



# Linguistic Diversity and the Preservation of Endangered Languages

A Case Study from Nepal



बान्  
ভাষা 语言  
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भाषा  
زبان  
Language



Mark Turin

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# **Linguistic Diversity and the Preservation of Endangered Languages**

**A Case Study from Nepal**

**Mark Turin**

**International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD)**  
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# Foreword

Mountains in general and the Himalayas in particular are not only centres of extraordinary biodiversity, they are also cultural and linguistic hotspots. Of the approximately 600 languages found in the Himalayas, over 400 are spoken by groups of less than 100,000 people, and most of these are in danger of extinction. Analogous to the threat of species extinction, the extinction of languages should be regarded as an unrecoverable loss of diversity for all of humankind.

Since its foundation in 1983, ICIMOD has supported the livelihoods of mountain peoples in various ways. The Centre helps to create sustainable mountain societies by promoting an enabling environment that enhances equity and empowers marginalised mountain people in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas. This includes the preservation and promotion of the existing social, cultural and linguistic diversity as the basis of human well-being.

Mark Turin, the author of this publication, brings together a wide range of information on language diversity, endangerment, and preservation, and situates these debates in the social context of contemporary Nepal. His findings clearly illustrate the interrelatedness of language, culture, knowledge, and ethnicity, as well as the close connection with questions of minorities, political orientation, and even ecological sustainability.

A disturbingly large number of Nepal's over 100 mother tongues are severely endangered and will likely be reduced to symbolic identity markers within a generation. At the same time, we can observe a revival of ethnic identities often closely related to linguistic attributes.

The lessons drawn from this study reach far beyond the Nepali context and may be applied to other multilingual societies across the Himalayan region and worldwide. Successful efforts to keep languages from extinction ideally combine mother tongue literacy and education with improvements in the socioeconomic and political status of minority language communities.

This publication demonstrates that cultural diversity, a characteristic feature of mountain regions, is an important asset for sustainable development. Given the high level of current interest in ethnolinguistic issues in Nepal, we hope that this publication will contribute to further policy developments which acknowledge that cultural and linguistic diversity enrich society.

Michael Kollmair  
Culture, Equity, Gender and  
Governance Programme  
ICIMOD

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I would like to thank the staff of ICIMOD and in particular the former Director General, J. Gabriel Campbell, for providing me this unique opportunity to write about linguistic diversity and language endangerment in Nepal. The last few years of Nepal's political trajectory have been tumultuous, and linguistic rights have received a great deal of attention within general discussions of social inclusion. Writing about these topics has been rather like playing chess on a constantly moving board, so framing such ideas and committing them to paper has taken considerable time. I am grateful for the patience, support, and flexibility that ICIMOD has afforded me.

The Culture, Equity, Gender and Governance (CEGG) programme has been my institutional home during my tenure as a visiting scientist at ICIMOD, and I could not have hoped for a more supportive and like-minded group of colleagues. Special thanks must go to Anupam Bhatia, the then Programme Manager of CEGG, whose enthusiasm brought me on board and who has long been interested in exploring the interconnections between linguistic diversity and biodiversity. Anupam's successor as Programme Manager, Michael Kollmair, has continued in the spirit of CEGG: intellectually rigorous, dynamic and deeply committed to enhancing equity and empowering marginalised mountain people. It continues to be a pleasure to work with him and to have had the present Talking Points shepherded through the production pipeline with his care and attention. I thank him for his support and trust.

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Policy papers such as this rely on a large corpus of freely available data which has been carefully collected and compiled by individual researchers or organisations. In particular, I am grateful to the editors of the online Ethnologue, staff at the Central Bureau of Statistics, and designers and developers at the ICIMOD MENRIS Division for providing open-access resources to facilitate comparative analysis.

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Mark Turin

# Summary

This discussion paper aims to situate language in its social context, specifically within Nepal, but also across the greater Himalayan region in general. Language rights and access to education in one's mother tongue are fundamental aspects of sustainable livelihoods, all the more so when the languages and communities who speak them are under threat. This issue of Talking Points locates the growing debate about linguistic diversity and the preservation, promotion, and protection of endangered mother tongues within a wider discussion of culture, equity, gender, and governance.

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 both biodiversity and language preservation programmes. In this sometimes provocative document, I present the options and challenges for linguistic development in the greater Himalayan region.

This issue of Talking Points is intended to be a discussion paper, drawing on publicly available data together with some contextual analysis. I begin by discussing 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. The last section is devoted to comparative examples from other states in the greater Himalayan region and to an analysis of government institutions and non-government organisations which already are, or may be willing to, support linguistic projects in Nepal. Throughout, I aim to position language in the context of wider social and cultural issues.

It is my hope that policy makers may benefit from an increased appreciation of ground-level realities for understanding the complexity of the ethnolinguistic fabric of modern Nepal, and that scholars will pause for a moment to reflect on the formation and implementation of suitable policy.



# Acronyms and Abbreviations

NEFIN	Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities
NFDIN	National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization