BEGINNING TO READ NEPALI:
MERO NEPĀLĪKITĀBA AS A TEXTBOOK

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Background
mero nepālī kitāba (henceforth MNK) is a textbook for Grade 1 written by Divakar Dhungel and published by MOEC: CTSDC/BPEP Primary Curriculum and Textbook Development Unit in 2049 v.s. Printed at the Janak Educational Materials Centre, Sanathimi, MNK contains a total of 39 lessons and 56 exercises, and it is heavily illustrated. A Teacher's Guide, henceforth TG, (MOECSW: CTSDC/BPEP Primary Curriculum and Textbook Development Unit, 2049 v.s.) is also prepared to aid the teachers of Nepali to use MNK effectively.

MNK, we are told in the foreword, is prepared after three full years of preparation and extensive consultation with hundreds of teachers, parents, headmasters, educationists, resource persons, linguists, and Nepali experts (p. 3). It is therefore appropriate to look closely into the contents of MNK.

According to the preface, the objective of MNK is to teach such linguistic skills as listening, speaking, reading, and writing to grade 1 learners of Nepali (p. 4). Closer scrutiny reveals that the great majority of lessons are devoted to teaching writing and reading and only a few to listening and speaking.

Imperfections of MNK
MNK is replete with imperfections; only prominent ones will be mentioned here.

Lack of fit between Curriculum and MNK
A grievous imperfection of MNK is the gross lack of fit between the curricular goals set in the Grade 1 Nepali Curriculum (printed on pp. 6-8 in TG) and the MNK as a prescribed textbook. A few examples are cited below for illustration.

The Curriculum states that the case markers ले ‘Nominative/Instrumental’, लाई ‘Accusative-Dative’, मा ‘Locative’ and बाट ‘Ablative’ will be taught to Grade 1 learners of Nepali. However, Lessons 21 and 22 teach such possessive forms as उसका ‘he-Possessive’ (p. 64), हराका ‘duck-Possessive’ (p. 64), पैठेको ‘tap-Possessive’ (p. 64), and गाईको ‘Ganga-Possessive’ (p. 67); Lesson 28 and the accompanying Exercise (pp. 82-83) also teach a

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number of pronominal possessive forms such as मेरो/मीरा ‘I-Possessive’, तिम्रो/तिम्रा ‘You (Mid Honorific)-Possessive’ and हाम्रा ‘We-Possessive’.

The Curriculum states that the personal pronouns म ‘I’, तिम्री ‘You (Mid Honorific)’, हाम्री ‘We’, लगाई ‘You (Honorific)’ and the interrogative pronouns को ‘who’, कुन ‘which’, के ‘what’, and किन ‘why’ will be taught to Grade 1 Nepali learners. But, the third person pronouns उ ‘he’, उनीहरु ‘they’ (pp. 84-85) and the second person pronoun तै ‘You (Nonhonorific)’ (p. 84); and the interrogative pronouns कस्री ‘how’ (pp. 92, 94) कत ‘how much/how many’ (pp. 98, 99), कस्तै ‘of what type’ (p. 105), and कहाँ ‘where’ (p. 105) also form the subject matter of MNK.

The Curriculum states that under Tense सामान्य वर्तमान ‘simple present’ and सामान्य भूत ‘simple past’ tenses will be taught to first graders. On p. 90, however, a complex tense form expressing indefinite mood is introduced, e.g., गन्त्यो होला ‘will/may have done’. The expression is a rather complex conjunct verb construction: विचार गन्त्यो होला ‘will/may have thought over’. Similarly, on p. 96 the present continuous tense verb forms, e.g., पुलि रहेको छ ‘is blossoming’, किन रहेको छ ‘is buying’ etc. are also introduced into the text.

The Curriculum states that the negative marker होइन ‘is-Neg’ will be taught to Grade 1 pupils of Nepali. On p. 18, however, the stylistically variant negative marker हैन ‘is-Neg’ is also introduced.

