

Contributions of Rupchandra Bista in Education Development of Nepal

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Abstract

This paper examines the philosophy of education and practical work of Rupchandra Bista, one of the best reformists, whose Thaha Darshan (Philosophy of Knowing) has reinterpreted education as civil empowerment and moral awakening in Nepal. The paper will look at the development of ideas by Bista in the historical context of Nepal where monarchy was replaced by the federal democracy and how his programs transformed the community-based and participatory learning. The research methodology will take the form of qualitative interpretive approach that incorporates the use of documentary and thematic analysis. Primary sources like writings of Bista and the data of the Thaha Movement are read and understood in conjunction with the recent secondary scholarship (2020-2025) of transformative, decolonial, and civic education. The literature review places the reforms community-funded schooling, gender inclusion, vocational programs, and the involvement of local governance proposed by Bista in the global knowledge democracy and epistemic justice discourses. The discussion shows that Bista envisaged contemporary structures of transformative learning and participatory governance making education a moral and political duty. His assimilation of local wisdom, cultural identity and social ethics provides a sustainable pattern of democratic education in Nepal. The paper concludes that implementing the principles of Bista in the modern educational policy can promote equitable, community-based, and ethically based learning systems.

Keywords: Rupchandra Bista, *Thaha* Darshan, transformative learning, civic education, epistemic justice

1. Introduction

Nepal education has become a symbol of political change as well as symbolizing modernization. The education system has been reflecting the dynamic socio-political situation in Nepal since the creation of Durbar School in 1853 to the introduction of federal reforms in education since 2015 (Sah et al., 2024). Rupchandra Bista born in Palung, Makawanpur, he was a philosopher, teacher and civic leader whose attention was to empower citizens with knowledge. Reconstructionism supports the idea of education as a social and moral change, and educators should be viewed as change agents (Adhari et al., 2024). The awareness, responsibility, and the lack of ignorance as propagated by the Thaha Movement are echoed by the transformative learning theories that teach that education is a vehicle of bringing critical reflection and social change. The idea that transformative learning makes learners seek to challenge their long-standing assumptions makes Bista's claim that ignorance is the root cause of subjugation true as learners make efforts to transform themselves and their societies (Eschenbacher, 2020).

The educational programs organized by Bista in Janakalyan Madhyamik Vidyalaya Palung are a rich combination of the concept of civic education, social responsibility, and the engagement of the community life in accordance with the modern concepts of education. His insistence on moral education and patriotism appeals to the research results that civic education leads to active citizenship and stabilization of the society, which is crucial to the resilience of democracy (Altaany and Abdelbary, 2024). Additionally, the importance of the community in education, which the literature points out, supports the beneficial effects of civic engagement on student achievement and learning behaviors (Bushra and Naqvi, 2023).

This paper is aimed at three things:

- (1) to examine the educational philosophy of Bista in his socio-political realms;
- (2) to examine his useful contributions in local leadership and community education; and
- (3) to be able to see how his ideas continue to be relevant in education reform today.

This paper has discussed how the idea of *thaha* as proposed by Rupchandra Bista transformed education into a liberation and critical consciousness process using the recent scholarship and perspective of the day. It uses the findings of the recent studies to illustrate how Bista believes that true learning can enable people to overcome ignorance and reform the society. His philosophy does not separate education as a source of knowledge but as a way of attaining social justice and moral consciousness, which is consistent with the modern theories of inclusive, participatory, and transformative education (Balarin, 2024).

2. Theoretical Framework: *Thaha* Darshan and the Philosophy of Knowing

2.1 Epistemology of Knowing: *Thaha* as Liberation

The main idea in the philosophy of Bista is the epistemic belief that true learning starts with the realization of an internal awakening that breaks ignorance and subjugation. *Thaha Darshan* (Philosophy of Knowing), depicts knowledge as not accrual of facts but as conscious realization which culminates into moral action. Just as Lodge (2021) believes in *conscientização*, Bista understood learning as a dialogical act that allows one to acknowledge the agency and role he or she plays in changing the society. To him, ignorance was the center of exploitation and education was the way to liberate.

