After ten days in Lubra I left for a five day period to conduct research on the schooling available in neghboring villages, to add a regional context to my research. Over these five days, I visited 8 villages

and stayed in three hostels. On the first day I walked two hours from Lubra to Kagbeni where I stayed for the day to conduct inteviews with locals and people at the school. The next morning, I walked about three hours up the valley to Khinga, where I stayed the night and spent that afternoon and the following morning conducting local interviews, including at the school. On the third day, I walked another hour up the valley to Jharkot, where I stayed for the following three nights. Jharkot exists as the largest town in a wide valley with five other neighboring villages, which are all a 15 to 45 minute walk from their closest neighbor. At the top of this valley sits the holy Muktinath temple, which is an important pilgrimage site for both Hindus and Buddhists. I spent two and a half days walking between the villages in this valley to conduct interviews at every school, and with locals I met along the way. Through this portion of my research, my findings do not reach as deep into the communites as for Lubra since in some towns I was only able to spend a few hours. However, it was extremely helpful to grow my regional understanding of the schooling resources available and the decisions parents are making regarding their children's education. This portion of my research made clear how interconected the issues of education are between neghboring vilages and the rippeling impact that Lubra's youth hostel was having across the region.

After this five day period of travel, I returned to Lubra for the final four days of my research to ask more questions no based on my shifted regional understanding, as well as to spend a few more days with the community in Lubra that I had grown quite fond of.

My Positionality:

In order to contextualize my findings, it is important to first consider my positionality as a researcher in Nepal. First off, while I do have a fair grasp on the Nepali language, I have only been learning it for the past four months and am far from fluent. This meant that while conducting interviews in Nepali, or really just making conversation, there were often words I didn't understand. Furthermore, if people started speaking with me too quickly, I may have had a difficult time grasping all that they were telling me. To confront this issue, I made a conscious effort during interviews to repeat people's statements back to them to make sure I was understanding correctly. Considering this strategy, I am

confident in the accuracy of my findings; however, the language barrier present is still noteworthy. Secondly, having white skin, I am visibly a foreigner to all Nepali people that I meet. Generally, I don't believe this had an impact on the answers I would receive in interviews. However, since many of the schools I visited were quite poorly funded, some principals I spoke with may have thought that speaking with me would help acquire more funding for their school. One time, financial assistance for the school was specifically requested of me.

Overview of Lubra:

Lubra is a village in the Mustang district of Nepal. It sits at the base of a steep valley carved by the Panda Khola (River), just upstream from where it meets the holy Kali Gandaki River. Lubra is a small village of traditional homes, with about 40 current residents. The Village name in full is pronounced and written Lubrak, which translates to valley (lu) of the serpent spirits (brak), in the local Tibetan dialect. However, the village is most commonly written and pronounced by locals as Lubra, (it can also be found online and in signage as "Lubra"). The village is surrounded by terraced farms where residents grow much of their produce for the year, along with nationally famous mustang apples, which are sold to the market. The village is also a day's hike from the nearby Anapurna Circuit Trek, so during the high seasons of spring and fall, the village sees a fair number of tourists who either pass through for lunch or stay in one of the village's hostels. Most notably, what difirentiates Lubra from other nearby villages is that its the only remaining village in the Mustang district that practices the Bon religion.

Bon is the indigenous religion of Tibet, tracing back hundreds or potentially thousands of years before Buddhism entered Tibet in the 7th century. It is believed that the preexisting Bon religion is deeply ingrained in what we now know as Tibetan Buddhism (Encyclopædia Britannica). However, as Buddhism was adopted as the state religion by the growing Tibetan empire, Bonpos (followers of the Bon religion) began to face persecution. Fearing the potential of forced conversion, many Bonpos migrated to the

margins of the empire, mainly to the Himalayas, along with areas to the east where they still reside today (Ramble, 2008).

The Mustang district lies on the north side of the Himalayan range within the Tibetan rainshadow, giving it a desert-like climate. This creates a stark environmental contrast from the subtropical Nepali hills. In line with these environmental distinctions are also cultural ones. Largely, Mustang's population considers themselves ethnically Tibetan, and they speak a local dialect of the Tibetan language called Loke as their mother tongue. My host father told me that people in the village had only begun speaking Nepali about 60 years ago. This dynamic contributes to Mustang's unique regional identity.

