

Revisiting Two semester MPhil in Sociology at TU: A FGD Report

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'CDSA is also planning to start M.Phil program in sociology and anthropology from the coming academic year 2012. The main objective of this program is to contribute to better academic performance of M. Phil students and upgrade and enhance the quality of education in sociology and anthropology being provided at Tribhuvan University by providing opportunities to the faculty member and aspiring students to learn from the most recent theoretical and methodological debates in the disciplines as well as in the social sciences. This will also enhance the quality of research work produced by research scholars (M.A, M.Phil and Ph.D) at T.U. CDSA plans to enroll 50 students (25 for sociology and 25 for anthropology) for M.Phil program for this academic year. In order to run M.Phil program, CDSA has already developed courses of study and managed teaching faculties.' (Gurung. 2012, in Short Institutional Profile of the Central Department of Sociology/Anthropology: Occasional Papers in Sociology and Anthropology pp.183).

This opinion from the central department shows that MPhil program in Sociology aims to provide opportunity to learn most recent theoretical as well as methodological debates, quality of research works, quality education and better academic performance. Faculty members are given priority for the program to enhance the quality of research works. Similarly, Brochure of MPhil in Sociology (unpublished) has shown that the Program aims to provide comprehensive mentoring to prospective students to prepare them for research after graduation. It seeks to accomplish this goal by enhancing the overall capacity of the students in:

- Independent, critical and organized reading, thinking and writing;
- Engaging with emerging disciplinary frontiers, emerging political, economic and cultural features of Nepal, South Asia and beyond; and,
- Linking theory and method.

The objectives of the program are crystal clear and cover a broad spectrum beginning from independent, critical and organized reading, thinking and writing through issues prevalent in disciplinary frontiers to linking theory and method. Manifestation of these objectives can be seen in the part of course distribution, instructional methods, assessment system etc. through gathering perception of all involved including the students.

This course contains very interesting area of research. During the first semester, courses like Macro Sociology, Historical Comparative Methods and Social Inquiry (So 601), Social movement: Studies on Collective Actions for Change (So 603), Poverty, Social Exclusion and Inclusionary Policies (So 604), Logic of Social Inquiry, Research and Writing (So 602) are taught. Though other two courses i.e. Social History of Nepali Society (So 605) and Sociology of Economic Development (So 606) are also enlisted courses for the first semester, aforementioned courses (from So 601 to 604) have been taught in the first semester. Only two courses i.e. 601

and 602 are required courses and remaining courses are optional ones. During the second semester, required course is Social and Economic Dynamics of Nepal: Survey Data Analysis and Interpretation (So 621) and five optional courses have been designed. Sociology and Public Policy (So 622), Globalization, Citizenship and Subjectivities (So 623), Neoliberal Development, Market and Social Change (So 624), Intersectionality: Caste, Class, Gender and Religion (So 625) and Transformation of Nepali State (So 626) are optional courses for second semester. The required course for second semester demands computer skill for statistical analysis and interpretation of macro level raw data. All courses are of three credit hours. Third semester is for thesis writing that carries six credit hours and there is no buzz sessions/regular class attendance. (CDSA MPhil Courses of Study, 2012)

Assessment system of the course is both internal and external. Attendance, class participation and discussion, term papers are the mode of internal assessment and written examination is the mode of external assessment. Forty percent mark is allotted for internal assessment and sixty percent marks for external evaluation. Some courses demand slightly different modality of internal assessment.

Reading numerous articles on different themes of the courses, interacting with the texts, writing reflection/summary, presenting and sharing knowledge, writing term papers based on the question, reviewing articles are some of the activities that students should be engaged in during the course.

Upto now two batches has completed their regular classes and are undergoing thesis/dissertation writing and the third batch with two shift- morning and evening is still undertaking its first semester. MPhil in sociology is a eighteen months' course. To cater the need of higher education along with research based courses, MPhil in sociology has been course of attraction for those who successfully completed their Master's Degree in sociology.

Studying MPhil in semester system is new experience for the students who completed their master's degree in yearly system from TU which is similar to MPhil programs in other faculties and discipline. Students enroll in the program and maintain the requirements of the courses. There has been no attempt to explore how students of MPhil feel after attending the course, how they express about their expectation and achievement during the regular classes or seminars, how they assess the overall courses, instructional techniques, prescribed texts/books/articles, assessment system and grievances etc. This is an attempt to explore perception of students who have recently completed their regular classes. To make it short, this is an attempt to explore the perception of students towards the course they attended.

