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► To cite this version:

Mark Turin, Yogendra Prasad Yadava. Indigenous languages of Nepal: A critical analysis of the linguistic situation and contemporary issues. Yogendra P. Yadava; Pradeep L. Bajracharya. The Indigenous Languages of Nepal (ILN): Situation, policy planning and coordination, National Foundation For Development of Indigenous Nationalities, pp.6-46, 2007, 99946-823-2-6. halshs-03083347

HAL Id: halshs-03083347

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03083347>

Submitted on 27 Jan 2021

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Indigenous Languages of Nepal: A Critical Analysis of the Linguistic Situation and Contemporary Issues

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and
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Abstract

According to even the most conservative estimates, at least half of the world's 6,500 languages are expected to become extinct in the next century. While the documentation of endangered languages has traditionally been the domain of academic linguists and anthropologists, international awareness about this impending linguistic catastrophe is growing, and development organisations are becoming involved in the struggle to preserve spoken forms. The death of a language marks the loss of yet another piece of cultural uniqueness from the mosaic of our diverse planet, and is therefore a tragedy for the heritage of all humanity. Language death is often compared to species extinction, and the same metaphors of preservation and diversity can be invoked to canvas support for biodiversity as well as language preservation programmes. This document addresses language endangerment in the Himalayas, with a particular focus on Nepal, and presents the options and challenges for the development of endangered languages in this mountainous region.

In the present report, we assess the linguistic diversity of Nepal in the frame of wider debates about diversity of all forms, and move on to situate language in the context of ecology, the state, the legal system, the national census, the media, the education sector, gender, the Maoist insurgency and finally culture. One section is devoted to comparative examples from other nations in the greater Himalayan region.

Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of the future prospects for promoting the indigenous languages of Nepal. As such, this section of the report offers a situational analysis which we hope will help frame current debates about language policy and the

linguistic diversity of Nepal. We are confident that the other two sections of this report, which focus on policy, planning, recommendations and capacity building, institutional support and coordination, will draw on the background analysis and data provided here.

Introduction

The greater Himalayan region, which extends for 3,500 km from Afghanistan in the west to Myanmar in the east, sustains over 150 million people and is home to great linguistic diversity and many of Asia's most endangered languages. Moving across the region, Afghanistan boasts 47 living languages, Bangladesh 39, Bhutan 24, China 235, India 415, Myanmar 108, Nepal 123 and Pakistan 72 (Ethnologue 2005). The entire Himalayan region is often described as one of the ten biodiversity 'mega centres' of the world. But this stretch of mountainous Asia is also home to one sixth of all human languages, so the area may be thought of as a linguistic 'mega centre' as well.

The great biological diversity of present-day Nepal is matched by its cultural and linguistic diversity. Comprising an area of 147,181 square kilometres with a length of 885 kilometres from east to west and a mean breadth of 193 kilometres from north to south, the topography of Nepal is rich and varied. Inhabiting these different climatic and ecological zones are 59 officially-recognised caste and ethnic groups who speak around 92 languages recognised by state officials. The disparity between the language totals forwarded by the *Ethnologue* (126) and His Majesty's Government of Nepal (92), and the difference between the number of ethnicities and mother tongues is interesting and important. Counting and classifying discrete languages or ethnicities is a complicated and political task.

According to recent census data collected in 2001, Nepal's 92 officially-recognised languages belong to four language families, an impressively large number for a country with a small land mass like Nepal. The Indo-Aryan group of the Indo-European language family forms the largest group in terms of speaker numbers, around 80% (Yadava 2003: 141). The Tibeto-Burman branch within the Sino-Tibetan family of languages is represented by 57 languages in Nepal, the largest number of distinct mother tongues of any linguistic grouping represented in the country, but with noticeably less speakers than the Indo-Aryan group. Two other language families are also found in Nepal: the Austric branch of the Austro-Asiatic family and the Dravidian family, each represented by a couple of languages along the southern belt of the country. Moreover, Kusunda, previously thought to be extinct, is a linguistic isolate spoken in Nepal. While the Census conducted by the Central Bureau of Statistics in 2001 established fairly credible numbers of speakers for each of Nepal's languages, more precise and accurate figures still need to be ascertained through further careful investigation.

As is clear from the facts outlined above, Nepal is not only home to more language families than in all of Europe combined, but also has a greater distinctness and diversity of individual languages in one country than in the whole of the European community.

The National Foundation for the Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN) was established under an act of parliament relating to “the development of indigenous nationalities in Nepal”. One of the principal objectives of the Foundation is to preserve and promote the languages of indigenous nationalities. In line with this objective, it is imperative to investigate and analyse the situation of these languages in order to formulate and implement an action plan for their preservation and promotion. It is with this perspective that the present study was undertaken.

To accomplish this task, the authors have identified the languages used as mother tongues by the indigenous nationalities of Nepal, outlined their genetic affiliation, described their distribution, discussed their literate traditions, reflected on the relationship between language and ethnicity, and finally identified Nepal’s most endangered languages.

As sources, both published and unpublished works prepared by national and international scholars were used, as well as raw census data provided by the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) of the Government of Nepal.

Identification

Fifty-nine indigenous nationalities have been officially identified in Nepal. The list is as follows:

A. Mountain		Population	
1. Bahragaunle	—	7. Lhomi	—
2. Bhote	19,261	8. Lhopa	—
3. Byansi	2,103	9. Marphali	—
4. Chairotan	—	10. Mugali	—
5. Dolpa	—	11. Sherpa	110,358
6. Larke (Nupriwa)	—	12. Syar (Chumba)	—
		13. Tangbe	—
		14. Thakali	13,731
		15. Thudam	—
		16. Tingaunle	—
		17. Topkegola	—
		18. Walung	1,148
B. Hill		Population	
19. Bankariya	—	26. Hayu	1,821
20. Bhujel/ Gharti	117,644	27. Yholmo	579
21. Baramu	73,83	28. Jirel	5,319
22. Chepang	52,237	29. Kusunda	164
23. Chantel	9,814	30. Lepcha	3,660
		34. Pahari	11,505
		35. Fri	—
		36. Rai	635,151
		37. Sunuwar	95,254
		38. Surel	—

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24. Dura	5,169	31. Limbu	359,255	39. Tamang	1,282,304
25. Gurung	543,571	32. Magar	1,622,339	40. Thangmi	22,999
		33. Newar	1,245,232	41. Yakkha	17,003
C. Inner Terai					
	Population				
42. Bote	7,969	44. Darai	14,859	46. Majhi	72,614
43. Danuwar	53,229	45. Kumal	99,389	47. Raji	2,399
				48. Raute	658
D. Terai					
49. Dhanuk (Rajbansi)	188,150	53. Kisan	2,876	57. Satar (Santhal)	42,698
50. Dhimal	19,537	54. Kushwadiya		58. Tajpuriya	13,250
51. Ganagai	31,318	55. Meche (Bodo)	3,763	59. Tharu	1,533,879
52. Jhangar	41,764	56. Rajbanshi (Koch)	95,812		

Table 1: Population of Nepal's indigenous nationalities

Source: *Nepal Rajpatra* (25 Magh, 2058 Bikram Samvat) (*Nepal Gazette*, February, 2001)

The indigenous nationalities listed above speak a number of distinct languages. It is still, however, not possible to enumerate the precise number of languages spoken in Nepal and their distribution on account of the lack of an authentic and comprehensive linguistic survey of Nepal. Nonetheless, several studies are available which address linguistic diversity within Nepal, each of which includes an estimate as to the number of speakers of each enumerated language studied. The present section examines these estimates and concludes with an impartial assessment of a likely and more accurate figure.

Brian Houghton Hodgson

Hodgson is credited as the first observer to recognize the affinity between Nepal's Tibeto-Burman languages. In 1828 he published a series of papers dealing with these languages (see Hale 1982: 1), and later published a comparative vocabulary of 28 Tibeto-Burman languages of Nepal including sketches of the grammar of a few of these tongues (Hodgson 1857). Hodgson's studies do not, however, include all the indigenous languages spoken in Nepal.

In addition, in a 1828 publication Hodgson made two important observations about Tibeto-Burman languages. First, he noted that Tibeto-Burman languages fall into two categories: (i) pronominalizing (i.e. verbs inflecting for pronominal subject and object) and (ii) non-pronominalizing (i.e. verbs not inflecting for pronominals). Second, he observed that these languages are similar to Austro-Asiatic languages in terms of verb agreement.

GRIERSON AND KONOW

In pursuance of the resolution of the Oriental Congress held in Vienna in 1866, the Government of India launched a systematic survey of Indian languages. Sir George Abraham Grierson, an Indian Civil Servant, was asked to assume the office of superintendent of this project in 1898. In the monumental *Linguistic Survey of India* (1898-1927) he and Sten Konow recorded not only Indian but also Nepalese languages. This survey was the first attempt to enumerate the languages of all families spoken in Nepal and India. The Grierson-Konow survey accepted Hodgson's classification of Himalayan languages into two typological groups: pronominalizing and non-pronominalizing.

Grierson-Konow's work did not, however, cover all the languages spoken by the indigenous nationalities as they are presently construed. In part this may be due to the fact that their study was not entirely based on direct fieldwork but relied heavily on secondary sources such as Hodgson's studies and consultations with informants in Darjeeling. Despite these limitations, their survey continues to be one of the most important source of data for linguists working on South Asian languages.

BENEDICT AND SHAFER

Both Benedict (1972) and Shafer (1974) provide information about Sino-Tibetan languages. Some years later Benedict and Bauman pointed out that pronominalization was not borrowed into Sino-Tibetan languages from Austro-Asiatic languages but rather a characteristic of Sino-Tibetan languages themselves.

HALE

Hale compiled a 'a brief survey of the literature on Tibeto-Burman languages' in 1982. In this, he presents a comparison of Tibeto-Burman languages and their major classifications as provided by Grierson-Konow (1903-1928), Shafer (1955, 1966 and 1974), Miller (1969), Benedict (1972), Voegelin-Voegelin (1977), Rierich (1931, Uray (1955) and Nishida (1970).