Findings:

Lubra:

The original basis for my research on schooling in Lower Mustang was because of an observation I made when I arrived in Lubra, that schooling operated differently here than what I had seen in other rural Nepali communities. While, as discussed in the introduction, many Nepali villages have a local school with one or two teachers and just a handful of students, and in Lubra, they have 89. That number of students more than doubles that of houses in Lubra. This is the result of a youth hostel that was built up the hill from the main village almost twenty-five years ago, housing students from across the region who have come to study in Lubras school.

Lubras Chasey Kentse Hostel first opened in 2001, 15 years afer the villages first ever school was built in 1986. The hostel was privately funded, free for all, and provided a place for children to stay while they attended the public Shree Lura Basic School. The project of establishing the hostel and procuring international funding for its development was largely spearheaded by English Anthropologist Dr. Charles Ramble. Beginning in 1981 Rabmle lived for five years in Lubra where he studied the Bon religion while also learning to speak the local Tibetan language. He is held in very high regard by locals in Lubra and

returns annually to visit. While staying in Lubra, I was able to get a hold of Dr. Ramble over the phone to interview him about the process of founding Lubras youth hostel.

The hostel was developed with the idea of solving issues faced by Bon students in the current landscape of Tibetan Education. Both for families in Lubra and across the region one of the main educational priorities they expressed was a formal Tibetan education for there children, as it is the indigenous language of the region. For decades, families with the means have sent their children to Buddhist schools in Kathmandu or India for this purpose. However, Bon students would often face religious persecution in these schools, and many felt the need to hide their Bon identity. There also existed Bon monastery schools where boys could express their religion freely, however, they were only for those on the path to becoming a monk. As a response to these factors, the goal in Lubra was to establish a secular school where bonpo children could exercise there cultural and religious practices freely.

When discussing the founding idea of the school, Ramble also gave a nod to the building popularity of sending children to Pokhara or Kathmandu for their education. He said there was a feeling from many locals that quality education was not possible in the villages, a belief he did not agree with. He hoped that building the hostel and the added resources it would bring to the local school would allow families to consider schooling in the village as a more viable option. This would allow students to receive a quality education while avoiding the detachment from village life and local culture that students in the cities faced. He also said it was essential that attending the hostel would be free for all students as a means to remove any class-related barriers to entry.

Ultimately, the main role that Dr. Ramble played in the establishment of the hostel was in the procurement of funding, something that remains essential to the hostel's ability to operate free of charge for students. Starting in 1996, as he traveled back and forth between Europe and Nepal, he would meet with potential funders for the project. In 2001, the NGO Mustang Bon Action was established to receive funding for the hostel. Initially, Kids in Need of Education (KINOE), an English charity group, provided funding for the hostel to be built in 2001. The Kalpa group, a Swiss organization founded by Loel Guinness (yes, of Guinness beer), took over from KINOE in 2002 and has been providing funding to the

hostel annually since. As of the past two years, the Kalpa group is trying to scale back their funding, and have connected the hostel to a foundation named THALEC, based out of Wyoming, with whom they now split the role of funding the hostel. One risk of procuring all of the hostels' funding from individual donors is the unreliability, as donors are liable to pull funding at any time, leaving Lubras youth hostel better funded, yet potentially more insecure that a publicly funded option.

Now, 24 years after it first opened, the hostel houses 87 students, all but two of the school's 89, who live with their families in the village. The school goes from the nursery level up to grade eight, and after graduation, the hostel pays for students to attend the private hostel in Jomsom for grades 9 and 10. Although the hostel is privately funded, and the school receives its funding from the government, the two largely operate as a combined entity. The school has 11 teachers total, all of whom teach different subjects, except for the nursery teacher. 5 of the teachers work exclusively for the school from 10 am to 4 pm, are paid by the government, and live in neighboring towns. The remaining 6 teachers live at and are paid by the hostel, and run the hostel's activities when they aren't teaching at the school. In addition to these 6 teachers, the hostel employs a monk who facilitates religious life at the hostel, and two women who do the cooking and housekeeping (Shree Amar Nepali, Lubra Headmaster, interview).

Now decades after opening, the hostel has completely changed the landscape of education in Lubra. Before the hostel was built, the school only went up to grade 5, after which, students would pay to stay at the hostel in Jomsom. My host brother, Chiring Gurung, attended the Lubra school from 1995 to 2000, immediately before the hostel was built. When he was there, he said there were about 15 students at the school with two teachers. It was an old building with no closing door, just an opening in the wall. He told me stories about class getting paused because of a cow walking into the building, or him and his friends jumping out the open window and running home. Overall, it didn't seem like a serious affair, least of all for the teachers, who he said were often drinking. The hostel has not only brought size to Lubras school, but also a level of professionalism and pride in the institution for those who work there (Chiring Gurung, interview).

