

Part 1

Setting the Scene

The Greater Himalayan Region: A Language ‘Mega Centre’

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 in alphabetical order, Afghanistan boasts 47 living languages, Bangladesh is home to 39, Bhutan has 24, China 235, India 415, Myanmar 108, Nepal 123, and Pakistan 72 (Ethnologue 2005, online edition). The entire Himalayan region is often described as one of the ten biodiversity ‘mega centres’ of the world. This stretch of mountainous Asia is also home to one-sixth of all human languages, so the area should be thought of as a linguistic and cultural ‘mega centre’ as well, and an important site for the common heritage of humanity (Figure 1).

The Linguistic Wealth of Nepal

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 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 92 languages officially recognised by the state and a few further unidentified languages (Yadava 2003) (Figure 2).

The disparity between the language totals published by the Ethnologue, which records 123 languages, and the Government of Nepal, which lists only 92, as well as the noticeable difference between the number of recorded ethnicities and mother tongues, is interesting and important. There is no one-to-one correlation between ethnic and linguistic indicators, illustrated by the simple fact that hill Chhetris and Brahmans both speak Nepali as a mother tongue, but are recorded as two distinct caste groups (Figure 3). Counting and classifying discrete languages is a complicated, political, and in some ways subjective task. Scientific categories such as mutual intelligibility compete with culturally-specific concepts of group cohesion and identity in all language enumeration efforts.

According to census data collected in 2001, Nepal's 92 languages (including Kusunda, a genetic isolate) 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 is the largest group in terms of speaker numbers in Nepal, at around 80%

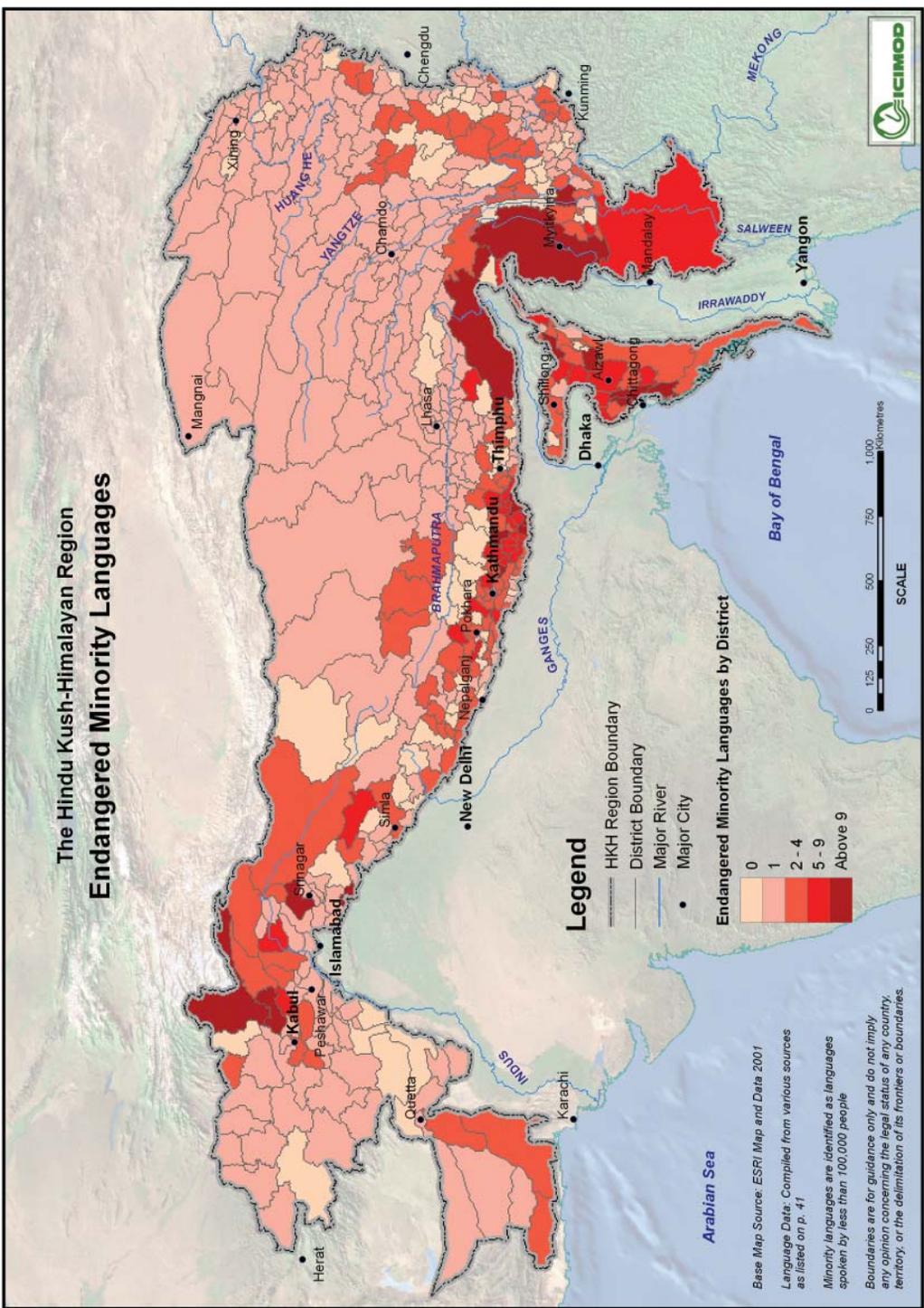


Figure 1: Map of endangered minority languages in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region
 Source: CD-ROM (in preparation), based on language data sources found on page 41

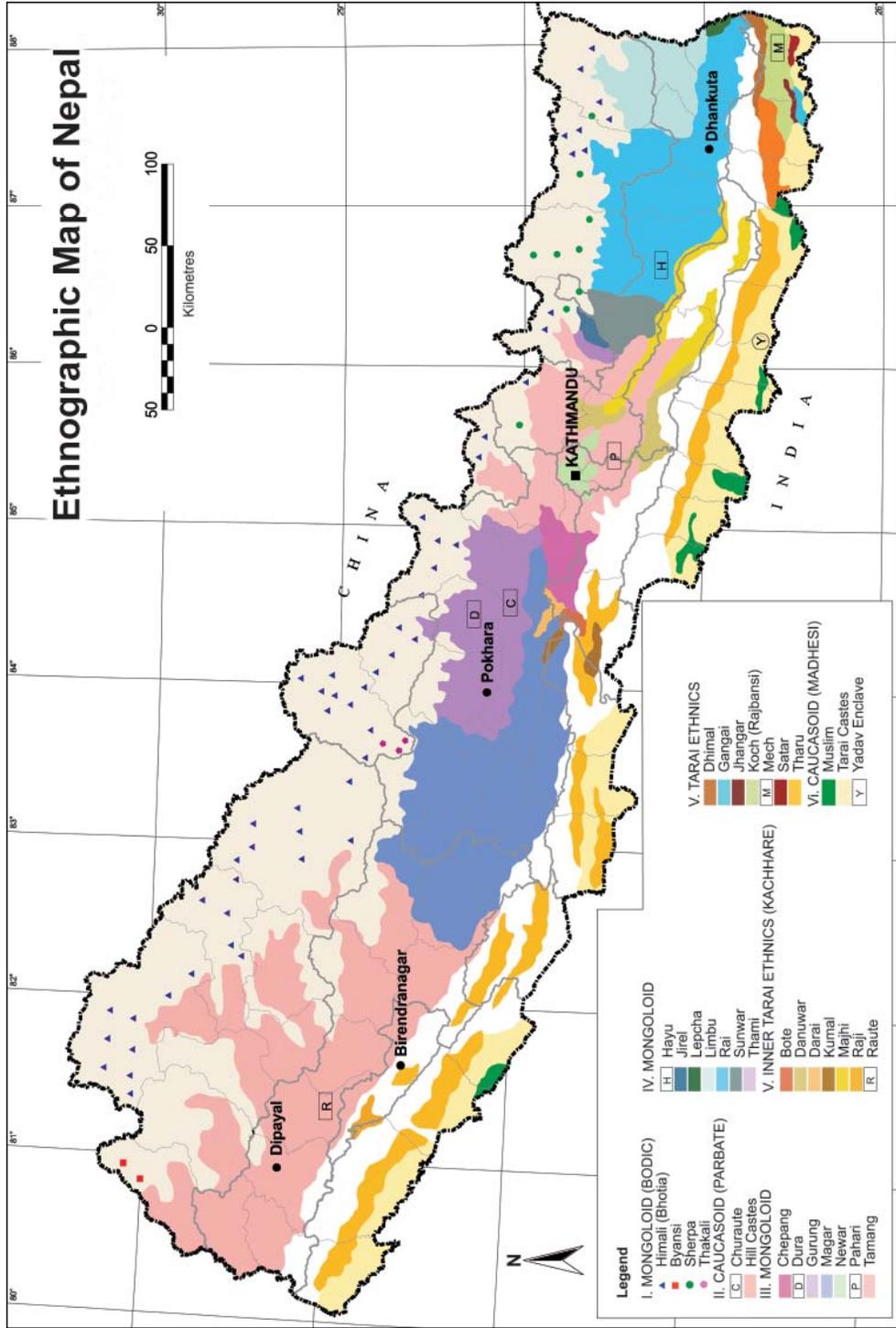


Figure 2: Ethnographic map of Nepal showing the distribution of caste and ethnic groups
 Source: Harka Gurung (2006). Nepal Atlas and Statistics. Himal Books, reprinted by permission

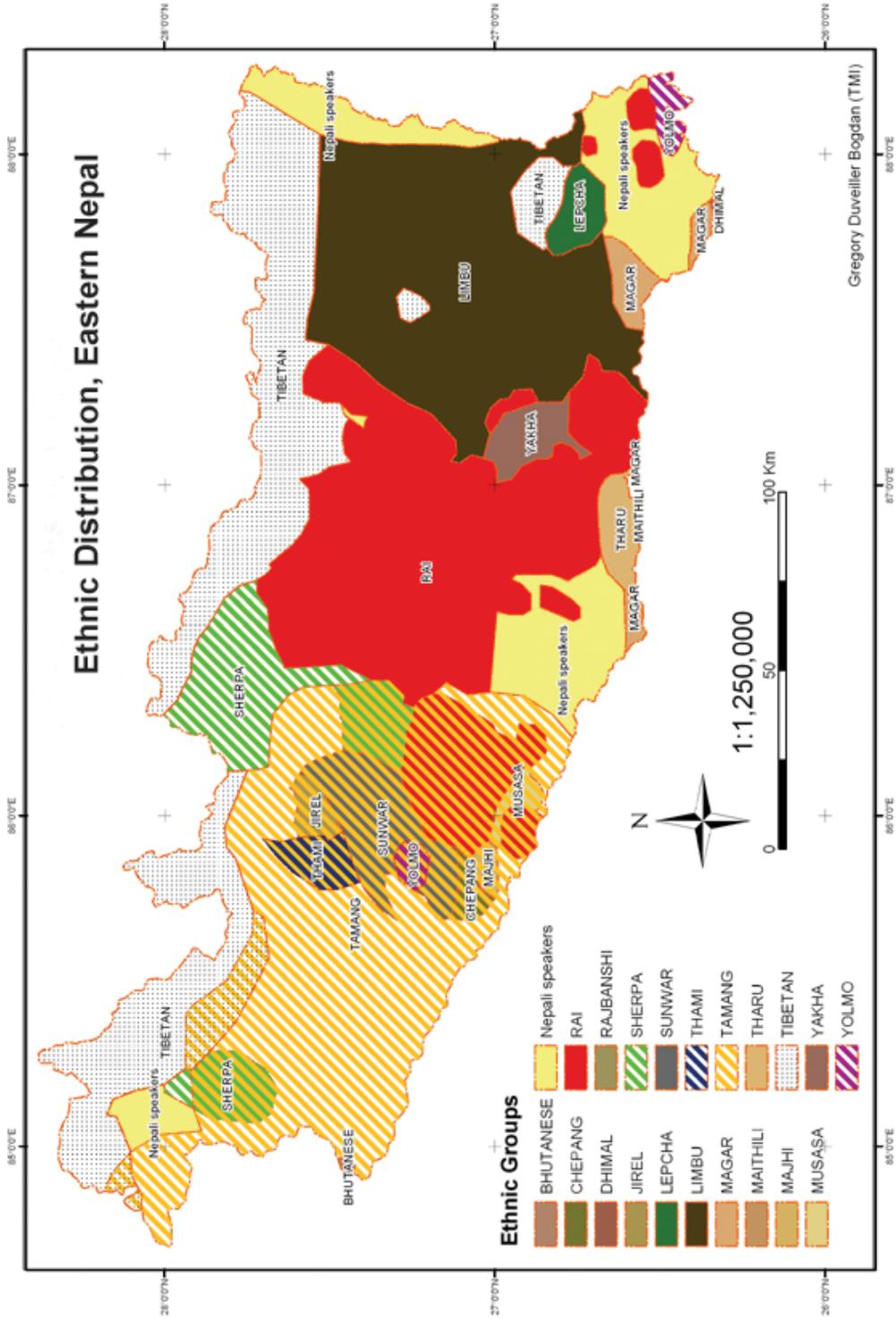


Figure 3: Ethnic distribution map of Eastern Nepal
Source: The Mountain Institute

(Yadava 2003, p. 141) (Figure 4). The Tibeto-Burman group 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, but with noticeably less speakers than the Indo-Aryan group (Figure 5). 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 small number of languages in the southern belt of the country (Figure 6).

All of these data show that Nepal is not only home to more language families than all of Europe combined, but also has more distinct and individual languages in one country than the whole of the European community. Yet Nepal's increasingly endangered linguistic diversity is largely lacking from discussions about integrated development in the country.

The Status of Nepal's Endangered Languages

While some of Nepal's languages are thriving, most notably Nepali, which is an official language, many of Nepal's minority languages¹ lie at various stages on the continuum towards 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. There are many reasons and modalities by which mother tongues become endangered, including declining speaker numbers (an example of which is Kusunda), the transformation 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 in Khotang district (Toba et al. 2002, p. 260).