MALLA

Malla (1989) lists 45 main indigenous languages out of a total of 70 languages spoken in Nepal.

HANSSON

The *Linguistic Survey of Nepal*, funded by the German Research Council (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft) and supported by the Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies at Tribhuvan University, was the first systematic attempt to enumerate and document Nepal's

languages. This project, undertaken in 1981-1984, aimed to carry out 'extensive field-work covering the four easternmost zones of the Kingdom' (Winter 1991:ii). The collected data, especially that pertaining to Tibeto-Burman languages, were analyzed in detail. The findings and conclusions of this analysis were presented by Gerard Hansson in his 1991 book. Another major contribution of this project was the linguistic atlas of the Kiranti languages (to appear in *Pacific Linguistics*).

Hansson recorded the following 34 Kiranti languages:

- | | |
|----------------|------------------|
| 1. Athpahariya | 2. Bahing |
| 3. Bantawa | 4. Belhariya |
| 5. Chamling | 6. Chhintang |
| 7. Chhulung | 8. Chukwa |
| 9. Dumi | 10. Dungmali |
| 11. Jerung | 12. Khaling |
| 13. Koi | 14. Kulung |
| 15. Limbu | 16. Lingkhim |
| 17. Lorung | 18. Lumba-Yakkha |
| 19. Mewahang | 20. Mugali |
| 21. Nachering | 22. Phangduwali |
| 23. Puma | 24. Saam |
| 25. Sanpang | 26. Sunwar |
| 27. Thulung | 28. Tilung |
| 29. Umbule | 30. Waling |
| 31. Wayu | 32. Yakkha |
| 33. Yamphe | 34. Yamphu |

Table 2: Kiranti Languages (Hansson 1991)

According to Hansson's report, Choksule and Dorungkecha were the two speech forms for which no data were collected. Besides, Polmacha remained unclassified on account of insufficient data. There were also 46 language names listed in the report which could not be identified since no data were collected for them (Hansson 1991: 112-3).

Finally, Hansson listed the following languages/dialects as nearly extinct:

1. Bungla
2. Chukwa
3. Hedangpa
4. Khandung
5. Lingkhim
6. Mugali (=Lambichhong)
7. Pongyong
8. Sambya
9. Eastern Kulung

Hansson's enumeration of Kiranti languages remains, however, tentative and inconclusive due to inadequate documentation (Ebert 1994: 8). According to van Driem (2001: 623), Hansson's report suffers from a number of limitations. First, it mentions a number of languages which in fact do not exist. Second, the data are collected from general questionnaires and are thus inadequate for more detailed analysis.

MATISOFF

In *Languages and dialects of Tibeto-Burman*, Matisoff et al. (1996) offer data on a range of Tibeto-Burman languages. The main entries provide information about variant names of languages, related languages, dialects, bibliographical citations and genetic affiliation in accordance with Shafer (1966-67 and 1974) and Benedict (1972).

From the entries given in Matisoff et al. (1996) the following can be identified as Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in Nepal:

- | | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. Athpariya | 2. Bahing | 3. Bantawa |
| 4. Baragaunle | 5. Belhariya | 6. Bhotia |
| 7. Bhramu | 8. Bhujje | 19. Byangsi |
| 10. Chamling | 11. Chantyal | 12. Chaudangsi
(Tsaudangsi) |
| 13. Chaurasya/Chaurasia | 14. Chepang | 15. Chhintang |
| 16. Chulung | 17. Darai | 18. Danuwar |
| 19. Dhangar/Jhangar | 20. Dhimal | 21. Dolpo |
| 22. Dumi | 23. Dungmali | 24. Ghale |
| 25. Gurung | 26. Hayu/Vayu | 27. Jirel |
| 28. Kagate Tibetan | 29. Kaike | 30. Khaling |
| 31. Kham | 32. Koi | 33. Kulung |
| 34. Kumhali | 35. Kusunda | 36. Kyerung |
| 37. Lepcha | 38. Lhomi | 39. Limbu |
| 40. Lohorung | 41. Magar | 42. Manangba |
| 43. Meche | 44. Mewahang | 45. Mugali |
| 46. Nachereng | 47. Nepali Sign Language | 48. Newar |
| 49. Pahari | 50. Panchgaunle | 51. Puma |
| 52. Rajbanshi | 53. Raji | 54. Rangkas |
| 55. Raute | 56. Rodong | 57. Saam |
| 58. Sampang | 59. Santhali | 60. Sherpa |
| 61. Sotang | 62. Sunwar | 63. Surel |
| 64. Takale | 65. Tamachhang | 66. Tamang |
| 67. Thakali | 68. Thami | 69. Tharu |
| 70. Thulung | 71. Tibetan | 72. Tilung |
| 73. Toto | 74. Tseku | 75. Umbule |
| 76. Wali | 77. Waling | 78. Yakkha |
| 79. Yamphe/Yamphu | | |

Table 3: Tibeto-Burman languages and dialects spoken in Nepal (Matisoff et al. 1996)

VAN DRIEM

The two volume *Languages of the Himalayas* is a recent study by George van Driem (2001). Based on the earlier studies as well as his own investigations corroborated by his colleagues and students, this treatise “tells a tale of the languages spoken in the Himalayas and of the people who speak them” (van Driem 2001: ix). In this study, van Driem further develops the idea of the Mahakiranti hypothesis, according to which there exists a subgroup of Tibeto-Burman languages, referred to as *Mahakiranti*, comprising Kiranti languages as well as the three Newaric languages Baram, Newar and Thangmi.¹ This hypothesis is still controversial among Tibeto-Burman linguists.

van Driem proposes the following genetic subgroupings of Kiranti languages, from east to west:

- Limbu
 - Eastern Limbu: Panthare, Tamarkhole
 - Western Limbu: Phedappe, Chathare
- Eastern Kiranti
 - Greater Yakka: Yakka, Chiling, Athpariya
 - Upper Arun: Lohorung, Yamphu, Mewahang
- Central Kiranti
 - Khambu: Kulung, Nachiring, Sampang, Saam
 - Southern: Chamling, Puma, Bantawa, Dungmali
- Western Kiranti
 - Midwestern: Thulung
 - Chaurasiya: Ombule, Jero
 - Northwestern: Bahing, Sunwar, Hayu

Table 4: Kiranti subgroups from east to west (van Driem 2001: 615)

In addition to the Mahakiranti hypothesis, van Driem’s study differs from others in the following ways:

- (i) He identifies 21 Kiranti languages instead of 23 enumerated in the 2001 Census and 34 in Hanson (1991).
- (ii) He corrects Shafer’s (1974) assignment of Hayu as belonging to West Central Himalayish group along with Magar and Chepang. In fact, Hayu belongs in the East Himalayish group along with other Kiranti languages.
- (iii) Thulung is treated as a distinct subgroup within Kiranti.
- (iv) He treats Belhare as a dialect of Athpariya.

¹At present, van Driem no longer subscribes to the Mahakiranti hypothesis as it was originally formulated, although he argues that the case for Newaric has grown.

CENTRAL BUREAU OF STATISTICS (CBS)

Another significant contribution towards the enumeration of Nepal's languages has been the censuses compiled every ten years by the CBS. Since the 1952/54 census, languages spoken by the indigenous nationalities, as well as Nepal's other languages, have consistently been reported.

The 1952/54 census recorded 44 languages out of which 29 were languages spoken by indigenous nationalities. In the 1961 census, the number of indigenous languages fell down to 26 (of a total of 33). The number of indigenous languages was, however, drastically reduced to 12 (out of a total of 17) and 13 (out of total of 17) in the 1971 and 1981 censuses respectively. These varying figures concerning Nepal's indigenous languages are presented in the following table:

	1952-54	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001
Total number of languages	44	33	17	17	20	92
Number of indigenous languages	29	26	12	13	15	70

Table 5: Number of Nepal's languages recorded in various censuses (1952/54 – 2001)

Source: Censuses (1952/54-2001)

The uncertainty about the number of Nepal's indigenous languages and their reduced enumeration in the last five censuses may be attributed to a lack of awareness of Nepal's indigenous mother tongues and also to the "one nation – one language" policy adopted during the Panchayat regime (Yadava 2003).

In the 2001 census, however, the number of languages spoken by indigenous nationalities shot up to nearly 70 (CBS 2002; Yadava 2003). These languages include Bram/Bramu, Bhujel, Chhantyal, Dura, Ghale, Kaike, Kisan, Kusunda, Munda, Raute, Yholmo, Khariya, Lhomi, Dungmali and Sadhani. Moreover, while earlier censuses recorded the Rai languages under the single category of 'Rai group of languages', in the 2001 census 23 separate 'Rai' languages were enumerated. The names of the various 'Rai' languages enumerated in the most recent census are presented in the table below.

Languages	Speakers	Languages	Speakers
1. Bantawa	371056	2. Chamling	44093
3. Kulung	18686	4. Yakkha	14648
5. Thulung	14034	6. Sanpang	10810
7. Khaling	9288	8. Dumi	5271
9. Umbule	4471	10. Puma	4310
11. Nachhering	3553	12. Bahing	2765
13. Koul	2641	14. Yamphule	1722
15. Chhiling	1314	16. Lohurung	1207
17. Mewahang	904	18. Tilung	310
19. Jerung	271	20. Dungmali	221

21. Lingkhim	97	22. Sam	23
23. Chhintang	8		

Table.6: Rai languages (CBS 2001)

Source: Population Census 2001 and Yadava (2003)

All the languages of indigenous nationalities recorded in the various censuses from 1952/54 to the present are given with their speaker numbers in Appendix 1.

There are a number of reasons for the significant rise in the number of languages recognised as being spoken in Nepal. One important factor instrumental in the change is that a large number of languages used as mother tongues were returned for the first time in 2001 because of the growing awareness by indigenous nationalities of their distinct cultural and linguistic identity, and the willingness of the state to acknowledge this linguistic and cultural diversity. Since the restoration of democracy in 1990 there has been a genuine increase in awareness among linguistic minorities and indigenous peoples about their mother tongues and the status that these might be accorded in the nation. The ethnic organisations which represent the languages and their speakers have taken an active role preserving and promoting diverse cultural identities and languages. Taking note of this changed reality, the CBS sought the cooperation and support of these organizations during the 2001 census enumeration. Following the enumeration, some linguists were also consulted to aid in the precise identification of Nepal’s languages.