As was envisioned at the youth hostels' inception, it is a fundamentally Bon institution, with students engaging in thirty minutes of prayer time twice a day before breakfast and dinner. One of the hostel's teachers also specializes in Tibetan language, which they teach at the school. Furthermore, the school remains readily engrained within the Bon tradition of Lubra itself. While I was there the men of Lubra were conducting a large puja (worship) where over the course of five days they read through the entirety of 16 sacred Bon books that reside in the villages monastery. On the last day of the puja, the town gathers to carry the books in a parade around the outskirts of the village, performing a small prayer at each of the cardinal directions. To aid with this process, the 8th-grade class from the school joined the rest of the village and was given the honor of each carrying one of the books. In these regards, the school has lived up to its goal of providing a secular education where students remain deeply ingrained in Bon daily life.

However, the school currently lacks the draw from Lubra itself that the founders had imagined. Currently, only two of the 89 students are from Lubra, while the rest are primarlity from neghboring villages. As I enquired about this around town, I kept getting the same answer: “There arent any kids in Lubra.” The reality is Lubra has always been a small town my Daai (host brother) estimated that twenty years ago there were about fifty people in Lubra, only slightly more than the current 40. However, now the crowd of full-time residents has skewed quite old, mainly to a demographic whose children have finished their education. These children, many of whom had attended the hostel around the time of its inception, now live and work in the cities with their families.

Understanding that Lubras youth hostel exists more as a regional resource than one for the town, the issue of admission begins to arise, as free education, food, and housing, turns out to be a quite sought after deal. Currently at the hostel, there are three districts represented in total; however, all but four students are from Mustang. This is because, above all alse the hostel prioritises proximity in the admissions process. This makes sense, considering keeping kids close to home with quality schooling was one of the initial goals of the hostel, and it still applies when students aren’t from Lubra. Furthermore, as part of the admissions process, the hostel likes to meet with families and give prospective students a

physical exam to make sure they are healthy. The hostel generally prefers for new students to enter the school at the nursery level in class sizes of 10 to 11. This is because the school teaches Tibetan language, which most others don't, so any student joining late would be behind. However, from time to time, students will join later on, especially in instances with fewer than 10 kids in a grade (Tenzing Nurbu Gurung, hostel teacher).

Regional Analysis:

After concluding my first stint of research in Lubra, I left for 5 days to do a general survey of education in the surrounding towns, focusing on the fact that I'd learned many of Lubra's students were originally from these nearby places. I learned that while Lubras was the first, over the following two decades three more free youth hostels had been built in the surrounding area, these however where completely government funded projects. Furthermore, I witnessed a sheer split between the local educational opportunities in towns with and without youth hostels. Students living in the youth hostels were coming from all around the area, along with districts across Nepal. As a result, over the past two decades, since hostels have emerged on the scene, schooling beyond the nursery (ECD) level in all surrounding towns without youth hostels has been canceled across the board. This is due to generally dwindling youth populations in these villages, and many of the remaining students were choosing the higher quality education available in the youth hostels. I saw the push and pull of how development in one town can affect its neighbors and analyzed the changes I found in each village. The following section goes one by one through each of the villages I visited and analyzes the local impacts of the dynamic shifts in regional schooling. Each of the schools and hostels mentioned below is public and receives the bulk of its funding from the central government, with a small amount from local donations as well.

* It may be helpful throughout this section to refer to the map on page three to aid in visualising the regional dynamics at play.

Kagbeni:

The first town I visited was Kagbeni, which sits at the site where the Jhong Kola flows into the Kali Gandaki River. Kagbeni is a fairly large town with beautiful streets of old houses on the northern end, and many hostels, shops, and restaurants dedicated to tourists on the southern side. As the last major stop on the way to Muktinath Temple, along with being on the popular Annapurna Circuit trekking route, Kagbeni sees many tourists annually. This tourism has brought new infrastructure to the town and an influx of wealth to the local population. This introduced a dynamic I observed as I spoke to people around town, where many people originally from Kagbeni, like the owners of hotels, have moved to Kathmandu or Pokhara. There were also many people I met who had recently moved to Kagbeni from other parts of the country for work they found in Kagbeni's hospitality industry. Many of these people had come alone, leaving their families, and notably children, back home.

