

# **Linguistic Diversity in Nepal Perspectives on Language Policy**

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A paper presented at an international seminar on  
"Constitutionalism and Diversity in Nepal"  
Organized by Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, TU  
in collaboration with MIDEA Project and ESP-Nepal  
22-24 August 2007  
Kathmandu, Nepal

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## Outline

Linguistic diversity is closely related to ecological and cultural diversity. The concept of ecosystem is guided by the principle that living entities exist through a network of interrelationships. The domains of both biological, linguistic and cultural diversities hold a mutually reinforcing relationship. 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 similar rate of linguistic and cultural variation. Human success in inhabiting the earth has been due to human ability to develop diverse cultures and languages which suit all kinds of environments. Now it may be argued that if diversity is a prerequisite to successful humanity then the preservation of linguistic diversity is crucial to humanity. Crystal (2000: 34) argues that "if the development of multiple cultures is so important then the role of languages becomes critical, for cultures are chiefly transmitted through spoken and written languages." 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 (as cited in Yadava and Turin (2007)).

Besides, various languages serve as symbols of ethnic identity and each speech community wants to preserve and promote its language. Robinson (as cited in *The Mother-Tongue Dilemma*, UNESCO 2003) likewise notes that "for a multilingual approach to work, governments must see linguistic diversity as a boon and not a problem to be dealt with." As languages serve as fundamental means of communication and interpersonal relationship, linguistic diversity needs to be looked upon as a societal resource to be planned for its full utilization.

Nepal is a multilingual nation. However, a single language has been given power, recognition and prestige while, as a corollary, the remaining minority languages are impoverished and marginalized. This, along with some other factors, have led to violent conflicts and separatist movements. It is, therefore, necessary to address these issues of linguistic minorities in the context of inclusive democracy in Nepal.

This paper is organized into three sections. Section 1 presents a situational analysis of linguistic diversity in Nepal. In section 2 we tease out the existing legal provisions vis-à-vis linguistic diversity and its exclusion. Section 3 is an attempt to see how the linguistic diversity can be accommodated in the form of an inclusive language policy compatible with the federal structuring of the state.

## 1. Linguistic diversity in Nepal: a situational analysis

The great biological diversity of 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 100 officially-recognised caste and ethnic groups who speak around 92 languages officially-recognised by the state (CBS 2001; Yadava and Turin 2007).

It is in order to understand the situation of linguistic diversity in Nepal before we undertake to plan it and formulating a viable language policy. For the purpose, we are going to deal with the identification of Nepal's languages, their genetic affiliation, writing systems, resources, and language attitude.

## 1.1 Identification

There have been made some attempts to identify the numerous languages spoken in this country as mother tongues. One of these attempts is the enumeration of languages in the various censuses. Since the 1952/54 census languages have consistently been reported. However, their number shows variation in these censuses. Except 'other', 'unknown' and 'not stated' languages, there were recorded 44 (1952/54), 36 (1961), 17 (1971), 18 (1981), and 31 (1991) languages in the last five censuses (Gurung, 2002:37) but their figures have drastically increased to 92. However, there still remain quite a few languages (used by as many as 168,340 strong speakers, i.e.0.74 per cent of the total population) which are lumped together into an 'unknown' slot in the lack of adequate information. This increase is due to the fact that a large number of languages used as mother tongues have been returned for the first time because of the growing awareness of several ethnic minorities about their distinct cultural and linguistic identity. Such mother tongues include Bram/Bramu, Bhujel, Chhantyal, Dura, Ghale, Kaike, Kisan, Kusunda, Munda, Raute, Angika, Yholmo, Khariya, Lhomi, Dungmali, and Sadhani. Deaf's Nepali Sign Language has been reported. Besides, the earlier censuses recorded all the Rai languages under a single heading, called 'Rai group of languages'. In the 2001 census, however, there have been enumerated 22 separate languages in this group. Similarly, Angika and Bajjika, which were earlier considered the dialects of Maithili and Bhojpuri, respectively, have now emerged as distinct languages. In addition, there have also been reported some foreign languages (mostly spoken in India) for the first time; they are Hariyanwi, Magahi, Kuki, Mizo, Nagamese, Sindi, Assamese, Oriya, Kurmali, Koche, Dzonkha, and Chinese, apart from English.

This considerable rise in the number of languages spoken in Nepal may be ascribed to a number of reasons. Since the restoration of democracy there has been continual increase in awareness among linguistic minorities (including indigenous peoples) about their mother tongues. Their ethnic organizations had been creating awareness of preserving and promoting their cultural identity including their languages. Taking cognizance of this reality, the CBS also sought the cooperation and support of these organizations during the enumeration for the 2001 census. Following the enumeration, some linguists were also consulted for the precise identification of Nepal's languages.

Presented below is the complete list of the languages arranged in order of their number of speakers reported in the 2001 census.

*Table 1: Population by Mother Tongue( Census 2001)*

S.No.	Mother Tongue	Number	%	Cumulative
	<i>Total</i>	22736934	100.00	100.00
1	<b>Nepali</b>	11053255	48.61	48.61
2	<b>Maithili</b>	2797582	12.30	60.92
3	<b>Bhojpuri</b>	1712536	7.53	68.45
4	<b>Tharu (Dagaura/Rana)</b>	1331546	5.86	74.31
5	<b>Tamang</b>	1179145	5.19	79.49
6	<b>Newar</b>	825458	3.63	83.12
7	<b>Magar</b>	770116	3.39	86.51
8	<b>Awadhi</b>	560744	2.47	88.98
9	<b>Bantawa</b>	371056	1.63	90.61
10	<b>Gurung</b>	338925	1.49	92.10
11	<b>Limbu</b>	333633	1.47	93.57

12	<b>Bajjika</b>	237947	1.05	94.61
13	Urdu	174840	0.77	95.38
14	Rajbansi	129829	0.57	95.95
15	Sherpa	129771	0.57	96.52
16	Hindi	105765	0.47	96.99
17	Chamling	44093	0.19	97.18
18	Santhali	40260	0.18	97.36
19	Chepang	36807	0.16	97.52
20	Danuwar	31849	0.14	97.66
21	Jhangar/ Dhangar	28615	0.13	97.79
22	Sunuwar	26611	0.12	97.90
23	Bangla	23602	0.10	98.01
24	Marwari (Rajsthani)	22637	0.10	98.11
25	Manjhi	21841	0.10	98.20
26	Thami	18991	0.08	98.29
27	Kulung	18686	0.08	98.37
28	Dhimal	17308	0.08	98.45
29	Angika	15892	0.07	98.52
30	Yakkha	14648	0.06	98.58
31	Thulung	14034	0.06	98.64
32	Sangpang	10810	0.05	98.69
33	Bhujel/ Khawas	10733	0.05	98.74
34	Darai	10210	0.04	98.78
35	Khaling	9288	0.04	98.82
36	Kumal	6533	0.03	98.85
37	Thakali	6441	0.03	98.88
38	Chhantyal/ Chhantel	5912	0.03	98.90
39	Nepali Language Sign	5743	0.03	98.93
40	Tibetan	5277	0.02	98.95
41	Dumi	5271	0.02	98.98
42	Jirel	4919	0.02	99.00
43	Wambule/ Umbule	4471	0.02	99.02
44	Puma	4310	0.02	99.04
45	Yholmo	3986	0.02	99.05
46	Nachhiring	3553	0.02	99.07
47	Dura	3397	0.01	99.08
48	Meche	3301	0.01	99.10
49	Pahari	2995	0.01	99.11
50	Lepcha/ Lapche	2826	0.01	99.13
51	Bote	2823	0.01	99.14
52	Bahing	2765	0.01	99.15
53	Koi/ Koyu	2641	0.01	99.16
54	Raji	2413	0.01	99.17
55	Hayu	1743	0.01	99.18
56	Byangshi	1734	0.01	99.19
57	Yamphu/ Yamphe	1722	0.01	99.19
58	Ghale	1649	0.01	99.20
59	Khariya	1575	0.01	99.21
60	Chhiling	1314	0.01	99.21
61	Lohorung	1207	0.01	99.22
62	Punjabi	1165	0.01	99.23
63	Chinese	1101	0.00	99.23
64	English	1037	0.00	99.23
65	Mewahang	904	0.00	99.24
66	Sanskrit	823	0.00	99.24
67	Kaike	794	0.00	99.25
68	Raute	518	0.00	99.25
69	Kisan	489	0.00	99.25