More prosaic, if far more influential, reasons for the decline in usage of Nepal's mother tongues, include decades of state neglect towards poor, rural ethno-linguistic communities, and the effectiveness of the Nepali language media in cultivating a sense of national Nepali identity at linguistic, religious, and cultural levels. While state policy makers may speak of 'language shift', for example, from a minority mother tongue to the national language, members of the affected community may interpret this rather as encroaching 'linguicide'. The value judgement lies in the frame of reference and perspective. Changes to linguistic forms and decreased competence in mother tongues are thorny and political issues.

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. Linguists and community activists have borrowed their conceptual framework, and even the associated jargon, from the fields of botany and zoology, and describe languages as lying on a scale from viable to extinct.

In Nepal, a disturbingly 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 (Figure 7). At the same time, and perhaps even because of the threat, ethnic and linguistic activists within these

¹ Minority languages are identified as languages spoken by less than 100,000 people.

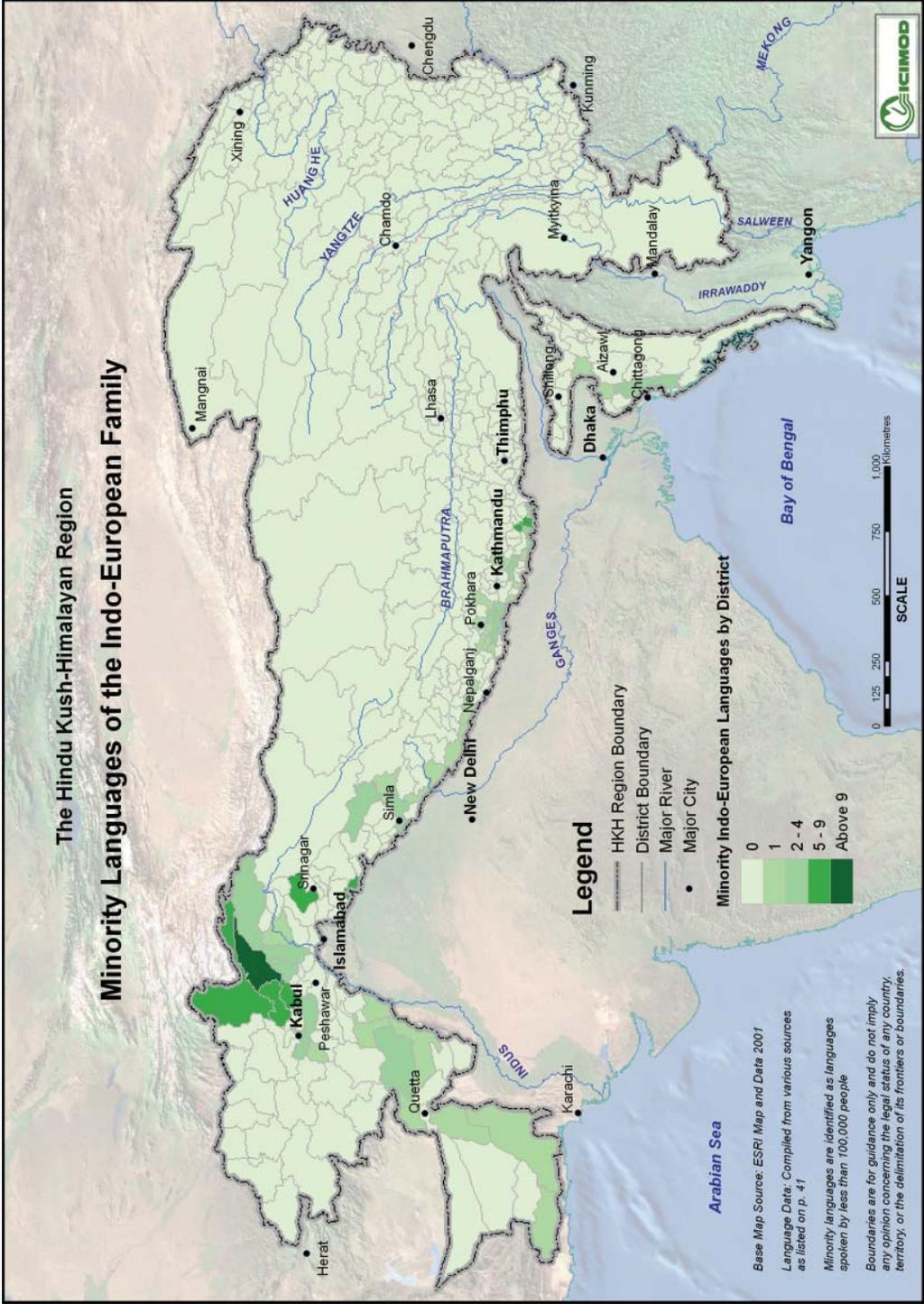


Figure 4: Map of minority languages of the Indo-European family in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region
 Source: CD-ROM (in preparation), based on language data sources found on page 41

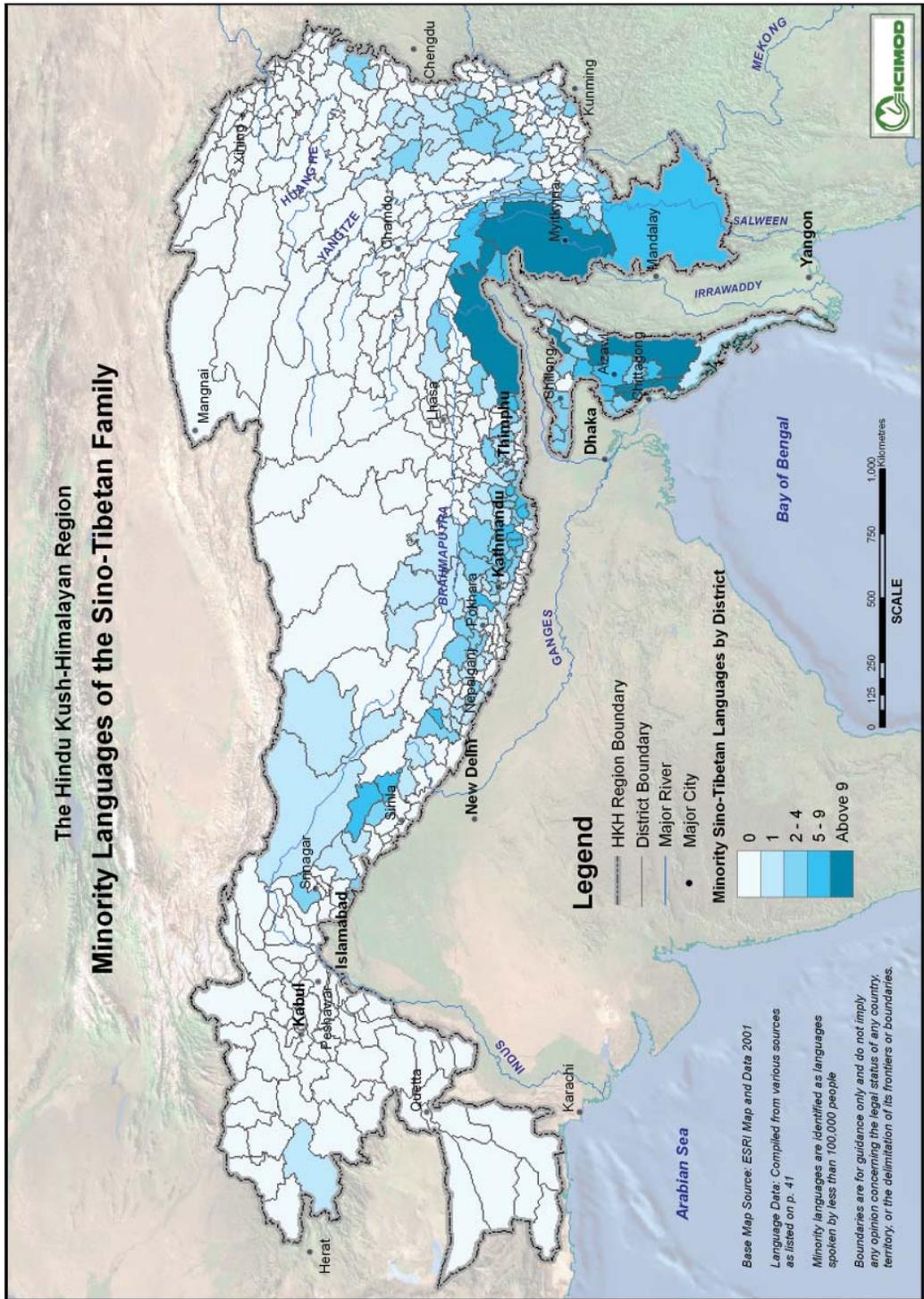


Figure 5: Map of minority languages of the Sino-Tibetan family in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region
 Source: CD-ROM (in preparation), based on language data sources found on page 41