There are two schools in Kagbeni: a privately funded monastery school with 70 boys, and the Shree Janashanti Secondary School with its adjoining youth hostel. The Shree Janashanti Secondary School is Kagbeni's public schooling option with 190 students and 22 teachers. The school offers classes from the ECED level to grade 10. The school teaches all standard classes along with a Tibetan language class for grades 1 and 2. I was told this was because many local children whose first language is Tibetan only attend the school for these two years before moving to school in the cities. Furthermore, grade 6 and on can take an optional computer class, and students in the lower secondary school can choose between taking math or economics. The school has grown immensely since the hostel was built in 2010. Previously, in 2005, the school had 65 students, all local, and 12 teachers.

Kagbeni's youth hostel was built in 2010 and now houses 159 of the school's 190 students. Technically, the school has two separate hostels. The smaller one is for students from the nursery level up to grade three, housing 68 students. It is staffed by three female teachers, one cook, and a warden, all of whom live at the hostel. The larger hostel is for the remaining 91 students from grades 4 to 10. This hostel is staffed by three male teachers (one being the headmaster), two female teachers, and a cook. Between the two hostels, they house students from 11 districts spread across the country. Some students come from

as far as the Chitwan district of Nepal in the country's southern flatlands, two days' travel by bus from Kagbeni. This speaks to the resources being provided in Kagbeni, with a large school, food, and housing paid for, it has become a nationally sought-after option.

The school attempts to accommodate as many students as they can, however, the headmaster spoke with me about the difficulty that this brings. There are often people from other regions of the country who show up and must be turned away from the hostel due to a lack of capacity. Because of the hostel's capacity issues, there are currently 31 “up down” students, who walk up to 45 minutes from their homes in neighboring villages (primarily Tiri to the north) to the school each day, an option that remains open to all. Being highly sought after and at capacity, one of the most difficult parts of the job for administrators is the application process. They meet with families to assess financial need, along with giving a basic exam to prospective students. Due to the high demand, paired with the hostel staff's desire to accommodate as many children as they can, the hostel will always remain at capacity. This means a constant strain on school resources, and squished housing for many students, with around 10-15 per room. This is a difficult dynamic for the school to navigate, as Nepal's government has provided no official guidelines on who is eligible to attend the public hostel, leaving it up to the school administrators to find a balance between serving all and prioritising quality.

Interestingly, less than 5% of students at the school are actually from Kagbeni. Almost all students live in the hostel or walk daily from other villages. The headmaster explained this to me, saying that because of the large tourism economy in Kagbeni, many of the local families are quite wealthy and choose to send their kids to school in the city. This means that the hostel serves more as a regional resource than one for the town itself.

Being the first school outside of Lubra that I visited, I was strunk my the caring and compassion I saw as I observed the schools teachers interacting with students at the hostel. The headmaster explained to me how difficult the job of the hostel teachers was, being in charge of the kids 24/7. On top of helping kids with their homework each evening, the hostel staff also serve as the only adult emotional support available to the children living at the hostel without their parents. This is an especially remarkable

undertaking considering the government only pays the hostel staff from 9 am to 4 pm, during school hours. It truly is a labor of love for these teachers. While the headmaster made sure I knew how difficult the job was, he also showed great pride for the work he did and for the services his staff were able to provide for their students.

Jharkot:

Jharkot is the largest village in the grouping that sits below the Muktinath temple. It is a cluster of homes along with a large monastery perched on top of a small hill with a 360-degree view of the valley it sits within. While dwarfed in comparison to the tourist infrastructure of nearby Ranipauwa, Jharkot still has a number of hostels and restaurants available.

Jharkot's primary school offers classes from the ECED level through grade 5. After grade five, students generally move to school in either Jomsom or Kagbeni, while some move to Pokhara. From last year's graduates, 8 went to Kagbeni, and 5 to Jomsom. The school currently serves 88 students with a staff of 8 teachers. Of these 88 students, 65 currently stay in the new youth hostel that was built in 2020. Jharkot's new youth hostel was built as part of a ‘merger’ between many of the schools in the surrounding area as a response to shrinking class sizes across the board. In the new model, local schools in surrounding villages would either close or downsize to only offer the ECED level, while their funding would be redirected to the now larger school and youth hostel in Jharkot that would be available to their students. The development of the hostel has brought large growth to the school from its enrolment of 26 students in 2019, the year before the hostel opened.