70	Churauti	408	0.00	99.25
71	Baram/ Maramu	342	0.00	99.25
72	Tilung	310	0.00	99.25
73	Jero/ Jerung	271	0.00	99.26
74	Dungmali	221	0.00	99.26
75	Oriya	159	0.00	99.26
76	Lingkhim	97	0.00	99.26
77	Kusunda	87	0.00	99.26
78	Sindhi	72	0.00	99.26
79	Koche	54	0.00	99.26
80	Hariyanwi	33	0.00	99.26
81	Magahi	30	0.00	99.26
82	Sam	23	0.00	99.26
83	Kurmali	13	0.00	99.26
84	Kagate	10	0.00	99.26
85	Dzonkha	9	0.00	99.26
86	Kuki	9	0.00	99.26
87	Chhintang	8	0.00	99.26
88	Mizo	8	0.00	99.26
89	Nagamese	6	0.00	99.26
90	Lhomi	4	0.00	99.26
91	Assamise	3	0.00	99.26
92	Sadhani	2	0.00	99.26
93	Unknown Language	168340	0.74	100.00

This uncertainty about the number of Nepal’s languages and their reduced enumeration in the last five censuses may be attributed to their lack of required information and awareness about mother tongues and also the “one nation – one language” policy adopted during the Panchayat regime.

Setting aside the various censuses, attempts have also been made by some linguists to identify Nepal’s languages by linguists. Malla (1989) and Toba (1992) mention 70 while *Ethnologue* (2005) lists 126 languages one of which, called Kusunda, has been claimed to be dead. All these attempts (including censuses) for identification of languages spoken in Nepal as mother tongues are some sort of approximation or rationalization of information and cannot be deemed final.

## 1.2 Genetic affiliation

The languages enumerated in the 2001 census belong to the four language families, viz. Indo-European, Sino-Tibetan, Austro-Asiatic, and Dravidian.

In Nepalese context, Indo-European family of languages mainly comprise Indo-Aryan group of languages, which forms the largest group of languages in terms of speakers, viz. nearly 80 per cent. Some of the Indo-Aryan languages spoken in Nepal are yet to be identified in the lack of their description. These languages include Tharu, Bote, Darai, and Danuwar.

Another important group of Nepal’s languages is the Tibeto-Burman group of Sino-Tibetan family. Though it is spoken by relatively lesser number of people than the Indo-European family, it consists of the largest number of languages, viz. about 57 languages. Contrary to speakers of Indo-Aryan languages, there has been steady decline in speakers of Sino-Tibetan languages from the 1952/54 to the 1981 censuses, viz. 21.8 (1952/54), 19.26 (1961), 17.16 (1971), and 12.06 (1981) per cent. In the last two censuses, they have, however, increased to 16.76 per cent (1991) and nearly 19 per cent (2001). Their decline and increase may also be due to the reason ascribed to those of Indo-European languages.

In addition to these two major language families, Nepal also includes two minor language families. They are Austric branch of the Austro-Asiatic family and Dravidian family of languages. The Austric languages comprise Santhali of the northern Munda group and

Khariya of the southern Munda group. It is to be noted that Satar has been reported in all the censuses but Santhal has been wrongly reported as a separate language except in the 1952/54 census. The 2001 census lumps both Satar and Santhal together into a single language, called Santhali. It is suggested that Munda (with 67 speakers) should also be included within Santhali, in that it is just a variant name of the same language. According to the 2001 census, Santhali speakers are 40, 193 in number, 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 Munda branch is Kharia, which has been introduced in the 2001 census for the first time. This language is spoken by 1575, i.e. 0.01%. All the Austric languages are spoken by groups of tribal peoples from the eastern Terai and make up approximately 0.19 per cent of the total population.

A single language of Dravidian language spoken in Nepal is called Jhangar in the region east of Kosi river and Dhangar in the region west of Kosi river. It constitutes the northernmost part of Dravidian family of languages. It is said to be a regional variant of Kurux spoken in Jharkhand State of India though it shows divergence in its vocabulary and grammar (Gordon, 1976; Yadava, 2002). According to the 2001 census, it is spoken by 28,615, i.e. 0.13% of the total population of the country. Its speakers have been reported to be 4832 (1952/54), 9140 (1961), and 15175 (1991). But it was not listed in the 1971 and 1981 censuses.

## **1.3 Language resources**

### **1.3.1 Writing systems**

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Most of the indigenous languages spoken in Nepal are still confined to their 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 and with increased language shift. It is therefore time to document these spoken forms before they are lost to posterity.