The theoretical basis of this view is similar to the contemporary discourse of knowledge democracy that claims that every society has useful epistemic systems that should be equally involved in the process of knowledge production. By demanding that individuals have knowledge in order to act, Bista democratized the very process of learning to make classrooms and even large assemblies areas of critical reflection. His focus on community involvement foresees the tenets of Education for Sustainable Development (UNESCO, 2020) and the 2030 Agenda of Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015), which endorse the ideas of inclusive, participatory, and lifelong learning as agent of change.

2.2 Transformative Learning and Civic Consciousness

The pedagogical philosophy that Bista adopts is also in line with transformative learning model that focuses on reflection, dialogue and perspective change. He has seen education as a dynamic process through which an individual development interrelates with that of the society. His service at the Janakalyan School and his involvement in community development projects were the concept of learning by serving, which eventually led to the modern education called civic education (Phuyel, 2025).

Learning in civic-education texts goes beyond the classrooms by promoting the socialization of democratic principles, accountability and participation in the student (Barua, 2023). This integration was prefigured by the methods of Bista: he tried to pursue an alternative pedagogical space in community meetings, cooperatives, and public speeches. The way he demanded that everyone should know made civic participation an educational practice one that is akin to the modern models of democratic and decolonial education that question Western knowledge monopoly (Andreotti and Stein, 2022).

2.3 Educational Democracy and Local Governance

The other aspect of the thinking by Bista is on the democratization of local governance via education. Being an elected representative and proponent of grassroots empowerment, he bridged the civic awareness and institutional transparency. His concept of the need to educate the citizens so that they are able to question the authority predicts the normative doctrine of the Right to Information (RTI) movement (Acharya, 2025). In the dynamic federal system of Nepal, education has become the major tool of promoting participatory governance and civic responsibility. Recent researches point out the fact that educated citizens tend to seek transparency, promote social justice, and meaningfully participate in the local decision-making procedures (Bhusal, 2025). Nowadays, these ideals encourage accountability, transparency, and civic control. Voting and sharing of information are some of the conditions that lead to effective decentralization. The legacies of Bista go together with the above arguments: as he connected knowing to governance, he has formulated education as a political empowerment and as a moral responsibility.

2.4 Humanist and Decolonial Perspectives

Bistas Thaha Philosophy represents a uniquely humanist and decolonial concept of education which places learning in the context of experiences and moral duties of people. His pedagogic concept echoes the modern humanist strategies that focus on the comprehensive self-realization, creativity, and autonomy of morality. Similar to Tagore concept of education as a process of releasing human potential, Bista saw knowledge as discovery of self and change of society. He opposed the blind application of Western ideas and urged the people to have an education based on Nepali culture, language, and wisdom. This stance is in line with the modern discussions of decolonizing education, that promotes curricula that learn to appreciate the local knowledge practices and community participation. Besides, researchers, including Dahal and Luitel (2023), emphasize the significance of re-storying teacher education by means of reflexivity, contextual pedagogy, and indigenous stories. Bista's philosophy envisaged such efforts through encouraging education as a dialogic process which incorporates ethical awareness, cultural affiliation and social responsibility. By so doing, he helped to establish a model of education that will integrate international humanist principles with the national traditions of knowledge of Nepal one that will enable students not merely to know, but to be knowledgeable in acting responsibly in their communities and the world at large. This kind of practice remains a source of inspiration to contemporary teachers aiming to reconcile the cultural grounding and global message as a way of enhancing education as a moral process and as a social engine of change.

3. Review of Literature

3.1 Historical Context of Nepalese Education

The development of the educational system in Nepal has taken place in the successive political systems of the oligarchic Rana regime up to a constitutional monarchy and finally the federal republic imbuing the citizens with new ideologies and institutions in the national consciousness. Even with such transformations, the continuing inequality in access, quality and purpose has been apparent, and has been a manifestation of education as both an instrument of modernization and ideological struggle. The focus on the early literacy campaigns was slowly replaced by the focus on civic education and moral teaching which reflected a long-standing contradiction between instrumental and emancipatory conceptions of learning.