Of the school's 8 teachers, five live on site at the hostel, including the head teacher, while three others live in the town of Jharkot. Although Jharkot was the chosen central location for the merger, there are only 11 currently enrolled students from Jharkot, while the rest come from other parts of Mustang, along with some from across Nepal, representing 7 districts altogether. Similarly to Kagbeni, the school in Jharkot has a nationwide draw due to the services it provides. There are currently 35 students from other districts trying to join the hostel; however, as of now, there is no more space on site. As a solution to this,

Jharkot's head teacher told me that some families have been moving to Jharkot so that their children can live with them in town and attend the school. This is made possible by new families moving into Jharkot homes that had been previously left vacant due to outmigration.

However, even though the Jharkot school is highly sought after, it isn't without problems. The schools head teacher layed out a list of improvements the school needs, but currently lacks the funding for: Firstly, he said they need more toilets, as the current count of two for boys and two for girls is not enough for there 88 students, and the ones they do have are apparently in poor condition. Furthermore, he said that over the years, furniture such as bunk bed frames have been broken by students, but the school doesn't have enough funds to replace them. Finally, the school only has one computer, which is currently not working, and they have no means to fix it.

After visiting Jharkot's school, I was struck by the dichotomy present where the head teacher was surely describing a struggling institution, yet the school was still so sought after that they were turning away large numbers of students. Mostly, I think this speaks to what the offer of free education, housing, and food means in the context of Nepali education, regardless of quality. Partially, the added difficulty I witnessed at Jharkot's school can be attributed to receiving less funding than its regional counterparts. This is because, on top of regular government school funding, the hostels in Jomsom, Kagbeni, and Chusang receive additional funds from the "Himali Abashi Chathra Bilthi," a government fund specifically designed to support Mustang hostels. However, since Jharkot's hostel was built after this fund was set up, along with its different location from the other three, which reside along the banks of the Kali Gandaki, it is currently excluded from receiving the additional funding.

Finally, as same as in Kagbeni, it feels important to note the clear care that the staff I met showed for their students. They also spend much of the day, 7 days a week, with their students, and act not only as teachers but also as caretakers. I am quite confident that the pain expressed by the head teacher as he described the poor conditions at the school came from a place of compassion and personal responsibility for the well-being of all his students.

Jomsom and Chusang:

Jomsom and Chusang are two towns I was not able to visit, but both are relevant as they have public schools with hostels that are attended by students in my region of focus. Jomsom is the major city of the larger area, housing the largest markets, the airport, and is widely viewed as the gateway into Mustang. Jomsom has two schools, one public and one private, both with attached youth hostels. Jomsoms private school and hostel is where the graduates of Lubras school are sent to complete 9th and 10th grade. Jomsom's public school has roughly 500 students, about 200 of whom stay in the hostel (Kagbeni Principal). However, the Jomsom public hostel differs from the aforementioned public hostels since it's not free. To attend the Jomsom public hostel costs 4,000 Rupees a month. This makes it a categorically different resource for local families, as cost barriers are a relevant consideration for many. Still, some local families send their kids here. I met a woman in the town of Jhong whose son was currently at the public hostel in Jomsom. He used to be at the private hostel, but she said it was too expensive, so they moved him to the public one (Pema Gurung).

Chusang is another town that lies not far north up the road from Kagbeni, also along the banks of the Kali Gandaki. I wasn't able to visit because it lies just across the border to Upper Mustang, for which I did not have a permit. However, Nepalis can cross this border seamlessly, making it another viable option for schooling. From what I heard, the Chusang school has just over 100 students, all living at the hostel. It offers classes from the Nursery level to grade 10, and was founded between 2013 and 2015. Since I wasn't able to visit the school myself, these estimates are a little rough and come from Minbahadur Lami Chhane, the head teacher in Jharkot. While my information is limited on both of these places due to being unable to visit myself, they both contribute to the larger context of youth hostels being developed regionally, all following the development of the Lubra youth hostel in 2001.

Villages without youth hostels:

Khinga:

Khinga is a village along the road that takes people from Kagbeni up to Muktinath. It sits separate from the cluster of other villages close to Muktinath, about an hour's walk down the valley from the nearest town, Jharkot. There is the main settlement of Khinga, a cluster of traditional houses offset about 100 meters from the road, at the edge of where the landscape takes a steep drop off toward the river below. Along the road, there are a handful of newer buildings, many being hostels, one store, and the school building. While there are still many residents in Khinga, my host mother there mentioned how the forces of outmigration weren't just pulling people to the cities, but also to their more developed neighbors of Kagbeni and Muktinath.