To achieve needed information regarding the perception of the students who attended MPhil in sociology courses, a Focused Group Discussion (FGD) was organized in Martin Chautari. Students of MPhil second batch were the participants of the discussion. The discussion program had two parts i.e. a) assessing the whole program of MPhil in sociology on the basis of

expectation-achievement , texts/ articles, assignments, instructional techniques, assessment system and b) assessing the course-Social History of Nepali Society- based on methodology, importance of history for the student of sociology, articles, assignments etc. for further improvement.

To sum up, the main objective of the FGD were to revisit two semesters of MPhil in Sociology at TU and its coursework from the stand of students; and to revisit the course Social History of Nepali Society(So 605). In addition, this FGD was aimed to provide some recommendations for CDSA as well as the course instructors of Soc 605.

Summary of Project:

Martin Chautari(MC) held a focus group discussion on 27 December 2014 involving students of MPhil in sociology (second batch) who had recently completed the regular class of second semester and were pursuing thesis writing. From the participants of the FGD, MC gathered information about the course works of two semesters of MPhil in Sociology program as well as the course- Soc. 605.

Introduction

MC held a focus group discussion with eighteen students on 27 December, 2014. The focus group was conducted as part of the MC to argue about higher education policy debate. Participants provided information in group discussion orally which was duly recorded. Main focus of the discussion was to gather information on the basis of students' perspective towards MPhil in Sociology courses at TU in general and the course of Social History of Nepali Society in particular. So, the first part of the discussion covers overall perception of MPhil courses and second part assembles perception regarding a particular course.

Part A: Revisiting two semesters of MPhil Sociology course-work at Tribhuvan University

The discussion was designed to gather information from the students regarding to the following issues:

How do you asses the course of MPhil in sociology?

Do you think that the objectives of MPhil courses are actually realized?

What is your suggestion to CDSA about the courses of MPhil in sociology?

Please, describe about the way of teaching and given tasks to the students during MPhil courses? Were the recommended texts fruitful?

Part B Revisiting Soc 605 (Social History of Nepali Society)

How was your experience with social history course?
How is sociology informed by History?

Is history relevant for sociologists? How? Share your experience.

What methodological assistance is provided by history to sociology and sociology to history?

Are the issues discussed during our MPhil course better understood through the lens of history?

What was your expectation and what was achieved after the course?

What would you suggest to the course instructor of the course?
Are you incorporating social history or history as such in your dissertation of MPhil?

Part A: Revisiting two semesters of MPhil Sociology course-work at Tribhuvan University

Most of the participants agreed that after studying MPhil, they feel themselves more confident to read longish article on the basis of the theme than before. They shared that they do not have hesitation, to

some extent, now to discuss about contemporary social issues like migration, social and economic history, democracy, market dynamics, globalization, poverty, inclusion/exclusion debate, citizenship, ethnicity, social movements and collective action, micro/macro linkages etc. They read more than 200 pages of article each week in different themes. They feel that the way how course is structured is a bit overloaded in the part of students. For the sake of standard article, they feel, some prescribed articles were very tough not only for the students to understand but also for the instructor to discuss about. Their expectations before enrolling the program were different from each other but finally they completed the course in homogenized manner. Though the course was a bit tough, their feeling after the course is that they become more knowledgeable in academic debate. One of the participants said-

‘After completing my second semester, I informed my program coordinator to provide me class for Master’s degree. It is due to the confidence that I gained during the course. I think I can provide required information for the students of Master’s degree’

Another participant said-

‘I was greatly shocked when I was in MPhil course for the first week as the topics discussed in the class were completely unknown and very difficult to catch up with. Later on, I was gradually involved in the discussion. I am now happy the course but still the course is not so ‘practical and some sort of happening’.’

Next participant frankly said-

‘During the course orientation, faculty had assured that they ‘will help us to write academically, argue boldly and think and write critically’ but reading was more focused and writing was ignored. We even did not get proper feedback in our term papers.’

Regarding assessment system, individual faculty and the course varies significantly. Forty percent of mark was allotted for internal assessment. One participant said-

‘We expected two term papers in a course and we were ready for that also but finally, we came to know that we would not get the second term paper. In a course, we had to submit reflection before we attend the class discussion. It was really fruitful for course preparation for final examination also. In some courses, instructor did not facilitate the text very well and assigned term paper on the basis of the same article. We wrote paper and finally, most of the students got victimized in marks.’