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 was developed from the Gupta or Brahmi script, which was employed for writing Sanskrit in the mid-seventh century.

Newar (or Nepal Bhasha) is another Tibeto-Burman language with an ancient written literary tradition. Introduced in the 9th century, the Newari script is still in use even though with the passage of time the script underwent changes. It was used in most of the earlier documents written in the Kathmandu Valley. Over time, there emerged variants of the Newari 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 BS: 5-10). Now the Newar language is also written in the Devanagiri script for the sake of convenience in reading,

writing and printing.

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 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 Devanagri 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 can be written in Roman script.

### 1.3.2 Language Materials

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In addition to writing systems, an attempt has also been made to identify other language resources (such as newspapers, magazines, journals, learning materials, literacy materials, literature, folk songs/their audi-video recordings, telefilms and films) available in various languages in the following table (Yadava et al *in progress*):

**Table 1: Materials**

SN	Name of the Language	Language Resources											
		Ne ws pap er	Ma ga zine	Jo ur nal	Lear ning Mate rials	Lite racy Mate rials	Lite ratu re	Poe ms	Play s	Fictions (short stories, novels)	Folk Songs (CD/Cas sette)	Tele Fil m	F il m
1	Awadhi	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
2	Bahing	x	x	√	√	√	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
3	Bajjika	No publications available on this language while taking data.											
4	Baram	x	x	x	x	√	x	x	x	x	√	x	x
5	Bhojpuri	√	√	x	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
6	Bhujel	x	√	x	√	x	x	x	x	x	√	x	x
7	Bote	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	√	x	x
8	Byasi	x	x	x	√	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
9	Chamling Rai	√	√	x	√	√	√	√	x	√	√	x	x
10	Chepang	No publications available on this language while taking data.											
11	Chhantyal	x	x	√	√	x	x	x	x	√	√	x	x
12	Danuwar	No publications											
13	Darai	x	√	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	√	x	√
14	Dhimal	x	√	x	√	x	x	√		x	√	√	x

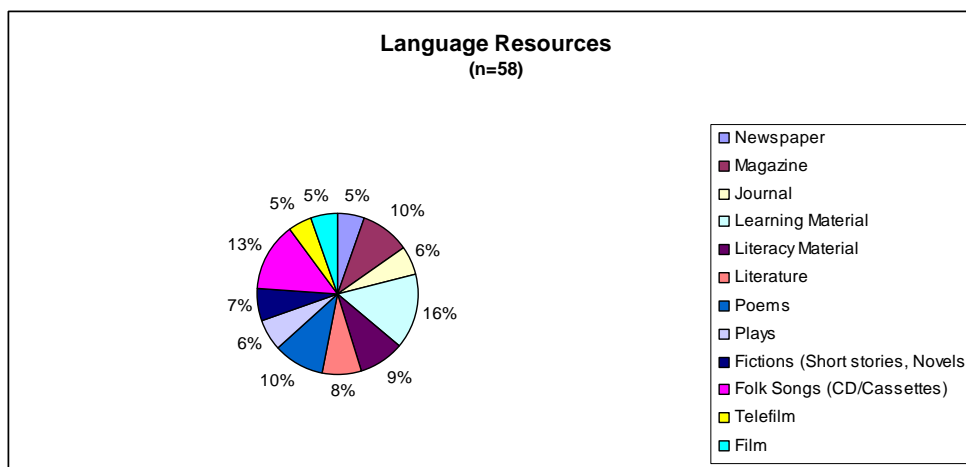
15	Dolpo	x	√	x	√	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	√
16	Dumi Rai	x	√	x	√	√	√	√	x	√	√	x	x
17	Dura	x	x	x	√	x	√	x	x	x	√	x	x
18	Gurung	x	x	x	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
19	Hindi	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
20	Jero	No publications available on this language while taking data.											
21	Koyi/Koyu	x	√	√	√	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
22	Kulung	x	√	x	√	√	x	√	x	x	√	x	x
23	Kumal	No publications available on this language while taking data.											
24	Limbu	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
25	Lohorung	No publications available on this language while taking data.											
26	Magahi	x	x	x	√	x	√	√	x	x	x	x	x
27	Magar Dhut	x	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
28	Magar Pang	x	√	x	√	√	√	√	x	x	√	x	x
29	Maithili	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
30	Majhi	x	x	x	√	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
31	Meche	x	x	x	x	x	x	√	√	x	√	x	x
32	Nachhiring	x	x	√	x	x	x	√	x	x	x	x	x
33	Na <sup>h</sup> :ke <sup>h</sup> / Na <sup>h</sup> :ge <sup>h</sup> / Nawa	No publications available on this language while taking data.											
34	Nepal Basha /Newar	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
35	Nu <sup>h</sup> bri Ke (Larke)	No publications available on this language while taking data.											
36	Pahari	x	x	x	√	√	x	x	x	x	√	x	x
37	Puma (Rokongla)	x	√	x	√	√	√	√	√	x	x	x	x
38	Rajbanshi	√	√	x	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	x	√
39	Sampang Rai	x	√		√	√	x	x	x	x	x	Proposed	x
40	Santhali (Satar)	No publications available on this language while taking data.											
41	Sherpa	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
42	Shingsa BhoTe	√	x	x	√	√	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
43	Surel	No publications available on this language while taking data.											
44	Tajpuriya	x	x	x	√	x	x	x	x	x	√	x	x
45	Tamang	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
46	Thakali	x	x	√	√	x	x	√	x	x	√	x	x
47	Thami	x	x	x	√	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x