Khinga's school used to go up to grade five, but has scaled down to being a nursery only over the past two decades. In 2005, the school scaled down from grade five to grade three due to low enrollment, and again from grade three to nursery only in 2015(Tenjing Gurung). Now the school has one teacher and 12 students learning at the ECED level from ages 2 to 5. Interestingly, 5 of the 12 students travel to Khinga from Jharkot each day to attend the nursery, since the ECED level at the Jharkot school is only offered starting at age 5. In a day, the students play, wash their hair and face, practice reading and writing, and eat lunch. The lunch given by the school was expressed to me as a crucial part of the service that Khinga's school provides for the community to financially support families with young children. Furthermore, in our interview, the school's teacher told me that the school could also help provide students with shoes or new clothing if she noticed there was a need (Susmita Bikah, Khinga school teacher). This gives a nod towards the services that schools can provide for rural towns beyond the scope of education, and frames the impact on towns to follow that have lost their schools altogether.

Purang:

Purang is the most central of all the villages in the valley beneath Muktinath. It sits in the shallow valley between Ranipauwa and Jharkot, 10 minutes down the hill from Ranipauwa, and 15 minutes from Jharkot. It is a beautiful village, surrounded by well-cultivated farming land and greenery that stand out in contrast to the desert climate. largely lacking any new development, Purang remains well populated due to its proximity to Jomsom and Muktinath. I met one man who moved here for work in Ranipauwa, but chose to stay in Purang because he likes the quiet.

Purang has no school, or even a nursery, and it hasn't for some time. I heard that there used to be a local school going up to 5th grade that closed altogether about 15 years ago due to low attendance (Minbhadur Lami Chhane, Jharkot head teacher). This was the only town I visited in the area that lost schooling altogether, well before the development of the Jharkot hostel. Families I spoke two in this town said they have children spread between Lubra, Kagbeni, Jomsom, and Jharkot. Of those at the school in Jharkot, some walk about twenty minutes to the school each day, while others stay at the hostel. Jharkot's headmaster explains to me that it was each family's choice, but often poorer local families chose to put their kids in the hostel to take advantage of the services provided. The headmaster thought this was good, educationally speaking, as it meant children got to partake in the afterschool learning environment, like receiving homework help from their teachers. Purang is an outlier with its school closing so much earlier than the others. However, I think it makes sense in the context of Lubras hostel having been around and Kagbenis having recently opened to contribute to diminishing numbers, along with the close proximity to Jharkots school as another option.

Ranipauwa:

Ranipuwa is the village at the highest point in the valley, closest to the Muktinath temple, situated at the base of the temple's long staircase approach. Because of this, Ranipuwa is heavily developed, filled with hotels and shops for tourists, bringing lots of wealth to locals. I didn't see any traditional houses still

standing around the village; there were a handful of older buildings that I saw tucked behind the main street. This included the old school building.

Ranipuwas school shares a similar story to Purang, having closed 15 years ago as well. However,. Ranipuwa used to have a school up to 5th grade, which was closed in 2010, and reduced to a nursery teaching the ECED level. However, due to low enrollment, the nursery also closed in 2022. Now, any kids of this age group still left in the town will walk to the nursery at the school in Jharkot, about 15 minutes down the hill (Chiming Gurung).

While this change happened at the same time as Purang, I would argue that it occurred in a different socioeconomic context. Overwhelmingly, locals whom I spoke with were sending there to school in Kathmandu. For example, I had become friends with the family who owns the Bob Marley Hostel in Ranipuwa because the wifes family is from Lubra, and all three of there daughters were attending school in Kathmandu. They had lived there in an apartment with a caretaker each since the age of five. Due to the apparent wealth of many locals, I think the school closing was more due to factors such as the popularity of private education and education in the cities, than a direct effect of the emerging hostels, like in Purang.

Chongur:

Chongur is a village situated across a small stream from the Muktinath Temple, about 30 minutes from Ranipauwa and an hour's walk on the other side to Jhong. The village has twenty houses and about 65 people currently living there. It used to have a school that went up to grade 5, until 2020, when the school closed as part of the Jharkot hostel merger. Before the school closed, five students were attending, who are now split between the school in Kagbeini and Jharkot. Since the closure, the school building has remained empty with no nursery present. Like many of the other villages, people in Chongur have children studying across the local hostels, as well as some completing their ‘plus two’ in the cities (Punam Pul and Dawa Gurung interview).