Similarly, another participant said-

‘No thing was on time, everything was in ‘Nepali para’ during MPhil. Even we got to know that our batch got higher marks due to the revolt of the first batch.’

Next participant said that-

‘Even selection process or entrance exam for enrolling in the program was ridiculous as the same generic question was asked in written and interview. The same question with the same mistake was

repeated in the final examination. There was no dialogue or feedback after the exam. Political ideology, to some extent, was revealed in the part of instructor.’

Much more comments were made during the discussion on term paper, classroom discussion and mark allocation. Regarding this issue, one of the participants argued –

‘I do not know why and how I got better marks than expected. There was frequent intervention from the instructor to be ‘in-line’ and little space was given for ‘reading beyond the line’.

Adding to the previous participant, another participant reported-

‘We talked about exam system even during the buzz session. We got mixed responses from our instructor. We attended final examination as we did in our MA. Allocation of marks for internal and external examination needs to be revised even if existing system of marks allocation in internal examination is not transparent.’

The courses offered for the students of MPhil in Sociology covers a wide range of knowledge and students who have completed the buzz session feel themselves confident in reading and delivering what they have discussed. They do not feel that they are equipped with intended methodological complexity. Independent thinking and critical thinking were not carefully imparted during their course. In spite of the hurdle of time, as most of the students were involved in job, they looked for more facilitation from the instructor.

Some of the conclusions that can be drawn from these narratives are as follows:

- MPhil in sociology has been a course of attraction due to its coverage of social issues
- The course provides confidence to its readers in academic discussions but it does not sufficiently cover strategies of academic writing in proper manner.
- Varied themes with longish article, approximately 200 pages of article within a week is felt to be a bit overloaded in the part of students who can hardly avoid their job for the sake of degree.
- Assessment system of the program is not satisfactory and students may not feel that they have been pursuing MPhil.
- There seems confusing role of teaching staff and the controlling body of the program.
- ‘Nepali Para’ has detrimental role through out the program. Even in semester system, the ghost of yearly system has its existence.
- Internal Assessment system (class performance and attendance) has not been satisfactory as it lacks transparency.
- What instructors say during course orientation is not realized actually in the regular sessions.

- Varying levels of the instructors and students have created some problems in course delivery.
- 'Independent thinking, critically arguing and boldly writing' has been ignored.
- Preparation of the text before attending the regular session has been ignored by some course instructors as well as by the students. Penalization of the students, even if the problem lies in the part of the instructor, is prevalent in the program.
- Feedback and critical dialogue after the completion of the course with the understanding of the students and instructor has been missing.
- There is wide gap between MA and MPhil in course structure and contents.

Suggestions to CDSA along with Office of Dean

It has been just two and half year that CDSA started teaching MPhil courses which are managed through Dean Office of the Humanities and Social Sciences faculty. Participants of Focused group discussion suggest the following things.

- Optional papers are to be widened as well as given to the students. Courses are offered in mandatory process that has killed the choices of the students.
- Independent courses are expected to be offered so as the students can find his/her interest tied up with the whole program.
- Selection process is ought to be revised.
- 'Nepali para' in internal and external assessment system can be revised.
- When expected level of the students is not maintained, the role of instructor is desired to be more facilitative.
- Grievance handling mechanism as well as dialogue/feedback system is expected to be maintained.
- Political ideology, if it is, needs to be discouraged.
- Revision, if possible, is desired to be made in allocation of marks in internal and external examination.
- Timely result of the semester has to be implemented at best. The sooner, the better.
- Only introducing the best and standard articles is not sufficient. It should be followed by thorough discussions.
- Twisting assessment system on the ground of individual motive has to be discouraged.

- Intensive writing classes are to be managed along with the required courses.

Despite some weaknesses in implementation, the two semester course has made the student expand their horizon of knowledge in different and contemporary issues in social sciences. The course helped the students to be acquainted with some new methodologies.

Part B: Revisiting Soc 605 (Social History of Nepali Society)

Introduction

Every social science/ well considered social study requires an historical scope of conception and a full use of historical materials.

-C.Wright Mills

‘Sociology is a historically grounded and oriented enterprise as major works of Marx, Tocqueville, Durkheim and Weber offered concepts and explanations meant to be used in truly historical analyses of social structures and social change.(Skocpol, 1984).