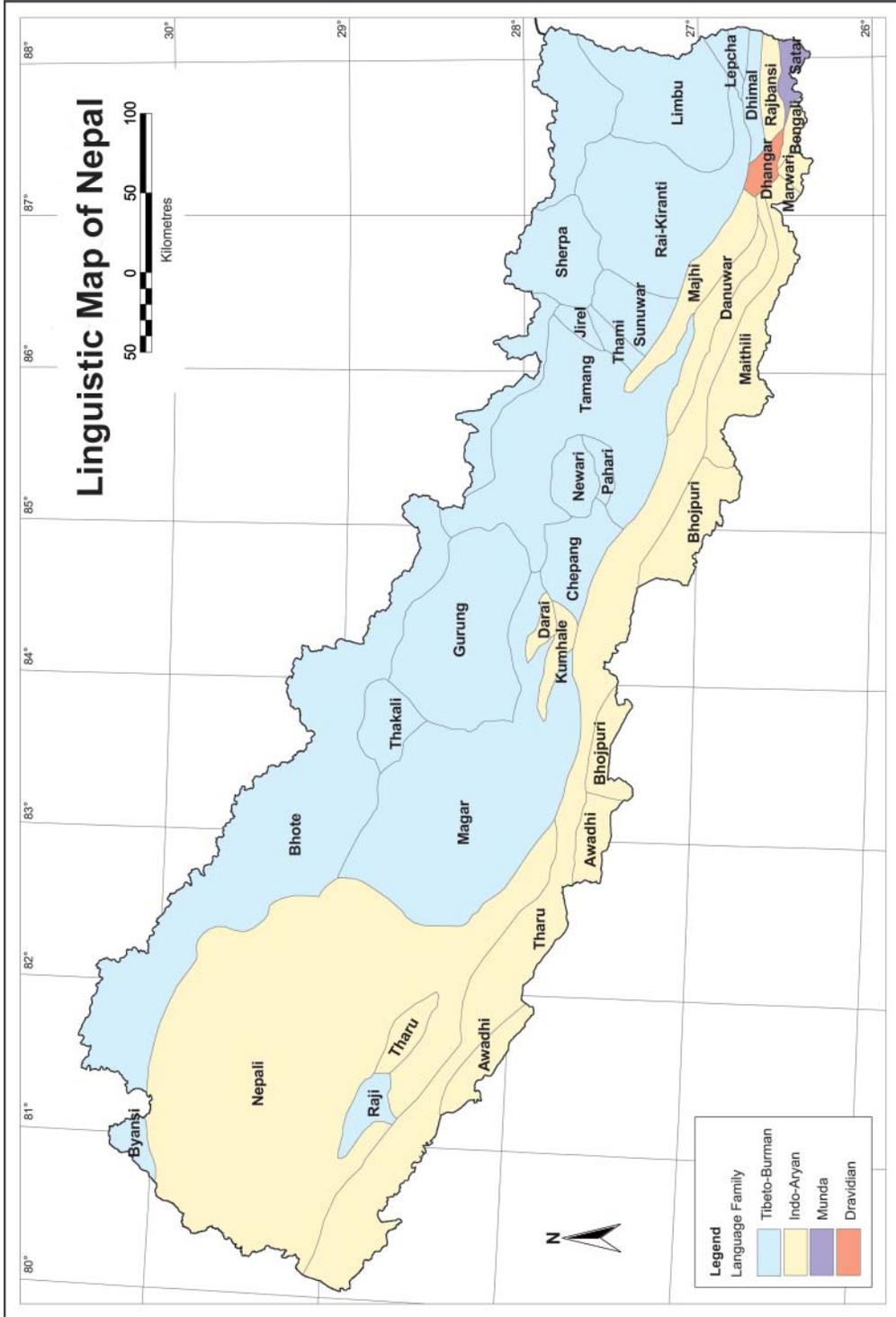


Figure 6: Linguistic map of Nepal showing the distribution of spoken languages
 Source: Harka Gurung (2006). *Nepal/Atlas and Statistics*. Himal Books, printed by permission