Jhong:

Jhong sits on the north side of the Jhong River directly across from Jharkot and the other villages proximate to Muktinath. It is the largest of three settlements to the north of where the river splits the valley (Jhong, Chongur, and Putak). In the center of Jhong are the ruins of a 13th-century castle that was built by former Tibetan Royalty. Furthermore, Jhong has a large and active monastery that can be seen from across the valley, filled with beautiful murals recently restored as part of a US-AID project.

Similar to Khinga, Jhongs school has been reduced to the nursery, ECED level. The school, named Janapriya Secondary School, used to go to grade five until 2020, when it was reduced to a nursery in conjunction with the Jharkot hostel being built. The school currently has 1 teacher and 5 students. The school day goes from 10 am to 2 pm, where students learn English, Nepali, math, eat kaaja (snack), and have some time for play. The nursery offers slightly different facilities compared to those in Khinga, including basic math, but only gives a traditional Nepali midday snack instead of a full meal. The Teacher in Jhong said that, similarly to Khinga, the school would help to get shoes or clothing for students in need if the problem arose. In this situation, the teacher would write a letter to the local Gaounpalikhaa (rural municipality governing body) requesting an allocation of funds (Sasmi Jugjali - Jharkot teacher).

Based on interviews with locals, it seems that Jhongs school was the largest of the local schools closed as part of the Jharkot merger. Based on a rough estimate, it seems that twenty years ago (around 2005) the school had 30-50 students, and as recently as 2015 it was still serving 20-25 children. This was only five years before the closure. Since the closure, all of these students have relocated to the youth holstels in Jharkot, Kagbeni, or Lubra.

Putak:

The final Village I visited was Putak, which is situated a thirty-minute walk down the road past Jhong. The town has 9 houses, with 30 to 35 current residents, and one open hostel. Similarly to the examples above, Putak's Jan Sawa Basic School has been reduced to an ECED nursery due to low

enrollment. The school has slowly scaled down its size, in 2019 going from class five to class three, and in 2021 switching from class three to nursery only. Currently, the school has four students and one teacher (Santi Pun - Putak teacher).

Analysis:

Below is a table showing relevant information gathered from each of the villages I visited:

	A	B	C	D	E	F
1	**Village Name**	**Number of students in the school**	**Number of teachers at the school**	**Year hostel was built**	**Year of closure/ down size**	
2	Lubra	89	11	2001	N/A	
3	Kagbeni	190	22	2010	N/A	
4	Jharkot	88	8	2020	N/A	
5	Khingga	12	1	N/A	2005: 5 to 3, 2015: 3 to eced	
6	Jhong	5	1	N/A	2020: 5 to eced	
7	Putak	4	1	N/A	2019: 5 to 3, 2021: 3 to eced	
8	Ranipauwa	N/A	N/A	N/A	2010: 5 to ecd, 2022: full closure	
9	Purang	N/A	N/A	N/A	2010: 5 to full clusure	
10	Chongur	N/A	N/A	N/A	2020: 5 to full closure	
11	*Chusang	~100	?	2013 - 2015	N/A	
12	*Jomsom	~500	?	?	N/A	

Generally, as I traveled from village to village, a story began to unfold where the development and success of local youth hostels was causing the deterioration of local schooling. Folowing the development of Lubras youth hostel in 2001 and subsiquent popularity, the Kagbeni and Chusang youth hostels were developed, this time with government funding, but following Lubras cost free model. This exacerbated a preexisting issue of shrinking enrollment in local village schools. Considering a large population of students from the villages below Muktinath were attending the various new hostels, along with downsizing in Khinga, Putak, and Purang, in 2020, the Ministry of Education conducted a merger of all the remaining schools in the area. The school in Chongur was fully closed, while those in Jhong and Putak were reduced to the ECED level, and all financial resources were redirected towards the new

Jharkot hostel. This was the most recent development in a 25-year period that shifted the region from having 9 local schools in the year 2000 to the model of regional schooling we see today.

As I traveled the area gathering the previously listed information, I also had the opportunity to hear personal stories related to schooling from locals along the way. Overall, I conducted 7 interviews with locals as I traveled between the various villages, along with a handful of informal conversations along the way. This does not including people who worked in the schools i visited or residents of Lubra. Between all those I spoke with, I heard a wide array of reports, mostly from parents, on the variety of places their children were attending for school and why. Between the local hostels I recieved a near unanimous ranking of overall quality going: 1 - Lubra, 2 - Kagbeni, 3 - Jharkot. However, it was noted that a disadvantage of the Lubra hostel is that the kids only return home once a year for 2 months of winter break. This is why one mother I spoke with chose to send her son to Kagbeni, where he could return home one weekend a month (Sonam Gurung, interview).