TOBA ET AL.

In a recent language survey report prepared by Toba et al. (2002), sociolinguistic information on a total of 56 indigenous languages spoken in Nepal (plus four other major languages, namely Nepali, Maithili, Awadhi and Bhojpuri) are presented. In this report, 39 different information sets were collected for each language on the basis of a UNESCO questionnaire. The details mainly include language family, dialect, presence or absence of a literate tradition, distribution of language and speakers, contact languages, population of speakers, multilingualism, attitude towards the language, domains of use and language loss. An attempt was made to elicit information from native speakers, though in some cases, such as for Bhojpuri and Bote, the researchers were unable to do so. Furthermore, this report excludes a number of indigenous languages enumerated in the population census, such as Kharia, Tibetan, Churauti and Bhujel. As the writers themselves confess, “it would have been desirable to visit the areas of each language listed in this report, but neither the time frame nor the present situation in Nepal allowed for this” (Toba et al. 2002: iii). Despite its shortcomings, then, this report is of help in understanding certain issues relating to Nepal’s languages, and particularly the indigenous tongues.

GURUNG

In his 2002 report, Gurung mentions 39 indigenous languages of which 22 are Kiranti languages. According to his findings, 71.3% of the indigenous population in Nepal have their own mother tongue. The *Ethnologue* (Gordon, ed. 2005), however, suggests that 75 of the 126 languages spoken in Nepal are indigenous.

As an approximation based on details published in existing studies and census reports, we may estimate the following list of languages spoken by indigenous nationalities of Nepal as mother tongues:

S.No.	Language Names	Census Status	S.No.	Language Names	Census Status
1.	Athapaharia	Ne	2.	Bahing	E
3.	Bantawa	E	4.	Baragaunle	Ne
5.	Baram/Baraamu/ Bhramu	E	6.	Belhare	Ne
7.	Bhujel	E	8.	Bote	E
9.	Byansi	E	10.	Chamling	E
11.	Chhantyal	E	12.	Chepang	E
13.	Chhiling	E	14.	Chhintang	E
15.	Churauti	E	16.	Danuwar	E
17.	Darai	E	18.	Dhangar/Jhangar	E
19.	Dhimal	E	20.	Dolpo	Ne
21.	Dumi	E	22.	Dungmali	E
23.	Dura	E	24.	Ghale	E
25.	Gurung	E	26.	Hayu/Vayu/Wayu	E
27.	Jerung/Jero	E	28.	Jirel	E
29.	Kagate	E	30.	Kaike	E
31.	Khaling	E	32.	Kham	Ne
33.	Khariya	E	34.	Kisan	E
35.	Koche	E	36.	Kou/Koi/Kohi	E
37.	Kulung	E	38.	Kumal	E
39.	Kusunda	E	40.	Lepcha	E
41.	Lhomi	E	42.	Limbu	E
43.	Lingkhim	E	44.	Lohorung	E
45.	Magar	E	46.	Majhi	E
47.	Managba	Ne	48.	Meche	E
49.	Mewahang	E	50.	Mugali	Ne
51.	Nachiring	E	52.	Nar-Phu	Ne
53.	Nepalese Sign Language	E	54.	Newar	E
55.	Pahari	E	56.	Puma	E
57.	Rajbansi	E	58.	Raji	E
59.	Raute	E	60.	Saam	E
61.	Sampang	E	62.	Santhali (Including Munda)	E

63.	Sherpa	E	64.	Sunwar	E
65.	Tamang	E	66.	Thakaali	E
67.	Thami/Thangmi	E	68.	Tharu(Dagaura/Rana)	E
69.	Thulung	E	70.	Tibetan	E
71.	Tilung	E	72.	Umbule/Wambule/ Ombule	E
73.	Yakkha	E	74.	Yamphe/Yamphu	E
75.	Yholmo (Helambu Sherpa)	E			

Table 7: Languages of the indigenous nationalities in Nepal.

(Note: Most of these languages have already been enumerated (E) while a few have not yet been enumerated (Ne) in the 2001 Census).

Distribution

The languages of Nepal's indigenous nationalities vary greatly in their distribution. Some are widely spoken across all the three regions (mountain, hill and Terai) while others are mainly confined to specific regions. The main distribution of indigenous languages along with their speaker number are presented in Table 8 below

A. Mountain		Population	
1. Bahragaunle	-	4. Lhomi	4
2. Byansi	1,734	5. Manangwaa	-
3. Dolpo	-	6. Mugali	-
		7. Nar-Phu	-
		8. Sherpa	110,358
		9. Thakali	13,731
		10. Tibetan (Bhote)	19,261
B. Hill		Population	
11. Athparia		30. Kagate	10
12. Bahing	635,151	31. Kaike	794
13. Bantawa	95,254	32. Khaling	9288
14. Baram	73,83	33. Kham	-
15. Bhujel	117,644	34. Kou	2641
16. Belhare		35. Kulung	18686
17. Chamling	44,093	36. Kusunda	164
18. Chantyal	9,814	37. Lepcha	3,660
19. Chepang	52,237	38. Limbu	359,255
20. Chhiling	1314	39. Linkhim	97
21. Chhintang	8	40. Lohorong	1207
22. Dumi	5271	41. Magar	1,622,339
23. Dungmali	221	42. Mewahang	904
24. Dura	5,169	43. Newar	1,245,232
25. Ghale	1649	44. Nachhiring	3553
26. Gurung	543,571	45. Pahari	11,505
27. Hayu	1,821	46. Puma	4310
28. Jerung	271	47. Saam	23
29. Jirel	5,319	48. Sampang	10810
		49. Sunuwar	26611
		50. Tamang	1,282,304
		51. Thangmi	22,999
		52. Thulung	14034
		53. Tilung	310
		54. Umbule	4471
		55. Yakkha	17,003
		56. Yamphu	1722
		57. Yholmo	579

C. Inner Terai		Population			
58. Bote	7,969	60. Darai	14,859	62. Majhi	72,614
59. Danuwar	53,229	61. Kumal	99,389	63. Raji	2,399
				64. Raute	658
D. Terai					
65. Dhimal	19,537	68. Kisan	2,876	71. Rajbanshi	188,150
66. Jhangar	41,764	69. Koche	95,812	72. Santhal	42,698
67. Khariya	1575	70. Meche	3,763	73. Tharu	1,533,879

Table 8: Distribution of Nepal's indigenous languages by topographic region.

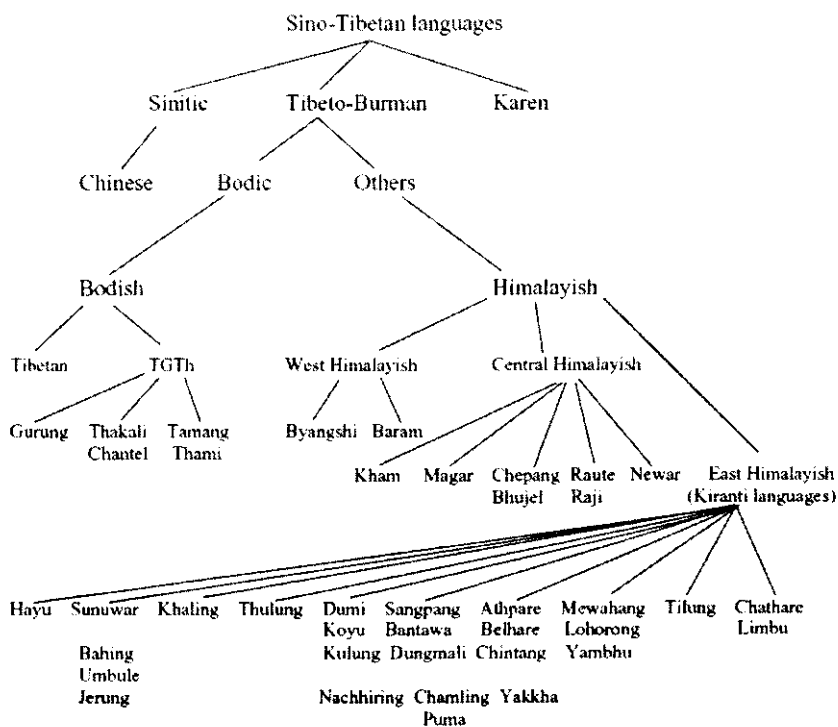
Genetic affiliation

Excepting Kusunda, the languages spoken by the indigenous nationalities of Nepal as mother tongues belong to four language families: Sino-Tibetan, Indo-European, Austro-Asiatic and Dravidian.

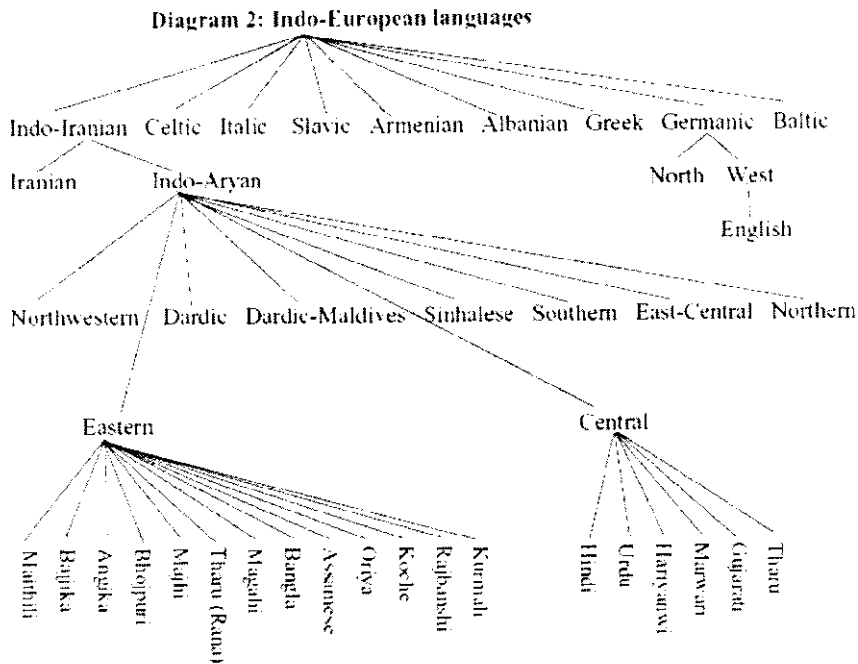
Most of Nepal's indigenous languages are members of the Tibeto-Burman group of the Sino-Tibetan family. Hodgson is considered to be the first to identify the unity among the Tibeto-Burman languages (Grierson 1909:12). According to Grierson, Max Muller (1854) made the first classification of Tibeto-Burman languages.

The Sino-Tibetan languages spoken in Nepal can be classified as follows:

Diagram 1: Sino-Tibetan languages



The Indo-Aryan languages spoken by the indigenous peoples of Nepal are genetically subcategorised in the following diagram:

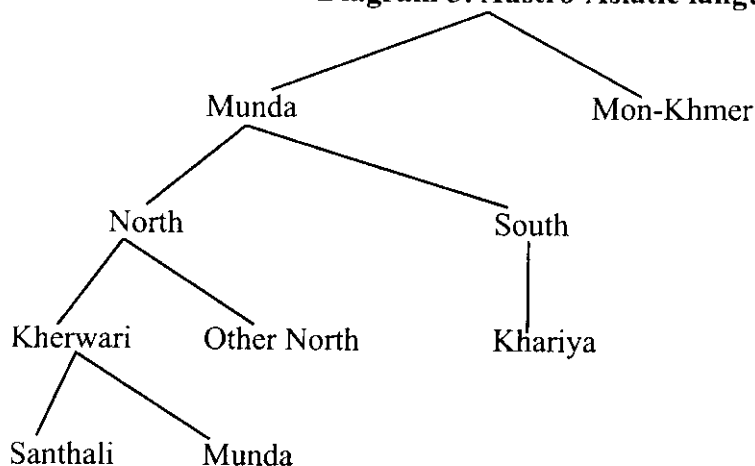


Some of the Indo-Aryan indigenous languages spoken in Nepal have yet to genetically classified due to a lack of available data about. These languages include Tharu, Bote, Darai, Kumal, Churauti and Danuwar.

Besides the two major language families of Sino-Tibetan and Indo-European, languages of the indigenous nationalities of Nepal also belong to two minor language families: the Austric branch of the Austro-Asiatic family and the Dravidian family of languages. The Austric languages comprise Santhali of the northern Munda group and Khariya of the southern Munda group. It is important to note that while Satar was reported in all of the censuses, Santhal was incorrectly reported as a separate language except in the 1952/54 census. The 2001 census lumps Satar and Santhal together as a single language name called Santhali. It is suggested that Munda (with 67 speakers) should also be included within Santhali, since it is thought to be just a variant name of the same language. According to the 2001 census, Santhali speakers number only 40,193, i.e. 0.18% of Nepal's total population, as compared to 0.20% (1952/54), 0.31% (1961), 0.21% (1971), 0.19 (1981) and 0.18% (1991). Another Austric language of the Munda branch is Khariya,

which was recognised by the census for the first time in 2001. This language is spoken by 1,575, i.e. 0.01% of Nepal's population. All the Austric languages are spoken by groups of tribal peoples from the eastern Terai and make up approximately 0.19% of the total population. The genetic affiliation of the Austric languages spoken in Nepal is shown in the following diagram:

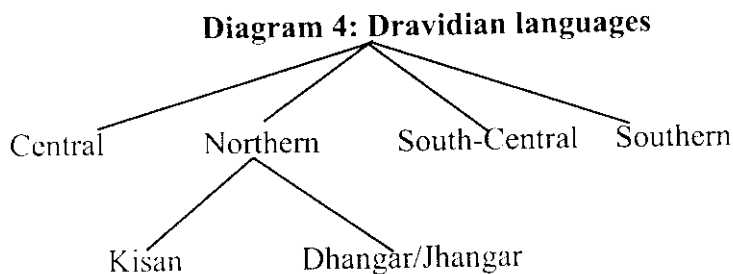
Diagram 3: Austro-Asiatic languages



One of the Dravidian languages spoken in Nepal is Jhangar and is located in the region east of the Kosi river, while Dhangar is spoken in the region west of the Kosi river. This language grouping constitutes the northernmost part of the Dravidian family of languages and is said to be a regional variant of Kurux spoken in Jharkhand State of India, even though it shows divergence in its vocabulary and grammar (Gordon 1976; Yadava 2002). According to the 2001 census, Dhangar/Jhangar is spoken by 28,615 people, i.e. 0.13% of the total population of the country. Speaker numbers were reported to be 4,832 (1952/54), 9,140 (1961), and 15,175 (1991) and the language was not listed in the 1971 and 1981 censuses.

Another Dravidian language spoken in Nepal is Kisan. Like Dhangar/Jhangar, this language also belongs to the northernmost part of Dravidian family of languages. The 2001 census suggests that there are 2,876 speakers. This language was enumerated for the first time in the 2001 census.

The genetic affiliation of the two Dravidian languages (namely Dhangar/Jhangar and Kisan) is shown in the following diagram:



Kusunda, also known as *Begai* by non-Kusunda speakers, is a language isolate, without any genetic relation to the other languages spoken in Nepal. A number of speculations exist about its genetic affiliation. Forbes (1877, 1881) suggests a relation between Kusunda and Chepang and other Tibeto-Burman languages. *Ethnologue* (2005) still considers Kusunda to be a Tibeto-Burman language. In the most recent and comprehensive study so far made, Watters et al. (2005: 3) write “A few speculative proposals continue to make the rounds on the possible relationship of Kusunda to Munda or even to languages further afield, like Nihali, a language isolate of west-central India (Whitehouse 1997); “possibly” Burushaski and languages of the Caucasus (Reinhard and Toba 1970); or the Yenisseian languages of Siberia (Gurov 1989, reported in van Driem 2001). The latest proposal (Whitehouse et al. 2004) advances the premise that Kusunda is an ‘Indo-Pacific’ language, with “the possibility that Kusunda is a remnant of the migration that led to the initial peopling of New Guinea and Australia.”

Recently, Whitehouse (personal communication) speaks of the need to undertake a DNA test of the Kusunda people to ascertain their precise genetic affiliation. The language family of Kusunda is thus yet to be confirmed. Reported earlier to be extinct, Kusunda has been recently discovered to have a marginal number of speakers. Of the total 164 Kusundas, 86 are reported to speak their mother tongue Kusunda (CBS 2001). Left with a handful of fluent but elderly speakers, this language will almost certainly die.

Writing systems

Most of the indigenous languages spoken in Nepal are oral traditions. Each of them has a rich oral heritage of traditional folk stories and songs handed down from parent to child over a long period of time, such as the *Mundhun* in Kiranti languages. However, these oral tales are disappearing with the growth of literacy in Nepali and with increased language shift towards the national language. It is therefore imperative to document these spoken forms before they are lost.

Only a few of Nepal's indigenous languages have literate traditions. These include Tibetan, Newar, Limbu and Lepcha. These languages have long traditions of written literature and have employed various writing systems or scripts. Tibetan and Sherpa are two of the Tibeto-Burman languages with the earliest written records (van Driem, 2001: 428). The Tibetan script, called Sambota, was developed from the Gupta or Brahmi script, which was employed for writing Sanskrit in the mid-seventh century. Tamang speakers have also shown preference for this script when writing their language.

Newar (or *Nepal Bhasha*) is another Tibeto-Burman language with an ancient written literary tradition. Introduced in the 9th century, the Newar script is still in use even though with the passage of time the script has undergone changes. This script was used in most of the earlier documents written in the Kathmandu Valley. Over time, there emerged variants of the Newar script in the forms of Ranjana and Bhujimol. Ranjana was in vogue from the 11th to 18th centuries while Bhujimol remained in use from the 11th till 17th centuries. From the Bhujimol script, it appears that a number of other scripts used for writing the Newar language emerged. These scripts, referred to as Golmol, Litumol, Kwemol, Kunmol, Hinmol and Pachumol are supposed to have been introduced by Newar scholars for writing ornamental texts on special festivals and ritual occasions. These embellished scripts were introduced in the 13th century and continued to be used until 17th century (Shakya, 2030 VS: 5-10). Now the Newar language is also written in the Devanagari script for the sake of convenience.

Limbu, another Tibeto-Burman language, uses its own Kiranti Srijanga script. Lepcha is written in Rong script. Both of these scripts were developed to propagate Buddhism during the regime of the third Chögyal or 'Maharaja' of Sikkim.

More recently, some of Nepal's other indigenous languages have taken to developing literate traditions. Initiatives have been taken by various language communities to develop writing systems appropriate to the sound system of their languages and which are practical and acceptable to them. These speech communities include Tharu, Tamang, Magar, Gurung, Rajbanshi and a subset of the Rai group of languages such as Bantawa, Thulung, Chamling, Khaling, Kulung and others. Tharu, Tamang and Gurung use the Devanagari script but some Gurung speakers advocate the use of the Roman script for their language. Magar has developed its own script, called Akkha. Recently, these languages have begun to develop written literature in the form of newspapers, magazines, textbooks for adult literacy and primary education, as well as folk literature.

As in India, Santhali as spoken in Nepal is written in the Roman script.

Language and ethnicity

According to *Nepal Gazette* (2002), 59 indigenous nationalities have been identified in Nepal. While specific ethnicities are often found to identify as speakers of particular languages as their mother tongue, for many languages there is no absolute one-to-one parity between an ethnic community and a speech community. The mother tongues associated with the indigenous nationalities are provided in the following table.