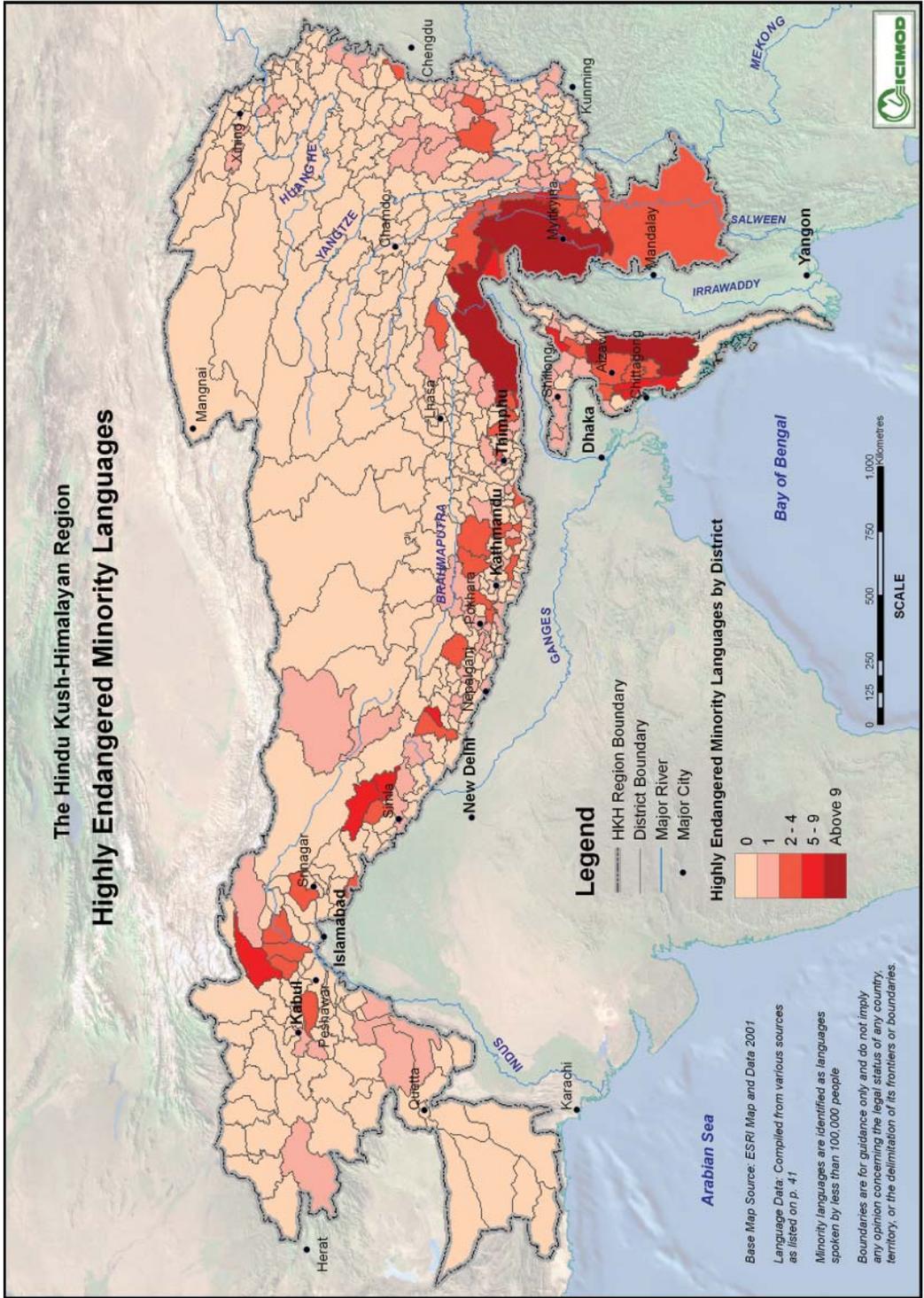


Figure 7: Map of highly endangered minority languages in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region

Source: CD-ROM (in preparation), based on language data sources found on page 41

communities have embarked on the process of documenting and promoting their mother tongues through cultural awareness campaigns, ethnic heritage programmes, and literacy projects. Successful language maintenance efforts ideally combine literacy and education with an improvement in the economic and political standing of the minority language community (Nettle and Romaine 2000).

Preserving and Promoting Linguistic Diversity in the Himalayan Region

Why should development workers and scholars be concerned with the extinction of endangered languages? After all, since 96% of the world's population speak 4% of the world's languages, and over 1,500 languages have fewer than 1,000 speakers, is it feasible or realistic to support minority tongues (Crystal 2000)? Some monolingual English speakers would have us believe that linguistic diversity 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 at home, a different language in the local market town, conversing in Nepali at school or in dealings with the administration, and often using an international language (or two) in dealings with the outside world. Nepal is a perfect case in point: an individual might speak Chintang at home, Bantawa in the bazaar, learn Nepali at school, speak Hindi when visiting a regional city and write in English to chat with friends online. We should not forget that 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 are intertwined with the evolution of cognition and culture, the spread of modern language families is a result of historical population movements across continents, and the colonisation of new environmental zones. Human languages are not evenly distributed across the world: there are relatively few in Europe compared to an abundance in the Pacific, and the greater Himalayan region is in part home to such linguistic diversity because the mountains act as a natural barrier to mobility and communication (Figure 8).

There are four clear reasons for supporting, preserving, and documenting endangered languages, aside from the fact that in themselves, languages are interesting:

- First, each and every language is a celebration of the rich cultural diversity of our planet and the extinction of each mother tongue heralds the end of another slice of cultural uniqueness.
- Second, every language is an expression of a unique ethnic, social, regional, cultural identity and worldview, or *Weltanschauung*, as German philosophers have called it. When a language dies, the framework through which an individual interprets and interacts in the world in which he lives goes with it.
- Third, an individual language is the repository of the history and beliefs of a people, and these oral traditions are rarely translated into the dominant language when the tongue in which they were created is on the cusp of disappearance.