Rupchandra Bista became a reformist within this complicated environment, and his vision of education was the key to national awakening. His tenure as the leader in the Janakalyan Madhyamik Vidyalaya in Palung represented a mixture of moral, civic and practical learning addressing to wake up the sense of collective consciousness (Parajuli, 2023) and helping students feel a sense of responsibility. The strategy of Bista is focused on the necessity of the moral motivation and critical discernment as the component of the educational practice (Mustakova-Possardt, 2004). According to Rastriya Samachar Samiti (2021), Bista was a philosopher-activist and believed that people should have access to knowledge and connected education with empowerment and social justice. His universal attitude was an indication of his view that education must not just impart knowledge but must bring about a change of attitude that promotes critical thinking, civic action, and moral activity.

3.2 Bista's Educational Practice and Influence

The contribution that Bista has made in the development of the Nepalese education, in practice goes much further than the philosophical promotion. As the principal of Janakalyan High School he made some new reforms that integrated both academic learning and community involvement. Bista showed great foresight when he used 60 percent of the local tax collections to fund the school to make it financially sustainable and establish a precedent of education funding by the community.

In addition, Bista also launched a number of inclusive programs that focused on democratizing the access to education. It was a localised gender upliftment campaign, with his campaign slogan, educate girls in Daman Palung, being one of the first Nepal-based movements to focus on gender upliftment, highlighting the empowering power of educating women (Adhakari, 2024). Being aware of the financial limitations of families in the rural area, he also implemented a morning classes system to children who had to take part in household chores, agriculture, or shepherding to provide them with adaptive approach which would help them to stay in school without leaving their household responsibilities.

Bista also incorporated business and vocational education in the school curriculum which encouraged self-reliance and practical skills in the students. His promotion of extracurricular favoring sports, music, dancing, and collective labour encouraged discipline, creativity and social unity (Wagle and Luitel, 2023). These efforts were precursors of contemporary ideas of whole child education and experience learning. His Thaha Movement served as a continuation of these principles of education, turning villages into civilized learning institutions where self-education, discussion, and community work become common (Khatri et al., 2024). This was a strategy that empowered people as well as enhancing community bonds, creating a culture of cooperation and mutualism, which are necessary in sustainable development.

Contemporary analogies can be made between the reforms by Bista and the global models of the civic and lifelong learning. His philosophy of local innovation and participation still lives on in the community learning centers in Nepal. The same is echoed by UNESCO (2020) that sustainable education should be a process that transforms starting at the grassroots, incorporating into it the values of the place, culture, and community.

3.3 Education, Democracy, and Civic Responsibility

The combination of education and democracy as introduced by Rupchandra Bista is one of the most significant points of his intellectual work. His concept of education included not only the acquisition of literacy or technical skills but a process of constant civic education, which helped citizens become aware of the structures of power, challenge them and lead to their transformation. His principle of thaha (knowing) was not restricted to the intellectual awareness as was the symbol of moral awakening and critical consciousness needed in participatory democracy. The fact that democracy could only succeed in an informed society as Bista believed is consistent with the current knowledge that democratic citizenship is acquired, exercised, and perfected through education. According to his opinion, ignorance was not just a personal limitation but also a social threat, which remains to perpetuate oppression and dependency.

In his community campaigns and Thaha Movement, Bista aimed at establishing what can now be called civic capacity by scholars of today. He thought that voters who would have the knowledge and reasoning skills will be better placed to check authorities and make collective decisions. His school reforms, local meetings, and his lectures in public were examples of how education could help to develop a participatory culture of politics. The contemporary empirical studies support the intuition of Bista. Research indicates that educational exposure is still one of the most important predictors of civic participation in Nepal. Likewise, as shown by Puri (2023), the area of digital literacy and online civic forums has increased the platform of mass discourse, where citizens particularly young citizens can find their voices and oppose the societal hierarchies. These conclusions resonate with the methods used by Bista in developing a platform to engage in a conversation even before the birth of social media.

The online spaces are the new civic spaces where knowledge sharing and activism get blossomed, just as at the open meetings in Palung where people in the village discussed the local government, education, and morals (Sharma and Jaffi, 2022). His philosophy has thus not been obsolete: it is not alone the institutions that keep the democracy alive but a whole population that has been empowered to reflect, engage in critical dialogue and share the collective responsibility.

He also highlighted moral aspects of democracy asserting that a government that lacks moral awareness turns to be manipulative and unfair. His thoughts parallel the current debates on the concept of deliberative democracy, in which the level of reasoning in the populace defines the quality of a governance (Timalsina, 2025). The Thaha Movement, and its insistence on the need to know, before acting, can therefore be regarded as a forerunner to the civic education theories which place a combination of ethics, knowledge and accountability.