Mountain			Inner Terai	
<i>S.No.</i>	<i>Indigenous nationalities</i>	<i>Mother tongues</i>	<i>S.No.</i>	<i>Languages</i>
1.	Barahgaule	Barahgaule	31.	Danuwar
2.	Bhote	Bhote/Tibetan	32.	Darai
3.	Byansi	Byansi	33.	Kumal
4.	Dolpa	Dolpa	34.	Majhi
5.	Lhomi	Lhomi	35.	Raji
6.	Marphali	Thakali	36.	Raute
7.	Mugali	Mugali		
8.	Sherpa	Sherpa		
9.	Thakali	Thakali		
10.	Tokpegola	Tokpegola		
11.	Walung	Walung		
Hill			Terai	
12.	Bhujel	Bhujel	37.	Dhimal
13.	Baram	Baram	38.	Dhangar/Jhangar
14.	Chepang	Chepang	39.	Kisan
15.	Chantyal	Chantyal	40.	Meche
16.	Dura	Dura	41.	Rajbanshi
17.	Gurung	Gurung	42.	Satar
18.	Vayu/Hayu	Vayu/Hayu	43.	Tharu
19.	Yholmo	Yholmo		
20.	Jirel	Jirel		
21.	Kusunda	Kusunda		
22.	Lepcha	Lepcha		
23.	Limbu	Limbu		
24.	Magar	Magar		
25.	Newar	Newar		
26.	Pahari	Pahari		
27.	Sunuwar	Sunuwar		
28.	Tamang	Tamang		
29.	Thami	Thami		
30.	Yakkha	Yakkha		

Table 9: Mother tongues associated with Nepal's indigenous nationalities.

There are 43 ethno-linguistic communities in Nepal which identify themselves as speakers of particular mother tongues. These communities are listed in the table above. For these

groups there is a one-to-one relation between the language spoken and the ethnic group, reflecting a 'one tribe, one language' formula. On the other hand, there are several ethnic communities who speak several mother tongues. In Nepal, the 'one tribe with several languages' model is aptly represented by the Rai (Kiranti) ethnolinguistic grouping in the eastern hills and mountain areas. In this case a 'single' ethnic group speak around 34 Kiranti language including Bantawa, Chamling, Kulung, Yakkha, Thulung, Sangpang, Khaling, Dumi, Jirel, Puma, Umbule, Bahing, Yholmo, Nachiring, Dura, Koi, Hayu, Yamphu, Chhiling, Lohorung, Mewahang, Kaika, Tilung, Jerung, Lingkhim, Sam, Kagate, Chhingtang and Lhomi, among others. In all then, in the Kiranti group there exists no one-to-one correspondence between a recognised ethnic community and their spoken mother tongue(s).

Finally, we find a number of ethnic groups who do not equate themselves with a specific mother tongue or whose ethnic mother tongues have not yet been identified or recognised.

In the case of a one-to-one relation between an ethnic community and their spoken language, a comparison of the populations illustrates the extent of language retention in each community. According to Gurung (2002: 7-8), there has been considerable increase in the speaker numbers of languages spoken by various ethnic groups except for Dhimal, Bhote-Sherpa and the Thakali languages. Rajbanshi and Raji are the two languages whose speakers' population exceeds the population of their ethnic community. Limbu, Jirel, Thami and Magar also show a significant increase in speaker numbers. This is evident from the table below.

Ethnic Group	1991	2001	Ethnic Group	1991	2001
1. Rajbanshi	104.1	135.2	18. Chepang	68.5	70.5
2. Raji	90.4	100.6	19. Darai	60.0	68.7
3. Hayu	-	95.7	20. Newar	66.2	66.3
4. Satar	-	94.1	21. Dura	-	65.7
5. Limbu	64.0	92.9	22. Gurung	50.7	62.4
6. Jirel	86.5	92.5	23. Chhantel	-	60.2
7. Tamang	88.8	92.0	24. Danuwar	46.7	59.8
8. Dhital	89.5	88.6	25. Kusunda	-	53.0
9. Meche	-	87.7	26. Thakali	51.8	49.6
10. Tharu	83.2	86.8	27. Magar	32.1	47.5
11. Yatha	-	86.1	28. Jhangad	-	36.3
12. Thami	75.4	82.6	29. Bote	-	35.4
13. Byansi	-	82.4	30. Sunuwar	-	27.9
14. Raute	-	78.7	31. Pahari	-	26.0
15. Rai-Kirant	83.6	78.3	32. Majhi	20.6	23.6
16. Bhote-Sherpa	99.1	77.6	33. Bhujel	-	9.1
17. Lepcha	-	77.2	34. Kumal	1.8	6.6
			35. Baramu	-	4.5

Table 10: The population of ethnic groups and their languages.

Source: Population Censuses (1952/54-2001) and Gurung (2002)

Aspects of the interplay between language and ethnicity outlined above reflect the dynamism of language shift in the Nepalese context. The findings suggest a common tendency to shift toward regional and ethnic languages. As a result, there has been continuous decline in the official numerical strength of mother tongue Nepali speakers.

Patterns of language endangerment

In linguistically diverse countries, minority languages continue to be endangered and lost. According to an estimate (Krauss 1992: 7), 90% of human languages will face extinction by the end of the 21st century. In other words, only 600 of the 6,000 or so languages presently spoken will be safe (Crystal 2000: 18). As a multilingual state, Nepal is susceptible to this global trend of language endangerment.

Some of Nepal's languages are thriving, most notably Nepali, which is the national language, while many of Nepal's minority languages lie at various stages on the continuum to eventual extinction. The key measure of a language's viability is not the number of people who speak it, but the extent to which children are still learning the language as their native tongue. The reasons for the endangered status of these mother tongues are varied, but include declining speaker numbers (an example of which is Kusunda), the destruction of the traditional habitat of a linguistic community through deforestation (as in the case of the Raute), or even natural disasters such as the landslides which swept away two villages thus almost entirely devastating the Koi speaking community (UNESCO 2002: 260). More prosaic if far more compelling reasons for the decline in usage of Nepal's indigenous mother tongues include many decades of neglect by the state of poor and rural ethno-linguistic communities compounded with the effectiveness of Nepali language and media in inculcating a sense of national Nepali identity, at linguistic, religious and cultural levels.

Language endangerment specialists have borrowed their conceptual framework, and its associated terminology, from the fields of botany and zoology, and portray languages as lying on a continuum from stable to moribund. In Nepal, a worryingly large number of the country's ethnic mother tongues are severely endangered, and will likely be reduced from communicative vernaculars to symbolic identity markers within a generation. At the same time, and perhaps even because of the threat, ethnic and linguistic activists within these communities have embarked on the process of documenting and promoting their mother tongues through cultural awareness campaigns and literacy programmes.

Why should development scholars and ethnic activists be concerned with the extinction of endangered languages? After all, 96% of the world's population speak 4% of the world's languages, and over 1,500 languages have fewer than 1,000 speakers (Crystal 2000). **Some monolingual English speakers** would have us believe that linguistic diver-

sity is incompatible with the juggernaut of inevitable progress which requires interoperability and smooth international communications across national boundaries. This is simply not the case, particularly in areas such as the Himalayas, where many people are functionally tri- or quadri-lingual, speaking an ethnic or tribal mother tongue inside the home, a different language in the local market town, conversing in the national language at school or in dealings with the administration and often using an international language (or two) in dealings with the outside world. The monolingualism of much of the First World is as provincial as it is historically anomalous.

While the origins of the extraordinary diversity of human languages is intertwined with the evolution of cognition and culture, the spread of modern language families is a direct result of historical population movements and migrations across continents and the colonisation of new geographical and environmental zones. Human languages are not evenly distributed across the world: there are relatively few in Europe compared to abundance in the Pacific. The Himalayan region is home to great linguistic diversity, in part because the mountains act as a natural barrier to mobility and communication.

There are four solid reasons for supporting, preserving and documenting endangered languages. First, each and every language is a celebration of the rich cultural diversity of our planet; second, each language is an expression of a unique ethnic, social, regional or cultural identity and world view; third, language is the repository of the history and beliefs of a people; and finally, every language encodes a particular subset of fragile human knowledge about agriculture, botany, medicine and ecology.

Mother tongues are comprised of far more than grammar and words. For example, Thangmi (known in Nepali as *Thami*), a Tibeto-Burman language spoken by an ethnic community of around 30,000 people in eastern Nepal, is a mine of unique indigenous terms for local flora and fauna which have medical and ritual value. Much of this local knowledge is falling into disuse as fluency in Nepali, the national language, increases. When children cease to speak their mother tongue, the oral transmission of specific ethnobotanical and medical knowledge also comes to an end. As Rana Bahadur Thangmi, a local shaman and village leader, poignantly stated in an interview with one of the authors: 'It concerns me that our ancestral language is on the wane and will likely not be spoken by the next generation, but it upsets me far more to think that our culture is also dying. No one will think to translate into Nepali the knowledge that our forefathers collected in order that our grandchildren may know what we have known.'

In order to assess the state of language endangerment in Nepal, a number of key variables should be selected and used. Eight criteria were proposed by an International Expert meeting at a UNESCO program 'Safeguarding of the Endangered Languages', March 10-12, 2003 for assessing language vitality and endangerment. To supplement

the matrix of UNESCO criteria and improve its accuracy for Nepal, some relevant factors recommended by Crystal (2000) and others must also be included. When taken together, this matrix consists of the following variables:

1. Inter-generational language transmission
2. Absolute number of speakers,
3. Proportion of speakers within the total population
4. Loss of existing language domains
5. Response to new domains and media
6. Materials for language education and literacy
7. Government & institutional language attitudes and policies including official status and use
8. Community members' attitude towards their own languages
9. Amount and quality of documentation
10. Economic and socio-economic status of speakers
11. Access
12. Motivation
13. Age of speakers
14. Migration to urban areas and foreign countries for job or education

There is a complex interaction of variables relating to language vitality and endangerment in Nepal which require more research to be properly understood. However, on the basis of the information presently available, an attempt can be made to determine which languages of the indigenous speech communities in Nepal are being threatened or are endangered and to what extent. According to the degree of endangerment, each of these languages has been categorized in one of seven levels, which are as follows:

- i) Safe language
- ii) Almost safe language
- iii) Potentially endangered language
- iv) Endangered language
- v) Seriously endangered language
- vi) Moribund language
- vii) Extinct language

Of these, safe and almost safe languages refer to the languages with little danger of

being lost. The other five levels have been defined by Stephen Wurm (1998: 192) as follows:

- (i) *potentially endangered languages* are socially and economically disadvantaged, under heavy pressure from a large language, and beginning to lose child speakers
- (ii) *endangered languages* have few or no children learning the language, and the youngest good speakers are young adults
- (iii) *seriously endangered languages* have youngest good speakers aged 50 or older
- (iv) *moribund languages* have only a handful of good speakers left, mostly very old
- (v) *extinct languages* have no speakers left

Accordingly, the languages of the indigenous peoples in Nepal can be categorized into the following levels of endangerment:

(i) Safe languages (13)

The safe indigenous languages of Nepal are:

Newar, Limbu, Magar, Tharu, Tamang, Bantawa, Gurung, Rajbansi, Tibetan, Sherpa, Khaling, Kham, Nepalese Sign Language

The features that all these safe languages share are inter-generational language transmission, a large number of speakers, a high rate of language retention, an increasing response to new domains such as seminars/meetings, computer fonts, printed and electronic media, e.g. newspaper, radio, TV, and film, development of materials for language education and literacy, use of mother tongue as medium of instruction in transitional bilingual education program under the aegis of EFA (2004-2009), and above all, community members' positive attitude towards their own languages.