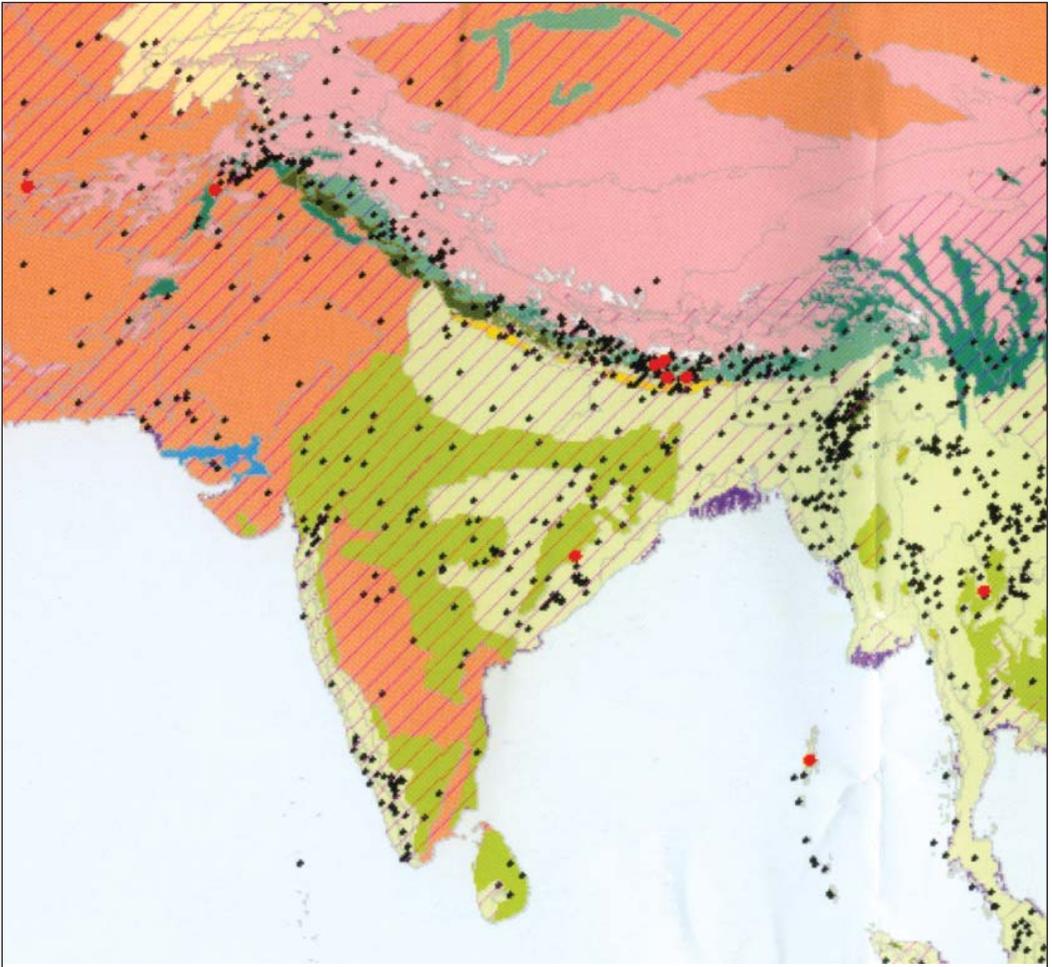


Figure 8: This map shows the overlapping distribution of the ecoregions and languages spoken in the countries of the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region. Black dots indicate languages and red dots indicate endangered languages. Note that areas of high biodiversity coincide with a high number of distinct ethnic groups speaking distinct languages. Most of the region's languages are spoken in areas of rich biological and cultural diversity.

Source: *The World's Biocultural Diversity: People, Languages and Ecosystems*. Close up of a map produced by UNESCO, Terralingua, and World Wildlife Fund for Nature

- Finally, and perhaps most importantly to a conservation and biodiversity readership, every language encodes a particular subset of fragile human knowledge about agriculture, botany, medicine, and ecology.

As large multinational pharmaceutical companies are learning to their own financial gain, small-scale communities living on the margins may hold secrets and valuable knowledge about the workings and uses of plants and natural resources. Once again, as these communities become increasingly marginalised and their traditional livelihoods endangered, the local knowledge which they hold may be lost to posterity in the process. Only in exceptional circumstances are indigenous languages and the knowledge systems which they encode documented, transcribed, and translated for the benefit of future generations.

Mother tongues consist 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 (Turin 2003). Much of this local knowledge is falling into disuse as fluency in Nepali 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 the author a few months before his death: 'It upsets me that our language is dying and will likely not be spoken by the next generation. 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.'



Sara Shneiderman

The late Rana Bahadur Thangmi, a powerful and respected guru or shaman, showing the author his topknot (2000).