Finally, the Curriculum states that the first grade pupils will be taught to read, write and understand simple sentences in Nepali. However, on p. 80, a number of complex adverbial subordinate clauses using perfective/absolutive particles are used, e.g. कट्ठु गन्त्री लगाई बच्चाले बटटा गुढाए ‘Having worn the shorts and vest, the child rolled the box’; ढाककी बेडकी बच्चो गाइ ‘Having carried the basket, the little child went’; बूढो मानेले लटकी टेम्बै डाक्टरलाई बोलाए ‘Having held a walking stick, the old man called a doctor’. Other examples also exist: मूलाई खाई मुडामा बस ‘Having eaten the radish, sit on the stool’ (p. 49); कॉरा लिई खेतमा जाओ ‘Having carried the bananas, go to the field’ (p. 52).

Vocabulary
Textbook writing is a difficult job, and it requires professional skill and acumen. Textbook writing also entails a thorough linguistic research in the area of vocabulary frequency count. Without such a count, it may not be easy to specifically determine the exact content of the teaching materials, and the well-known principles of selection, gradation and presentation may not be adhered to. Exactly how important the study of word frequency might turn out to be is evident from a gleaning of Lesson 1 (p. 7) and Exercise 2 (p. 33) of MNK. The first lesson of MNK, a textbook meant to be used all over the country by non-Nepali speaking children alike, contains such infrequently
used lexical items as अगुल्लो ‘burning log’, and उछिट्टार्ड ‘to flick away’. Exercise 2 (p. 33) of MNK uses such lexical items as कन्न (whatever it may mean!), पत्र (a tatsama word meaning ‘letter’) and सन्न (since when did number ‘seventeen’ become a lucky number in Nepal?). As a matter of fact, the very first vocabulary item in Exercise 1 (p. 33) is कर ‘hand’: are we to assume then that कर is the most frequently used word in the Nepali language?

The quality of MNK as a textbook is gravely marred by the use of a number of stylistic and dialectal/sociolectal/idilectal variants, e.g., अत (p. 43), श (p. 46), and आश्र (p. 52) – all meaning ‘come-Imperative-Nonhonorific’, and जाक (p. 52) and, जान (p. 52) – meaning ‘go-Imperative-Nonhonorific’. A more precocious child, on the basis of analogy, may come up with देओ (for देख) ‘give-Imperative-Nonhonorific’ – a form which is not used in MNK. A more confusing example is छन्य ‘is’ which is used both as a third person present tense singular/respectual as well as a third person present tense plural/respectual marker, e.g., राम घरमा छन्य (p. 86) ‘Ram (Singular-Honorific) is inside the house’ and उनीहुँ घरमा छन्य (p. 84) ‘They (Plural-Honorific) are inside the house’. The confusion is further confounded when the young reader is confronted with बकुल्लो and बकुल्लो ‘crane’ (p. 77) and बिरलो and बिरलो ‘cat’ (p. 110) in the very same lessons. Apparently, there is a linguistic reason for this confusion. In Nepali there is a rule whereby a number of canonical forms ending in -ो undergo a morphophonemic alteration of the type o → a upon additon of case morphemes and postpositions. For example:

andho ‘blind’, but andhā-le ‘blind-Nom’ (p. 77)
andho ‘blind’, but andhā-la ‘blind-Acc/Dat’ (p. 77)
kamilo ‘ant’, but kamilā- ‘ant-Acc/Dat’ (p. 58)
bakullo ‘crane’, but bakullā- ‘crane-Nom’ (p. 77)
cucco ‘beak’, but cucčā-le ‘beak-Instr’ (pp. 76-77)
dulo ‘hole’, but dulā-bhitra ‘hole-inside (Loc)’ (p. 110)
bacco ‘child’, but baccā ‘’child-Poss’ (p. 77)

On the other hand, the canonical form phucco ‘child’ undergoes a morphophonemic alternation of the type o → e upon addition of case morphemes, e.g.

phucco, ‘child’ but phuce-le ‘child-Nom’ (pp. 76-77)
phucco ‘child’, but phucce-lāi ‘child-Acc/Dat’ (pp. 76-77)
phucco ‘child’, but phucecko ‘child-Poss’ (pp. 76-77)

It is unfortunate that MNK attempts to teach both types of complex morphophonemic alteration rules to first graders in one and the same lesson.
(Lesson 26; pp. 76-77). It would have paid the author had he made a judicious selection of the more frequent and appropriate vocabulary in MNK and graded them in such a manner that the stylistically variant as well as complex forms may be introduced in higher grades.