(ii) Almost safe languages (13)

Chamling, Santhali, Chepang, Danuwar, Dhangar/Jhangar, Thangmi, Kulung, Dhimal, Yakkha, Thulung, Sanpang, Darai, Dolpo

Like the 'safe' languages, the 'almost safe' languages presently still have inter-generational language transmission, a fairly large community of speakers, a high rate of language retention and community members' positive attitude towards their own languages. However, they lack a response to new domains of language use and media and have not developed materials for language education and literacy.

(iii) Potentially endangered languages (8)

Kumal, Thakali, Chantyal, Dumi, Jirel, Athpahariya, Mugali, Belhare

These languages are characterised by a lack of intergenerational language transmission, a small community of speakers, and a lack of language use in education and media even though their speakers have a positive attitude towards their mother tongue.

(iv) Endangered languages (22)

Umbule, Puma, Yholmo, Nachiring, Dura, Meche, Pahari, Lepcha, Bote, Bahing, Kou, Raji, Hayu, Byansi, Yamphu, Ghale, Khariya, Chhiling, Lohorung, Sunuwar, Majhi, Bhujel

These languages are united by a very small size of elderly and sometimes adult speakers and are no longer spoken by their children, and the languages have shown no response to the new domains of media and materials for language education and literacy.

(v) Seriously endangered languages (12)

Mewahang, Kaike, Raute, Kisan, Churauti, Baram, Tilung, Jerung, Dungmali, Baragaule, Nar-Phu, Managwa

These languages have been marginalized and are now spoken by under 500 speakers and may face extinction unless some drastic measures are taken for their revitalization.

(vi) Moribund languages (7)

Lingkhim, Kusunda, Koche, Sam, Kagate, Chhintang, Lhomi

These languages are left with but a handful of mostly elderly speakers, often less than 100 in number, and are on the verge of extinction.

(vii) Extinct or nearly extinct languages

Baybansi, Chonkha, Longaba, Mugali, Sambya, Pongyong, Bungla, Chukwa, Hedangpa, Waling, Khandung

These languages are either no longer spoken at all, or only to a very rudimentary level. Given the state of decline and attrition in these languages, they cannot possibly survive to the next generation.

While the above categorization has been proposed on the basis of micro-level variables which are unique to individual languages and their communities, there are some broader factors which impinge on language endangerment. Such factors constitute macro-level

variables. These variables are 'broad indicators of the potential threat that exists to minority languages in a given region of the world' (Grenoble and Whaley 1998: 27).

Barring native languages from use in existing as well as new domains of administration, government and technology has the result of giving native languages low utility and prestige. This is further accentuated by the fact that Nepali is the *lingua franca* and the language for inter-ethnic communication. As a result, indigenous peoples tend to acquire Nepali at the expense of their native languages. Gender also seems to play a role in this process as males of ethnic groups have a higher rate of proficiency in Nepali and lower rate of retention in their native languages than females, as observed in the case of Kusunda speakers.

Despite the positive attitude of members of the speech community towards their native languages, the scarcity of resources continues to be an obstacle in promoting indigenous tongues since most of the ethnic groups concerned are constrained by economic vulnerability.

Historical factors have made the Nepali work force highly mobile. In the early days, the outflow of Nepali youth started with their recruitment in the regiments of the British army, employment in tea plantations in Darjeeling and Assam and manual labour across much of the Indian northeast. The flow of migration from mountains and hills to the Terai was particularly noteworthy during the third quarter of the last century. At the same time, increased urbanization produced cities which acted as magnets for rural people while developments in transport and communications made it easier for the rural people to these centres. In this changed context, learning the dominant language (in this case Nepali) helps the process of assimilation in a multi-ethnic capital city. In the Indian northeast, Nepali shifted from being a national language back home to a *lingua franca* or trade language for peoples of all ethnicities to communicate with one another. A consequence of such cultural assimilation and population movement has been the gradual erosion of indigenous languages.

The documentation of indigenous languages is an essential component in ensuring their vitality and promotion. Such documentation includes a precise inventory of linguistic forms used, a modern reference grammar, a basic dictionary, audio-visual recording of narrative texts and their analysis, and may include elements of applied linguistics for educational and revitalization purposes. There are still relatively few grammatical studies of Nepal's indigenous languages. National agencies such as Central Department of Linguistics at TU, the National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN), and the Royal Nepal Academy (RNA), and international agencies such as the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), the South Asia Institute at Heidelberg University (SAI), the Himalayan Languages Project at Leiden University, and some Euro-

pean and American universities, have made significant contributions in documenting these languages. However, very few works on their applied aspects exist. There is still an urgent need for investigating the use of language in basic education and for the revitalization of endangered languages for their preservation and promotion. Having presented a situational analysis of indigenous languages of Nepal, we now move to address some contemporary issues.

Language and ecology

Linguistic diversity is an integral component in ecological stability and the fabric of cultural life, and we should remember that the evolution of a species or a language takes much longer than its extinction. Languages, like species, adapt to and reflect their environment. The Thangmi language, spoken in a highly mountainous region where topography is challenging, has four semantically distinct verbs which are translated into English as 'to come': *yusa* 'to come from above (down the mountain)', *wangsa* 'to come from below (or up the mountain)', *kyelsa* 'to come from level or around a natural obstacle' and *rasa* 'to come from unspecified or unknown direction'. To some extent, then, language thus mirrors ecology, and ecology reflects the linguistic and cultural forms of a people inhabiting a specific niche. The languages and cultures of millions of indigenous peoples of the Himalayas are in part endangered because their traditional homelands and ecological habitats are now under threat.

In the powerfully written *Vanishing Voices*, Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine make an explicit link between language survival and environment issues: the extinction of languages is part of the larger picture of near-total collapse of the worldwide ecosystem. The struggle to preserve environment resources, such as the rainforest and ethnobotanical knowledge, cannot be separated from the struggle to maintain cultural diversity. The causes of language death and ecological destruction, in their view, are political.

Nettle and Romaine support their argument with an intriguing correlation: language diversity appears to be inversely related to latitude, and areas rich in languages also tend to be rich in ecology and species. Both biodiversity and linguistic diversity are concentrated between the tropics and in inaccessible environments, such as the Himalayas, while diversity of all forms of diversity tail off in deserts. Around the world then, there is a high level of co-occurrence of flora, fauna and languages, and humid tropical climates as well as forested areas are especially favourable to biological and linguistic diversification. Data from Nepal would appear to support this trend: the country is home to over 5,400 species of higher plants and 850 species of birds, 2.2% and 9.4% of the world's totals respectively (Shrestha and Vimal 1993: 3), a high level of biodiversity per unit area matched by a similarly high rate of linguistic variation.

The *Vanishing Voices* hypothesis is logical but also contentious, with some language activists and scholars arguing that the trends to which Nettle and Romaine allude are coincidental and causally unrelated. Whatever one's take on the interrelatedness of biological and linguistic diversity, one result is uncontested: languages have increasingly come to be described as valuable 'resources' to be protected, promoted and developed by governments. Distinct from, but deployed in a similar manner to discussions about water, fossil fuels and manpower resources, the linguistic resources of a nation are part of its rich intangible heritage. As discretely summed up by UNESCO in its universal declaration on cultural diversity of 2001, "cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature."

Language and the state

As the Nepalese linguist Chudamani Bandhu noted, Nepali has made great inroads "first as a lingua franca, then as an official language and ultimately as the national language" (1989: 121). Widely spoken both within Nepal, and also across much of northeast India and even some of Bhutan, the position of Nepali as a major South Asian language is assured. Between 1952 and 2001, according to official census statistics, the number of mother tongue Nepali speakers almost trebled from 4 million to 11 million (drawn from tables in Yadava 2003: 141). Revealingly, while 48.6% of the population returned Nepali as their mother tongue in the 2001 census, 53% stated that Nepali should be the only official language compared to 31% who felt that others languages should also be recognised as official languages. Interestingly, 16% of those polled independently said that they were eager to see minority languages used in official capacity in local government (Hachhethu 2004: 187).

During Panchayat rule in Nepal, from 1962-1989, the state promoted a doctrine of 'one nation, one culture, one language' and the nation-building project of that era was intolerant of indigenous and minority languages. In this era, while political, educational, developmental and administrative activities helped speakers of other languages to learn Nepali, little motivation existed for mother tongue Nepali speakers to learn other languages.

In these years, it was considered natural and preferable for Nepal to be monolingual, and minority languages and linguistic rights were largely disregarded. Since the Panchayat era, however, the Nepali government has made significant progress in recognising the multi-ethnic and multi-lingual nature of the nation. The *Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal*, codified on November 9, 1990, states that:

- (1) *The Nepali language in the Devanagari script is the language of the nation of Nepal.
The Nepali language shall be the official language.*

(2) *All the languages spoken as the mother tongue in the various parts of Nepal are the national languages of Nepal. (Constitution of Nepal, Part 1, Article 6)*

The ambiguity of the Constitution here is notable: while Nepali is the 'language of the nation' and the 'official language', mother tongues spoken by indigenous peoples are 'the national languages of Nepal'. Some commentators see the distinction as helpful, while others are critical of what they perceive to be an intentional semantic confusion, and they reject the claim that the Constitution of Nepal is a forward-looking and robust document which truly champions diversity and minority rights.

Language and the law

The constitutional ambiguity laid out above sets the stage for the key linguistic tension of modern Nepal. While Nepal's linguistic minorities have a number of national and international provisions enshrining their linguistic rights, such groups have little confidence in their ability to gain access to, and then effectively use, the legal system to defend these rights. Aside from one prominent case discussed below, language activists have rarely relied on legal provisions to ensure their rights, and debates about language, ethnicity and culture are not usually acted out in courts.

The case in question relates to a well-documented decision made by various local administrative bodies between August and November 1997—the Kathmandu Municipality, Dhanusha District Development Committee and Rajbiraj and Janakpur Municipalities—to use the locally dominant languages of Newar(i) and Maithili respectively as official media of communication in addition to Nepali. This right, they argued, had been enshrined in the *Local Self-Governance Act* of 1999 which deputed to local bodies the right to use, preserve and promote local languages. The decision by these local bodies to use regional languages was legally challenged and cases were filed in the Supreme Court, after which an interim order was issued on March 17, 1998 prohibiting the use of local and regional languages in administration. This order led to widely publicised discontent and public resentment among minority communities, and a number of action committees were promptly formed to address the ruling.

Nevertheless, on June 1, 1999, the Supreme Court announced its final verdict and issued a *certiorari* declaring that the decisions of these local bodies to use regional languages were unconstitutional and illegal. The court's verdict raised serious questions about the sincerity of the government's commitment to the use of minority languages in administration and led to further frustration among minority language communities. Public demonstrations and mass meetings were called, and the Nepal Federation of Nationalities (NEFEN) organised a national conference on linguistic rights on March 16-17, 2000 with support from the *International Work Group on Indigenous Affairs*

(IWGIA). The proceedings of this conference were published in April 2000. Four resolutions were adopted during the conference, one of which demanded that:

'...legal provisions be made to allow the use of all mother-tongues and the verdict of the court be declared void since it runs against the values of the present Constitution of Nepal which recognises all mother-tongues as "national languages" and the Local Autonomy Act [LSGA] of 2055 which contains provisions for the use, preservation and promotion of mother-tongues by local bodies.' (NEFEN 2000: 8)

As the above example illustrates, many language activists in Nepal feel powerless to guarantee their rights in the face of government opposition. Moreover, disagreements exist between different indigenous peoples' movements on the correct path to achieve equality. At opposing ends of the continuum are advocates who propose working to change the system from within versus militant organizations who have allied themselves with the Maoist movement, believing that parliamentary debate will not deliver practical results at the grassroots level. The middle ground, however, is occupied by a plethora of organizations who support minority rights but who are fast losing faith in the government's desire to bring about any meaningful change.

There is widespread concern among ethnic activists and rural villagers alike that despite the legal provisions respecting their fundamental rights, an institutional inertia exists regarding the emotive issues of mother tongue education and the access of minority communities to positions in government and administration. Indigenous people, particularly in rural areas poorly serviced by infrastructure, have very limited access to the existing legal provisions to defend their rights and are intimidated by the very institutions which are meant to represent and protect them.

While the issues are complex, there are three principal reasons that indigenous people rarely resort to legal means to defend their rights. First, the machinery of government is still primarily controlled by 'high caste' groups who have held power for the last 250 years and have little incentive to change or relinquish control. Second, educated indigenous peoples in both urban and rural Nepal are reluctant to use official channels—legal or administrative—to redress inequalities since they believe the system to be weighted against their interests and know their chances of success to be limited. This is an understandable concern, as illustrated by the rulings against Newar and Maithili illustrated above, particularly since fluency in spoken Nepali and a high degree of literacy are prerequisites for legal exchange. These are skills which many indigenous people still do not have. Third, many indigenous peoples and linguistic minorities in rural areas are simply not aware of their rights, or even if they are, have little practical knowledge of how and where to assert them. The above factors, combined with continued social and linguistic discrimination, have inhibited the development and inclusive participation of

indigenous linguistic communities in the Nepali nation.

Given the disjuncture between the legal and constitutional provisions for linguistic equality on the one hand, and the reality of the overwhelming strength of Nepali on the other, the despair of activist groups representing minority ethnic and linguistic communities is quite understandable. We suggest that the crisis lies less in the formulation of policy, and rather more in the desire of governing classes to change the status quo. Since many obstacles relate to implementation, concerned groups need to focus their energies on providing a clear roadmap for achieving their present goals alongside formulating new bills, acts and amendments.

Language and the census

Periodic and in depth national censuses are essential tools for understanding the ethnolinguistic composition of a nation. Some countries do not even include questions about language in their surveys for fear of the political ramifications of research in this area, and that it is rare to find census questions about the usual language of the home, subsidiary languages spoken, practical multilingualism or an appreciation of the fact that reading skills may be distinguished from writing skills in any given language. While the challenges outlined above are faced by all countries embarking on the painstaking process of a national census, Nepal has a number of particular hazards of its own.

The challenges of census-taking faced by Nepal are accentuated by the lack of infrastructure, the extremity of the physical terrain, the profound absence of motorable roads and the cultural prejudices of some of the ruling elite. Walks of up to ten days from the road-head to access alpine valleys have been known to deter many census collectors from actually visiting these areas. The disjuncture between urban educated Nepalis and their often semi-literate rural cousins is stark, and both literal and figurative miscommunication are common when the former ask potentially invasive questions of the latter.

The first census of Nepal was conducted in 1911 with the aim of surveying population growth, migration and social structure. Thereafter, the first systematic census was conducted between 1952 and 1954, and there have been regular census enumerations every decade since then.

There is a surprisingly high variation in the number of languages reported in the censuses of Nepal since the 1950s: 44 languages were returned in 1952-1954, 36 in 1961, 17 in 1971, 18 in 1981, 32 in 1991 and 92 in 2001. This massive oscillation cannot be said to reflect the actual state of languages spoken in Nepal, but reflects rather the changing political ideologies of the nation state over the last half century. Census statistics are routinely conscripted to argue for monolingual and multilingual visions of Nepal, even

when both sides agree that the data are unreliable.

The 2001 census is by far the most rigorously enumerated one so far, with carefully collected data on both ethnicity and language. Two specific questions pertaining to language were asked in the 2001 census: Which language do you speak as a mother tongue and which language do you speak as a second language? The guidelines issued by the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) define ‘mother tongue’ as “the language acquired first by children in their childhood from their parents and used in their households since they start speaking”, while ‘second language’ is defined as any language other than the mother tongue learned and used to speak with neighbours (as cited in Yadava 2003: 138).

It is encouraging to note that HMG Nepal has recognised the difference between language and ethnicity, and has started to collect data on both. Until recently, the language category in the census often served as a substitute for enumerating ethnicity. However, now that this obstacle has been overcome, the CBS should give serious thought to enumerating bilingualism and multilingualism the forthcoming census of 2011. Such data will provide a far more accurate picture of language use in Nepal.

Language and media

The freedoms enshrined in the constitution of post-1990 Nepal led to a boom in all forms of media production, primarily the print sector and FM radio. Ethnic and linguistic minorities have used their newly-found freedoms to great effect, with a plethora of journals, newspapers and magazines in local languages now available in Kathmandu and in district centres. Even centrally-run media providers have sought to catch up with the informal and private sectors, with state-owned Radio Nepal broadcasting news bulletins in several mother tongues, including Hindi, Magar, Newar and Tamang, and Nepal Television (NTV) producing a limited number of small-screen tele-films in local languages.

This freedom of linguistic expression has done much to instil a sense of civic and community pride in local languages and minority mother tongues, and marked a real change of course from the Panchayat-era policy which discouraged dissemination of information in any language other than Nepali. To this day, however, Nepal is widely believed to be a nation formed in large part through a common language: Nepali. Chudamani Bandhu suggests that the beginning of the publication of the Nepali daily, *Gorkhapatra*, in 1901 was a major event “in the history of the Nepali language” and one which marked “the beginning of modern Nepali” (1989: 125-126). HMG fears that this sense of national cohesion may be eroded through supporting minorities language media, and has

shown some trepidation at further extending state media services for other minority languages.

Some of the most exciting recent developments in media are coming from the digital sector. Nepal-based and Nepali language Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have blossomed over the last decade, and software localisation projects (including a Nepali version of Linux) and newly standardised Nepali fonts are making it easier for first-time computer users who have little or no literacy in English to learn basic computing skills in and through Nepali. While access to ICT infrastructure is still limited to a tiny percentage of Nepal's population, the completion of the East-West information superhighway and the deployment of VSAT Internet access in some remote district capitals are signs that access is being extended to those on the wrong side of the Nepal's digital divide (Pandey and Shrestha 2005). It remains to be seen whether minority language communities across Nepal will embrace the new possibilities afforded by these technologies, but the signs are good. A number of language activists are already constructing databases of lexical corpora along with literacy materials making use of Devanagari Unicode, which although designed for Nepali, can be retasked for many of Nepal's minority mother tongues working towards standardisation.

Language and education

Until 1990, the national education policy was largely intolerant of indigenous and minority languages. Since 1990 though, Nepal has come a long way in acknowledging diversity: Article 18 of the Constitution states that 'each community shall have the right to operate schools up to the primary level in its own mother tongue for imparting education to its children', even though this provision remains essentially inactive at present. This constitutional guarantee is very much in line with contemporary research and international best practices.

As John Daniel, Assistant Director-General for Education in UNESCO, writes: 'Years of research have shown that children who begin their education in their mother tongue make a better start, and continue to perform better, than those for whom school starts with a new language. The same applies to adults seeking to become literate'. This is particularly important because about 476 million of the world's illiterate people speak minority languages and live in countries where children are for the most part not taught in their mother tongue. Languages are recognised as forming an integral part of a people's cultural and historical identity, as reflected in the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001).