48	Tharu	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
49	Thulung	x	√	x	√	x	√	√	x	√	√	x
50	Tokpegola/D hokpya	No publications available on this language while taking data.										
51	Uranw/ Kudux	No publications available on this language while taking data.										
52	Urdu	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	x
53	Walung	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	√	x	x
54	Wambule	x	√		√	x	x	√	√	x	√	x
55	Yakkha/ Yaksa	√	x	x	√	x	x	√	x	x	√	x
56	Yolmo	x	√	x	√	x	x	√	x	x	√	x

Only a very few non-Nepali languages have all kinds of publications and a few publications are available in most of the Non-Nepali languages. On the other hand, some Non-Nepali languages still do not have any kind of publications. They remain only in oral form and there is an urgent need to document these languages and care to be taken by the government side. The Pie Chart: 1 below shows the situation of the Non-Nepali languages with respect to publications.

**Pie Chart: 1 Materials**



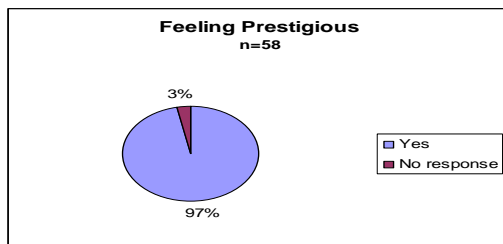
As information elicited so far, the availability of the newspaper in Non-Nepali languages is 5% (14 language organizations out of 58), 10% magazines (26 language organizations out of 58), 6% journal (15 language organizations out of 58), 16% learning materials (39 language organizations out of 58), 9% literacy materials (24 language organizations out of 58), 8% literature (20 language organizations out of 58), 10% poems (27 language organizations out of 58), 6% plays (16 language organizations out of 58), 7% fiction (17 language organizations out of 58), 13% folk songs (35 language organizations out of 58), 5% telefilms (13 language organizations out of 58), and 5% film (14 language organizations out of 58).

All kinds of publications are available in nine non-Nepali languages such as Awadhi, Bhojpuri, Hindi, Maithili, Nepal Bhasha/Newar, Sherpa, Tamang, Tharu and Urdu. On the other hand, twelve languages such as Bajjika, Chepang, Danuwar, Jero, Kumal, Lohorung, Na<sup>h</sup>:ke<sup>h</sup>/Na<sup>h</sup>:ge<sup>h</sup>/Nawa, Nuhbri Ke (Larke), Santhali (Satar), Surel, Tokpegola/Dhokpya, and Uranw/Kudux have no publications. In addition, the rest of the Non-Nepali languages have some publications available and the members of the language organizations are trying to produce the materials in their own mother tongue.

## 1.4 Language attitude

The responses the participants of the 58 language organizations gave during the interview are presented below in the Pie Chart 1 (Yadava et al *in progress*).

**Pie Chart: 1 Feeling Prestigious**



The majority of the responses (97% or 56 language organizations out of 58) has strong positive attitude toward their mother tongue. They feel more prestigious to use their mother tongue. They did not feel embarrassed about speaking their native languages in the presence of the speakers of the dominant language.

There are other sociolinguistic factors such as language maintenance and loyalty which need to be studied for the better understanding of the language situation in Nepal.

## 2. Existing provisions and linguistic exclusion

Despite being multicultural and multilingual, Nepal enshrined 'ethnic', instead of 'civic', nationalism in its task of nation-building (Oakes 2001). It has been reflected in various regimes in the country. Following the Gorkha conquest, what was Gorkhali or Khas, the language of ruling elites, also spoken by hill people as lingua franca or mother tongue, assumed the new nomenclature 'Nepali' with an intent to transform it into the national and official language. Rana regime further perpetuated this 'one nation-one language' policy. This was a deliberate plan to eliminate all but one language, viz. Nepali. This is evident from the fact that Newar and Hindi language movements were suppressed. Besides, the following recommendations formed Nepal's language policy in education:

- (i) The medium of instruction should be the national language in primary, middle, and higher educational institutions, because any language which cannot be made lingua franca and which does not serve legal proceedings in court should not find a place ... The use of national language can bring about equality among all classes of people, can be an anchor-sheet for Nepalese nationality, and can be the main instrument for promoting literature.
- (ii) No other language should be thought, even optionally in primary school because few children will need them, they would hinder the use of Nepali, parents would insist on their children

taking them whether capable or not, time is needed for other more important and fundamental learning – there are not enough well-qualified teachers, and those who wish and need additional languages, can begin them in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. (NEPC 1956:95)

The motive behind prescribing the use of Nepali alone is clear from the following extract:

If the younger generation is taught to use Nepali as the basic language then other languages will gradually disappear, the greater the national strength and unity will result...Local dialects and tongues other than Nepali should be vanished [banished]from the playground as early as possible in the life of the child. ((NEPC 1956; as cited in Gurung 2002 and Maddox 2003)

The use of Nepali in education was further reinforced by K.I. Singh government in 1957 by prescribing Nepali as medium of instruction.

The case of Nepali was further reinforced during the Panchayat regime. In 1961 the National System of Education was introduced to further promote the use of only Nepali in administration, education and media in compliance with the Panchayat slogan 'one language, one dress, one country' (*eutaa bhasha, eutaa bhash, eutaa desh*). In addition, Nepali Company Act was passed in 1964 directing all companies to keep their records in English or Nepali.

With the restoration of democracy there has been growing awareness among non-Nepali speaking people about their culture and languages since they consider them as the symbols through which they strive to assert their identity and recognition. The constitution of Nepal (1991) framed after the restoration of democracy recognized languages other than Nepali and made the following provisions about the non-Nepali languages:

(1) The Nepali language in the Devanagari script is the language of the nation of Nepal. The Nepali language shall be the official language. (*Constitution of Nepal, Part 1, Article 6.1*)

(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 6.2*)

In addition, the constitution also made a provision for the use of mother tongues in primary education (( *Constitution of Nepal, Part 1, Article 18.2*). It also guaranteed Nepalese as a fundamental right to preserve their culture, scripts and their languages ((*Constitution of Nepal, Part 1, Article 26.2*).

The greatest weakness of these provisions was the lack of any explicit plan and policy to implement them.

To tease out these constitutional provisions about language, a recommendation commission for formulating policy for national languages was formed by the government in 1993. The main objectives of the commission were twofold: promotion of national languages and their use in local administration, primary education and media. There have been some advances in the use of minority languages in primary education and media. The CDC has so far developed textbooks in 14 national languages to be taught as subject. This initiative is no doubt a welcome step; for the first time some non-Nepali languages have been introduced in education. However, there are two serious drawbacks with this initiative. First, these textbooks, which are essentially the translation of the existing Nepali textbooks, are not tailored to the cultural requirements of the language communities in question. For example, it is Chaith which is the most important festival for Maithili speaking community but in compliance with the Nepali textbook the translated textbook contains a teaching unit on Dasain. This may lead to cultural imposition on non-Nepali speaking communities. Secondly, such a translated textbook with non-native content may not be easily accessible and motivating for its learners. What is essential is to develop curricula and textbooks suited to the cultures and physical milieu of the concerning language communities.

Another implementation of the commission report has been the introduction of 18 different languages in Radio Nepal though they have been made available very limited time for broadcasting.

The recommendation for the use of minority languages in local administration was later enacted into a law, the *Local Self-Governance Act* of 1999 which deputed to local bodies the right to preserve and promote local languages. 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).

Government of Nepal (GON), which participated in different international fora like Jomtin Convention and Dakar Forum, is committed to making quality primary education accessible to all children including children from indigenous and minority language groups. In pursuance of this commitment, one more goal for Nepal has been included besides other six universal goals of EFA for *ensuring the right of indigenous people and linguistic minorities to basic and primary education through mother tongue*.

To achieve the EFA/Nepal (2004-9) goals a policy of transitional multilingual education policy has been endorsed. According to this policy, a child will acquire basic educational skills through the medium of his/her mother tongue and gradually switch to a lingua franca/an official language so that s/he can "feel at home in the language in which the affairs of government are carried on" and finally learn a foreign language (e.g. English) for broader communications and access to science and technology (Fishman 1968: 698).

Quite recently, *The Interim Constitution of Nepal* (2007), an outcome of the *Andolan II*, makes the following provisions for languages:

- (1) All the languages spoken as the mother tongue in Nepal are the national languages of Nepal.
- (2) The Nepali Language in Devnagari script shall be the official language.
- (3) Notwithstanding anything contained in clause (2), it shall not be deemed to have hindered to use the mother language in local bodies and offices. State shall translate the languages so used to an official.

( *The Interim Constitution of Nepal* (2007), *Part 1, Article 5*)

Regarding the education and cultural right, the constitution enshrines the following provisions:

- (1) Each community shall have the right to get basic education in their mother tongue as provided for in the law.
- (3) Each community residing in Nepal shall have the right to preserve and promote its language, script, culture, cultural civility and heritage.

( *The Interim Constitution of Nepal* (2007), *Part 3, Article 17*)

### **3. Linguistic restructuring of the state**

The language situation in Nepal laid out above sets the stage for articulating perspectives on a viable inclusive language policy. Despite some legal provisions for the prevailing multilingual scenario in the country Nepali alone is used in all official domains, education and media. If a single language is accrued all power and prestige it results in the exclusion of minority languages and marginalization of their speakers. The negation of multilingualism naturally gives rise to a sense of antagonism. Language movements are the byproducts of such exclusion and marginalization (Pattanayak 1995:51). This is evident from the main focus of the indigenous and Madheshi activists on their language issues in their ongoing political campaigns.

At this critical juncture a multilingual nation like Nepal can remain united if it accepts its linguistic pluralism. This calls for the formulation of an inclusive language policy through which speakers of different language communities can have an equal access to the national system.

"If the language policy is to be effectively tackle processes of social exclusion it must be e-oriented , from the current culturist concerns of nationalism and ethnicity, to a more pragmatic agenda that focuses on questions of utility and access. This necessarily involves a shift in the discourse of language rights, from a monolingual agenda revolving around the primacy of the mother tongue (Brass 2003), to a recognition of the pervasive multilingualism that exists in Nepal, the utility of local, regional, national and international languages" (Maddox 2003:205)

Before articulating some perspectives on language policy, it would be in order to discuss the role of language in restructuring the state within the envisaged federal system. Of the criteria such as regionalism, language, ethnicity, historicity and development, language is considered more stable and effectual for demarcating states in Nepal. Language and culture function as an adhesive link and strengthen greater cohesion among members of a community. Hence, language and culture are prominent criteria for restructuring a state.

Experiences from some other South Asian nations, which share common geographical region and socio-economic features, also support for the linguistic restructuring of the state. For example, the earlier administrative federal states of India were reorganized in 1956 as a result of the movement for linguistic federalism. It was called the "Linguistic Reorganization of States", according to which the different states of India were demarcated and named on the basis of languages listed in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, e.g. Bengal for Bangla, Punjab for Pnjabi, and so on. Later other states such as Jharkhand (for Santhali), Uttaranchal (for Garwali) and Bodo (for Bodo) states were created on linguistic basis. Many of the conflicts in India have been addressed and settled through linguistic federalism. Bangladesh was separated from Pakistan and became an independent linguistic state. The denial of linguistic federalism demanded by minority Tamils has further aggravated the political conflict in Sri Lanka. These experiences corroborate the idea of restructuring Nepal into linguistic states. In a number of cases, esp. indigenous peoples, there is also one-to-one relation between language, ethnicity and culture and this relation makes a stronger case for linguistic states (See Appendix ). However, languages with speakers from diverse caste and ethnic groups, as in the Terai, may not be congenial for restructuring the state. In this context regionalism comprising common way of life and culture may serve as a criterion.