**Spelling**
A major thrust of MNK is to teach the young pupil to write Nepali in a correct manner. Unfortunately, MNK tends to employ a rather inconsistent spelling system and causes unwarranted grief and consternation to the first grader. TG offers no relief either. For example, in an effort to teach how to write clusters, MNK recommends to omit the vertical bar of the first letter of a two-letter cluster, e.g. क + भ + घ = भण्डर (pp. 68, 72) ‘flag’ (also written as भन्डर on p. 11) and ग + न + नी = गन्नी (p. 66) ‘vest’. The letter containing no vertical bar is combined with the following letter to form a two-letter cluster in the following manner:

\[ \text{ब + र + ता = बट्टा} \text{ ‘box’ (p. 79)} \]
\[ \text{क + ट + र = कट्टू} \text{ ‘shorts’ (p. 79)} \]
\[ \text{ल + र + ठी = लट्टौ} \text{ ‘a walking stick’ (p. 79)} \]

Immediately after, on p. 80, the same lesson (i.e., Lesson 27) also teaches to write बट्टा as बट्टा and लट्टी as लट्टी.

The words containing -kk- and -kt- clusters are written in the following manner:

\[ \text{ह + क + का = हुक्का} \text{ ‘hookah’ (p. 79)} \]
\[ \text{ढ + क + की = ढक्की} \text{ ‘basket’ (p. 79)} \]
\[ \text{ञ + क + ठर = ठाक्टर} \text{ ‘doctor’ (p. 79)} \]

However, TG teaches to represent these very same clusters as हुक्का and ढक्की (p. 126); both MNK and TG allow कट्टू to be written as कट्टू. In other words, the second consonant-letter is allowed to be represented underneath the first consonant-letter in the above examples. Under the circumstances, isn’t it likely that a more precocious child, upon the basis of analogy, may tend to write ठाक्टर ‘doctor’ as ठाक्र? I presume that probably only a homorganic consonant-letter is allowed to be represented underneath the preceding consonant-letter in Nepali, but it is not quite clear.

Inconsistencies in the spelling system persists: whereas the -न्ग - cluster is represented as गंगा ‘Ganga’ and चंगा ‘kite’ (p. 67) in MNK, both MNK and TG tend to represent the very same cluster as संग ‘with’ (p. 38 and p. 128, respectively) and not as संग.

A more curious example is the representation of the back rounded vowels following a consonant in Nepali. In sharp contradistinction with the
prevailing practice in other Indo-Aryan Languages using Devanagari, *MNK* observes a peculiar practice of the type shown below:

कुकुर ‘dog’ (p. 45)  
कुबुर ‘cock’ (p. 45)  
पूल ‘egg’ (p. 46)  
पूल ‘flower’ (p. 48)  
पुतली ‘butterfly’ (p. 45)  
मूल ‘radish’ (p. 48)  
धूप ‘incense’ (p. 49)  
बुझ ‘old man’ (p. 49)  
पूजा ‘worship’ (p. 49)

The above examples clearly demonstrate that while the back rounded vowels are represented under the vertical bar of the consonant-letter in ध, प, म, प्व, त्र, न, and न्त, they are not done so in ख, ग, ज, and झ. Instead, they are represented underneath the tail-like part following the vertical bar of the consonant-letter. Such a practice confuses the young learner and renders the writing system of Nepali less practical and even less scientific.

**Presentation**

In general, the material is well-presented in *MNK*; a veritable feature of the textbook is that it is amply illustrated. A number of lapses remain, however. To cite a glaring example, the language of command used in most Exercises of *MNK* is vague. The command given is: गल्ने शब्द कापीमा लेख ‘Write down the matching word in answer-copy.’ The command, however, should read: चित्र हे। चित्र संग गल्ने शब्द कापीमा लेख। ‘Look at the picture. Write down the word that matches with the picture in answer-copy.’ This lapse occurs throughout *MNK* (pp. 33, 34, 37, 41, 44, 47, 50, 53, 56, 59, 62, 68, 70, 78, 81, 85), and it diminishes the pedagogic value of an otherwise well-written text.

**Summing Up**

To sum up, *MNK* may be a suitable textbook for Nepali-speaking pupils of Grade 1; for non-Nepali-speaking pupils, however, *MNK* may turn out to be an inept specimen of a textbook. Rather than lessen the existing high rate of educational wastage and attrition in primary education in Nepal, *MNK* may continue to contribute to it.