The National Foundation for the Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN) in Nepal also views the existence of a specific and unique language as a primary basis for the identification of an ethnicity or '*adibasi janajati*'. The Foundation is implementing

a range of policies to support endangered and indigenous languages. Dictionary projects are particularly popular, since the products have both practical benefits and symbolic capital: linguistic minorities can canvas central and local government more effectively for mother tongue education when a lexical corpus has been prepared and the process of standardising an unwritten language is already underway. There is an increasing realisation that successful language maintenance efforts ideally combine literacy and education with an improvement in the economic and political standing of the minority language community.

Language and gender

Across the greater Himalayan region, disaggregated census data demonstrate that women retain fluency in their ethnic mother tongue for longer than men but are on the whole less literate. While men from disadvantaged mountain areas commonly engage in trade with other communities or seek wage labour in local centres and neighbouring states, thereby learning regional *lingua francas* and foreign languages, women are still in many cases the natural resource managers of a community. Whether collecting firewood and forest products, fetching water, working the fields or raising children, women in remote Himalayan villages of Nepal have plenty of cause to use their indigenous mother tongue in daily life.

One of the recommendations of the Education for All (EFA) five-year project which commenced last year was that Nepal now take steps to ensure that rural primary schools are staffed by more local women teachers who can explain words and concepts using the mother tongue of the students as a medium to help them transition to functional bilingualism. Part of this movement requires a change of mindset: dispensing with the prevailing belief that Nepal's indigenous unwritten languages are backward, primitive and somehow shameful, and moving to embrace ethnic languages as symbols of diversity and indigenous knowledge. NFDIN is leading by example through training 200 local women to work in their own communities.

Major questions remain, however, about how patterns of language use and competence relate to gender. To date, most literacy programmes for adult women have focussed on achieving basic numeracy and literacy in Nepali, and not in local mother tongues. We hope that women's empowerment projects will increasingly realise the importance of revalorising the ethnic heritage and languages of the communities they aim to support.

Language and conflict

The deployment of 'language' in public arenas, whether ethnic or national, can quickly become very politicised. The clamouring of linguistic minorities in Nepal for education in their mother tongue is as much about basic linguistic rights as it is a call for national

recognition and participation in the governance of the modern nation state. Ethnic and linguistic differences are quick to be invoked in times of conflict.

In Nepal, the violent conflict between Maoist rebels and government forces which has claimed over 12,000 lives since 1996 has tapped into the pre-existing concerns of ethnic and linguistic minorities. Some analysts even argue that the marginalisation of Nepal's disadvantaged and ethnic groups is one of the root causes of the Maoist insurgency. The Maoists have been very adept at co-opting indigenous peoples and their outstanding grievances into their overall political struggle for a constituent assembly and radical communist reforms. In their 40-point demands, the Maoist leadership address the basic rights of indigenous peoples and their mother tongues, arguing for local autonomy for communities where ethnic peoples are dominant and the provision of education in the mother tongue through secondary school.

The teaching of Sanskrit is also an inflammatory topic in contemporary Nepal. Sanskrit, the liturgical and classical language of India, to which modern spoken languages such as Hindi and Nepali are related, is intimately associated with issues such as caste, Hinduism and highly structured learning. Anti-Sanskritism has at points been one of the rallying cries of the Maoists, and one which finds favour with almost all indigenous people who see Sanskrit as the linguistic embodiment of a hegemonic heritage which they do not share. A number of ethnic and linguistic activists are at pains to point out that their platform is not so much anti-Sanskrit as it is pro-ethnic language, and that they simply want all of Nepal's mother tongues to be given the recognition and support that is accorded to Sanskrit. Sanskrit is still the only language in Nepal for which government scholarships are available for university-level study, despite the fact that Sanskrit is the mother tongue of no one in Nepal. This adds insult to injury for the indigenous peoples and linguistic minorities of Nepal, many of whom are still smarting from the imposition of Nepali as the national language in the 1990 constitution and the earlier introduction of compulsory Sanskrit up to high school level.

Language policy in neighbouring nations

Given the incredible linguistic diversity of the Himalayan region, it is interesting to compare how other nation states in the area do, or do not, address the linguistic rights of minority language communities within their borders. This comparative perspective is instructive for framing the linguistic provisions enshrined in Nepal's 1990 constitution.

Article 3 of the constitution of Bangladesh as adopted on 4 November 1972 defines the 'state language of the Republic' as Bangla, while Article 1.8 of the entirely bilingual (Dzongkha and English) Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan, circulated by email in on 26 March 2005, clearly states that 'Dzongkha is the National Language of Bhutan'.

The constitution of Pakistan, adopted on 10 April 1973, is similarly unambiguous on the importance of a national language promoting unity: ‘the national language of Pakistan is Urdu, and arrangements shall be made for its being used for official and other purposes’ (Article 251.1). However, unlike Bangladesh and Bhutan, the constitution of Pakistan accepts that ‘the English language may be used for official purposes’ until the transition to Urdu is complete, and that provincial assemblies may ‘by law prescribe measures for the teaching, promotion and use of a provincial language in addition to the national language’ (Article 251.3)

While the laws of Bangladesh, Bhutan and even Pakistan promote a monolingual national identity, the constitution of the People’s Republic of China adopted on 4 December 1982 is seemingly more tolerant of minority languages. While the state ‘promotes the nationwide use of Putonghua [Mandarin]’ according to Article 19, ‘people of all nationalities have the freedom to use and develop their own spoken and written languages, and to preserve or reform their own ways and customs’ particularly in autonomous areas or in local government (Articles 4 and 21).

The Republic of India has a more nuanced view of linguistic diversity, and many clauses of its constitution, most recently updated in 1996, allude to or explicitly specify the rights of minority language communities. Although article 343 of the constitution states that the ‘official language of the Union shall be Hindi in the Devanagari script’, parliamentary business may also be transacted in English (Article 120). Across India, however, individual states have considerable control over which languages should be used as the official media of state legislative and administrative business, and the Eighth Schedule of the constitution lists 18 languages which have been officially endorsed by the central government as languages of state communication.

Looking at constitutional and legal provisions alone, then, the Constitution of Nepal is not unsympathetic to minority languages, particularly when compared to some of its staunchly monolingual neighbours. It can be argued that small nations, almost by definition, must strive to foster linguistic unity—somewhat in the manner that Bhutan is attempting—to avoid Balkanisation and ethnic strife. Nation states such as China and India, being at once so vast and heterogeneous, have little choice but to tolerate and even encourage local languages as tools of administration and education.

Another conclusion which might be drawn is that constitutional ambiguity is a way forwards. Ram Kumar Dahal, writing on the multiplicity of speech communities in India, notes that the aim of including English as the ‘auxiliary language for at least fifteen years’ was to help standardise and institutionalise Hindi ‘all over India’ (2000: 156-157). India’s failure to achieve this goal has resulted in various languages of administration and communication, leading to the kind of code-switching and rampant multilin-

gualism which is so often immortalised in Bollywood films.

Signs of hope and the way forwards

The preservation of a language in its fullest sense entails the maintenance of the speech community. Reversing language death therefore requires the preservation of the culture and habitat in which a language is spoken. While many of the languages spoken as mother tongues in the Himalayas today will likely only survive, if at all, as second languages in the coming years, that is in itself no small feat. Supporting minority languages and halting linguistic decline must become an integral element in securing the sustainable livelihoods of diverse mountain peoples. Integrated development programmes which focus on the vulnerability of marginalised peoples in Nepal should introduce a component of support for the languages and livelihoods which are presently under threat.

A number of national and international organisations working to support indigenous minority communities are worth mentioning here. Terralingua <www.terralingua.org> supports the integrated protection, maintenance and restoration of the world's biological, cultural, and linguistic diversity through an innovative program of research, education, policy and on-the-ground action. Collaborating with the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and UNESCO, Terralingua have authored a number of excellent reports on biocultural diversity and indigenous and traditional peoples in the world's 200 global ecoregions.

The British Department for International Development (DFID), through its Enabling State Programme (ESP), has recently provided a three-year grant to the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) to support the empowerment of Nepal's marginalised ethnic groups. Entitled the Janajati (indigenous ethnic group) Empowerment Programme (JEP), the project has the explicit purpose of increasing the participation of Nepal's disadvantaged ethnic peoples in socioeconomic and political processes at central and district levels. Focussing on local capacity building and strengthening civil society networks, JEP proposes to preserve and further develop Nepal's ethnic languages and help advocate for linguistic rights.

In terms of research output, the Central Department of Linguistics (CDL) in Nepal has embarked upon an ambitious interdisciplinary project known as the Linguistic Survey of Nepal (LINSUN) which will identify and analyse Nepal's languages to produce an encyclopaedia of Nepal's languages and an archive for linguistic data on endangered languages. The Chintang and Puma Documentation Project (CPDP), spearheaded by the University of Leipzig in conjunction with CDL in Nepal, is working on the linguistic and ethnographic documentation of two endangered Kiranti languages of Nepal. The core objective of the project is to provide audiovisual documentation of language practice with rich linguistic and ethnographic description.

Language revitalisation campaigns aim to increase the prestige, wealth and power of speakers of endangered mother tongues, to give the language a strong presence in the education system and to provide the language with a written form to encourage literacy and improve access to electronic technology. Linguistic diversity is, after all, the human store of historically acquired knowledge about how to use and maintain some of the world's most vulnerable and biologically diverse environments. As the writers of UNESCO's hard-hitting report conclude, 'If during the next century we lose more than half of our languages, we also seriously undermine our chances for life on Earth. From this perspective, fostering the health and vigour of ecosystems is one and the same goal as fostering the health and vigour of human societies, their cultures, and their languages. We need an integrated biocultural approach to the planet's environmental crisis' (2003: 44). Biocultural development projects need to involve and mobilise communities to build positive values for indigenous languages.

To sum up, this paper offers a situational analysis to help frame current debates about language policy and the linguistic diversity of Nepal. We hope that the other two papers in this volume, which focus on policy, planning and recommendations and capacity building, institutional support and coordination, respectively, will be able to draw on the background details gathered together here.

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