#### **4. Need for an inclusive language policy**

In the context of the envisaged federal structure of the country there is a need for designing Nepal's language policy to preserve and/or promote local, regional, national and international languages. Roughly speaking, this policy may be categorized as follows:

- i. Official language policy
- ii. Policy for use of language in education and media

##### **i. Official language policy**

Keeping in view the restructuring of Nepal into various linguistic states, it would be legitimate to suggest a bilingual policy for each state, a policy favouring the two official languages: a lingua franca and a regional language. Linguistic diversity "has always set the stage for the development of lingua francas" (Samarin 1972:660).

A lingua franca is used to communicate across linguistic barriers. Nepali, a lingua franca used by majority of Nepalese, is a legitimate choice for an official language. In addition, Hindi, often used as a lingua franca among Terai people, can also serve as an official language in the Terai. If states are created on linguistic basis each of them will have its regional language which can be used as another official language apart from Nepali or Hindi. Some of the possible options from among regional

languages include Maithili, Bhojpuri, Tharu, Tamang, Newar, Magar, Avadhi, Bantawa, Gurung, and Limbu. However, there may exist some minor languages (such as several Rai languages, Dhangar, Santhali, Urdu, Bhujel, etc.) confined to just one or more specific Village Development Committees. In such a case they can be used as medium of local administration provided that these languages are translated into the two official languages. This provision will ensure equal linguist right to every language community. Based on 'territorized' individual rights, such an inclusive language policy recognizes the same rights to all members of a community within a specific region.

## **ii. Policy for use of language in education and media**

According to School Level Educational Statistics of Nepal (2005), there are 4,502,697 students at primary level in Nepal; of them 16,02,047 are from indigenous groups. In addition, it has also been found that most of the school dropouts belong to these non-Nepali speaking communities. Apart from them, a large number of children from these vulnerable groups have no access to school and are debarred from the right of achieving basic education.

It has been widely accepted that all children should have opportunity to receive basic and primary education through mother tongues as their right. If we provide primary education through mother tongues children can have better learning as they can engage more actively in understanding and learning activities though their greater proficiency in them. Besides, it also can help to attract the out-of-school children from indigenous and minority language groups to join school as they will feel homely with the use of their mother tongues in education (UNESCO 1951). It is therefore desirable to envisage a policy such as 'transitional bilingual education', according to which children will start their basic education in their mother tongues for better learning and quality education, gradually switch to a lingua franca for broader communications and eventual switch to an international language such as English for global communications and access to science and technology.

We have so far discussed the policy or status planning of Nepalese languages for promoting their functions in areas such as government offices, education, and mass media. As a prerequisite, the change in status requires the development of language resources such as orthography, new vocabulary, spelling changes, dictionaries, grammars, and reading materials in these languages so that a language becomes an appropriate medium of communication for use in administration, education, etc. This branch of planning is known as 'corpus planning'. Most of Nepalese languages, which are still preliterate and undescribed, need to undergo corpus planning before introducing them in the prescribed areas.

Last but not the least, nearly one-fourth of Nepalese languages are viable to be threatened due to reasons such as lack of inter-generational language transmission, marginalized number of speakers, dearth of materials for language education and literacy, negative government and institutional language attitudes and policies including official status and use, and so on. To preserve these 'seriously endangered' or 'moribund' languages (to use Wurm's terms) before they are lost to the posterity to come, it is high time to undertake their linguistic and ethnographic documentation.

There have been various estimates about Nepalese languages in the past. However, there is a need for an authentic linguistic survey to facilitate the implementation of a language policy.

Finally, there is a need for a regulatory body to formulate, evaluate and implement the language policy.

## **Conclusion**

To sum up, Nepal is a mosaic of linguistic diversity. However, the previous centralized regimes with assimilationistic policy entrusted a single language Nepali with all power and prestige while minority languages were looked down as inferior and suppressed. With the growing awareness of individual rights there has been focus of minority accommodation. It is with these perspectives that we have proposed for a territorized bilingual policy in regional units of administration and the transitional bilingual education in policy. In a recent study it has been shown how minority languages can be better preserved and promoted by regional/local administration than the central one.

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