Griffin(1995) raised on whether to understand history in its own right or history as storehouse of sample to be tested in sociological theory. Linking history and sociology is important in the sense that history provides time that provides social context in which things happen. Time is an inescapable part of the structural and contextual context (sociology) in which people exist, think and act. Culture and social structure constrain or empower social action at any point in time (History) and cultural understanding and social institutions (sociology) are continually made and remade by social actions occurring through time. We should more thoroughly historicize how we use some of our basic categories of analysis like class, gender, and race and we should more fully exploit the explanatory and integrative potential inherent in narrative. Furthermore, Griffin(1995) says that both sociology and history try to understand and explain how people acted in contested, challenging or hostile environments and in so doing, changed or reproduced the social structures, cultural categories and political practices in which they were enmeshed.

It seems that keeping all these aforementioned ideas in mind, the course- Soc. 605 Social History of Nepali Society for MPhil in Sociology was designed. This is an optional course for MPhil in Sociology. The main objective of the course, as mentioned in the course of study, is to not only familiarize the students to ‘modern’ Nepali history but also to stimulate them to think critically on the ways to approach the history sociologically. The course has been designed in the theme that we can not grasp the complexities of our society and understand the problems and challenges that we as a nation and society are facing today without having an understanding of how Nepali society evolved over the years. The course covers theory, debates and methodology of historical sociology, major historical conjectures, economic history, evolution, ideology and functioning of political parties, and the appraisal of Nepali historical and social research. The assessment system of the course is divided into three parts i.e. book review in which students can select any books on Nepali history and society, review essay or term paper in which students can take any article or theme from the course to write a critical essay and finally external assessment. Class presentation and discussion is highly valued within internal assessment.

Outcome 1. Perception of students on significance of the course and its contents, history to the students of sociology, methods and research, instructional and assessment systems within the course duration

All the participants of FGD were the students of the course ‘Studies in Nepali History and Society’ in MPhil second semester. They were the first batch to undertake this course. During FGD, their experience with the course, linkage of history to sociology, methodological assistance provided by history to sociology, their expectation before the course and achievement after the course, their use of those learnt methods in dissertation and finally suggestion to the course instructor, were set as issues of discussions.

The course begins with theoretical discussions that link history and sociology. One of the participants said-

‘At first I thought that our readings will be in Nepali as we were supposed to read about Nepali history and society but it was not the fact. We discussed articles mostly written in English. Then we read the texts that contained important conjectures of Nepali history. They were plain-texts and we were encouraged to ‘question on the theme of the article’. Sometimes, I felt as if I went through an interesting story of some kind. Finally, I got what I had to get i.e. the course helped me to understand Nepali history which was a new experience.’

Another participant added that they were involved in the discussion of comparative historical methods in their first semester. This course helped them to understand the previous course. The terminologies they were encountered through the courses of first semester like social movement, elite split, transnational contentions, exclusion become more interesting due to the knowledge of Nepali history.

Next participant said a very interesting thing –

‘It was my great opportunity to know about Nepali history as I was ‘zero’ in it.’

Adding that idea to the first part of this FGD, one of the participants said-

‘After completion of this course, I realize that this course needs to be undertaken in the first semester. We opened up with new methods of research like oral history, narratives, memories etc. when we had already planned for our research in another way. If it was taught in the first semester, we would be able to make our research more interesting.’

Reflecting on one of the text, a participant said-

‘The article about Library, was the first article that I read in which researcher has discussed about the lapses and possible disadvantages of the methodology employed in his research. We were trained in writing one or two points on delimitation of our research.’

Regarding story and theory, a participant said that he/she read longish stories of the time but could not vividly link the event with the theory. As suggestion, another participant added that the course needs to add more theoretical discussions.

Regarding the texts prescribed for reading in the course, one participant remarked-

‘Probably, this is the course in which we read many more articles than any other courses. Most of the articles at the later part of our classes were related to methods, that is, reading a text means, finding the method (‘dance’) that researcher employed. Such texts help us to use certain methods in our research.’

Regarding internal assessment within the course, a participant said-

'letting us to write a book review on our own(selecting book that contains history or sociology or any book related to intended thesis) helped us to feel free exploring our interest in the discipline. It is a part of independent reading. It helped me make my research more interesting.'

Finally, the course contains very interesting and fruitful area of study for the students of sociology, some revision on theoretical part of the course i.e adding some more articles in theory, adding some texts written by the instructors and Nepali scholars, assistance in academic writing (at least in this course either as side by side or in the course-self) were some of the suggestions to the instructors.