It is worth noting that while people unilaterally agree that the hostels have greatly improved the level of free education available locally, those with the means still often send their children to school in Pokhra or Kathmandu. For some, this requires having enough wealth to pay for their child's boarding in the city. While for others, all it takes is a relative kind enough to let your children move in. It’s hard for me to know how much this trend reflects the true quality of local schooling, versus being the product of a long-standing bias towards education in the cities. Either way, the preference still stands. This means that while local education has improved, it has not yet achieved the ability to stem the flow of people relocating to the cities. Still, for those children never afforded this opportunity, now, their chances to achieve academic success close to home are far higher.

While exploring the nuances of this fairly new model for schooling in Lower Mustang and how it has improved overall educational quality, it is impossible to ignore the subsequent effects on village life. For towns without youth hostels, what was 10 years ago a popular decision to send your kids away from home for school has now become mandatory. This means that for 6 of the 9 towns I visited, going forward, there will largely be no children present past the age of 5. I find it a heartbreaking tradeoff,

necessary as it may be. It means kids are missing out on growing up participating in local cultural traditions, and are separate from the web of their own family, likely spread across the village. It will also mean the degradation of the tibetan language for all those attending schools other than Lubras, since it would be taught at school, and they will miss out on exposure to it at home. I also heard from people I spoke with about how, even though kids were leaving home for school anyway, it's particularly difficult following the Jharkot merger for families to not even have a choice.

I asked many people what they thought about this tradeoff, but there was one man who I thought explained the challenge quite well. I met him while passing through Chongur and sat down where he and his three-year-old son were playing. I asked if he thought things were better now or before, when the village had its own school? He said, “Before, the school was so small. I think that the hostels, with more teachers and students, are better for education. But it's hard. It's hard for families when kids have to leave home for school. It's hard for the local culture that kids don’t stay here” (Dawa Gurung, interview). He lays out the contrast and difficulty so clearly, but what has stuck with me from this interview is one specific word choice: “*Tara tyo gado”* - but it's hard. He could have easily used bad, or harmful, but instead he said hard. I think this is so emblematic of the situation at play because ultimately, there is no separating the pros from the cons here. It's a package deal, and he is fully aware of the loads of good for the village's youth that come with improving educational opportunities. But also, as the parent of a three-year-old son still living at home, it is undeniably hard.

Conclusion:

Over the past twenty-five years, there have been immense changes in the dynamics of schooling all across Nepal. Through extensive government and international investment, literacy rates, attendance, and gender equality have skyrocketed nationwide. Accomplishing these changes has required innovation and change at all levels of education and from urban to rural locations. In many ways, the shifting dynamics of education in Lower Mustang represent the collaborative effort required between domestic

and foreign investment to create this change. We see this in Lubra with the intertwinement of the private hostel and public school to create a cohesive experience for the students. This same interconnected impact further ripples across the region as the private establishments of Lubras Hostel set into motion the wave of youth hostel development regionally. These hostels together have drastically changed the state of education in Lower Mustang, providing access to larger schools with improved resources, available to all regional children. However, these changes are not without their drawbacks, as the development of youth hostels subsequently factored into the cancellation of local schooling at the village level.

Reflecting on the big picture of these findings, I look back to my conversation with Charles Ramble about the ideation of Lubras hostel. He spoke about how the hostel was built to provide a solution for families desiring quality education without compromising cultural preservation. This looked like keeping kids tied to village culture and the Bon religion. While the 89 students in Lubra have been afforded a solution, for families across the region, this same problem still rings true almost 25 years later. Potentially, even more so now, as many villages have lost the option of local schooling, making it obligatory in many places to send your kids away from home. It's hard to know what good solutions to the current state of the issue look like, since quality education seems to require attendance that, at least in this area, cannot be found in one village alone. While Hostels are free and keep students in village life, there is no denying that it's not the same as growing up within the unique traditions of your own village. I hold no answers. All I can do is feel the difficulty of the situation that has been expressed to me, and all I can know is that I have faith in the fortitude of Mustang's local traditions and trust the people of the region to adapt accordingly in an ever-changing world.

P.S.

Hi to anyone who's in the Pitzer in Nepal library :)

For any questions, please reach out to nadelhenry@gmail.com

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