3.4 Epistemic Justice and Local Knowledge

The ideas about education by Bista reflect what is being called by the modern academics as epistemic justice acknowledging and legitimizing the existence of multiple methods of knowing in education systems. A long time before the term acquired scholarly recognition Bista wrote that genuine education has to be based on local culture and indigenous experience. His immense antagonism was directed at rote learning and elite education that distanced students, rather than grounding them in the real social surroundings and the practical aspects of life, and culture-based morals (Rai and Gaire, 2021).

These beliefs were in his reforms of the curricula at Janakalyan High School. He would bring the local language, folk culture and useful work to formal education in order to make the learning experience meaningful and empowering. His incorporation of vocational training, agriculture and community service did not only increase skills but also maintained cultural dignity which is an early conception of sustainable education that balances intellectual, ethical and physical growth (Verma, 2023). The strategy is quite consistent with contemporary decolonial pedagogy which aims to question Western domination in the production of knowledge and to reestablish the importance of the indigenous view.

Moreover, Bista realized that education should relate epistemology and ethics. He managed to close the gap between the world of modern ambitions and the world of traditional wisdom by placing the knowledge in the real-life context of the Nepali society (Wagle, 2022). His theory still rings within the federal age with policymakers focusing on local curriculum and mother-tongue education as inclusion and justice strategies.

What Bista refers to as the epistemic core of education as being focused on moral integrity, involvement in community and experiential learning can be seen as a framework that connects the creation of knowledge to social change. The innovations in education which were led by him like community funded education, education to the gender and vocational education are a living testimony to epistemic justice in action. They enabled marginal groups to take back their power and regard education as a right and duty (Poudel, 2025).

Finally, the legacy of Bista illustrates the idea that epistemic justice is not an imaginary abstract notion but a form of practice, which is based on compassion, responsibility, and social interaction. His philosophy remains influential to educators and policymakers who want to indigenize education system in Nepal and still be globally relevant. Simply put, Bista turned education into a moral dialogue between the local tradition and the universal human values an everlasting contribution making knowledge a key point in democracy and social change.

4. Discussion

4.1 Bista's Educational Vision as Transformative Learning

The review shows that the educational thinking of Bista envisaged transformative-learning theory many decades before it was variously stated in the Western academia. His Thaha Darshan fostered the ability to reflect critically and socialize and as a result, the learners were able to reinterpret their reality and act on it. This cycle resembles phases of outlook changes that disorient dilemma, critical evaluation and action reintegration phases. The pedagogy of Bista was therefore highly constructivist and dialogical and fostered self-awareness and agency in the learners.

4.2 Integration of Education and Democracy

Bista also acknowledged that education is constitutive of democracy and vice versa. A people with no knowledge as he argued, cannot support freedom. Educational philosophy was turned into civic activism in his campaigns in the Panchayat and post-Panchayat periods. He made the moral education and the political participation meet by his treatment of thaha as a right and a duty. This connection is confirmed by modern scholars, who demonstrate that civic education has a direct effect of enhancing democratic accountability.

5. Conclusion

The role of Rupchandra Bistas in contribution to the education development in Nepal cuts across both institutions and time. Having combined both critical inquiry and moral responsibility, Bista further perceived education to enable people to question, to comprehend, and to change their social realities. The education of ethical citizenship and participatory democracy was demonstrated in his work in schools, the local government, and social activities. His thoughts were theoretically a precursor to the modern concepts of transformative learning, knowledge democracy, and civic education. In practice, his efforts gave rise to a tradition of local education and openness and established one of the foundations of democratic development in Nepal. His philosophy has not been comprehensively institutionalized but it is still relevant to educators, policymakers and reformers who want to bring education in line with justice, participation, and sustainability. Therefore, the future educational reforms in Nepal should incorporate the principles of Bista in the way curriculum is made, how teachers are prepared and also how civic-learning programs are developed to bring about his vision of an informed and responsible

citizenship. With the world becoming more and more decolonial and participatory, Bista has presented a very Nepali approach to emancipatory education based on indigenous culture and aligned with the universal principles of human freedom, dignity, and wisdom.

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