

Part II

The Position of Language in Nepal's Bio-cultural Context

Language and Ecology: An Intimate Symbiosis

Linguistic diversity is an integral component in ecological stability and the delicate fabric of cultural life, and languages, like species, adapt to and reflect their environment. We should not forget that the evolution of a species or a language takes much longer than its eventual extinction. The Thangmi language, spoken in a highly mountainous region where topography is challenging, has four semantically distinct verbs all of 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'
- *rasa* 'to come from an unspecified or unknown direction'.



Mark Turin

Cause for hope: after years of being forgotten by scholars and language activists, the endangered Thangmi language now boasts three dictionaries all of which were published in 2004.

In such instances, language mirrors ecology, and ecology can also reflect the linguistic and cultural forms of the people who inhabit a specific niche. The languages and cultures of millions of indigenous peoples of the Himalayas are now endangered in part because their traditional homelands and ecological habitats are under threat.

In the powerfully written *Vanishing Voices* (2000), Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine make an explicit link between environmental issues and the survival of languages. They argue that the extinction of languages is part of the larger picture of the near-total collapse of the worldwide ecosystem, and suggest that the struggle to preserve environmental resources, such as the rainforests and unique ethnobotanical knowledge, cannot be separated from the struggle to maintain cultural and linguistic 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 is inversely related to latitude, and areas rich in languages also tend to be rich in ecology and species. As we are slowly discovering, both biodiversity and linguistic diversity are concentrated between the tropics and in inaccessible environments, such as the Himalayan region, while diversity of all forms tails off in deserts. Around the world, there is a high level of co-occurrence of flora, fauna, and languages, and humid tropical climates, forested areas, and mountainous regions are especially favourable to biological and linguistic diversification (Figure 9). Data from Nepal 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 Gupta 1993, p. 3). This particularly high level of biodiversity per unit area is matched by a similar degree of linguistic variation.

While the language-ecology hypothesis is entirely logical, it remains contentious, with some language activists and scholars arguing that these overlapping trends are coincidental and causally unrelated. Whatever one's position on the interrelatedness of biological and linguistic diversity, one result is uncontested: languages are increasingly 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, linguistic resources are an integral component of a nation's rich, intangible heritage. As discretely summed up by UNESCO in its universal declaration of 2001, "cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature" (UNESCO 2002, Article 1).

Language and the Constitution: Promise versus Delivery

Every modern state must balance the often competing needs of centralisation and consolidation on the one hand, and support for its minority communities and cultures on the other. In Nepal, as in other poor countries, this struggle can be particularly intense. A weak infrastructure combines with mountainous topography to make planning and integration difficult, and minority causes have historically been marginalised or even jettisoned in the name of national unity. In the case of Nepal, a principal vehicle for such cultural integration and political unity has been the Nepali language.



Indigenous and Traditional Peoples in the Global 200 Ecoregions

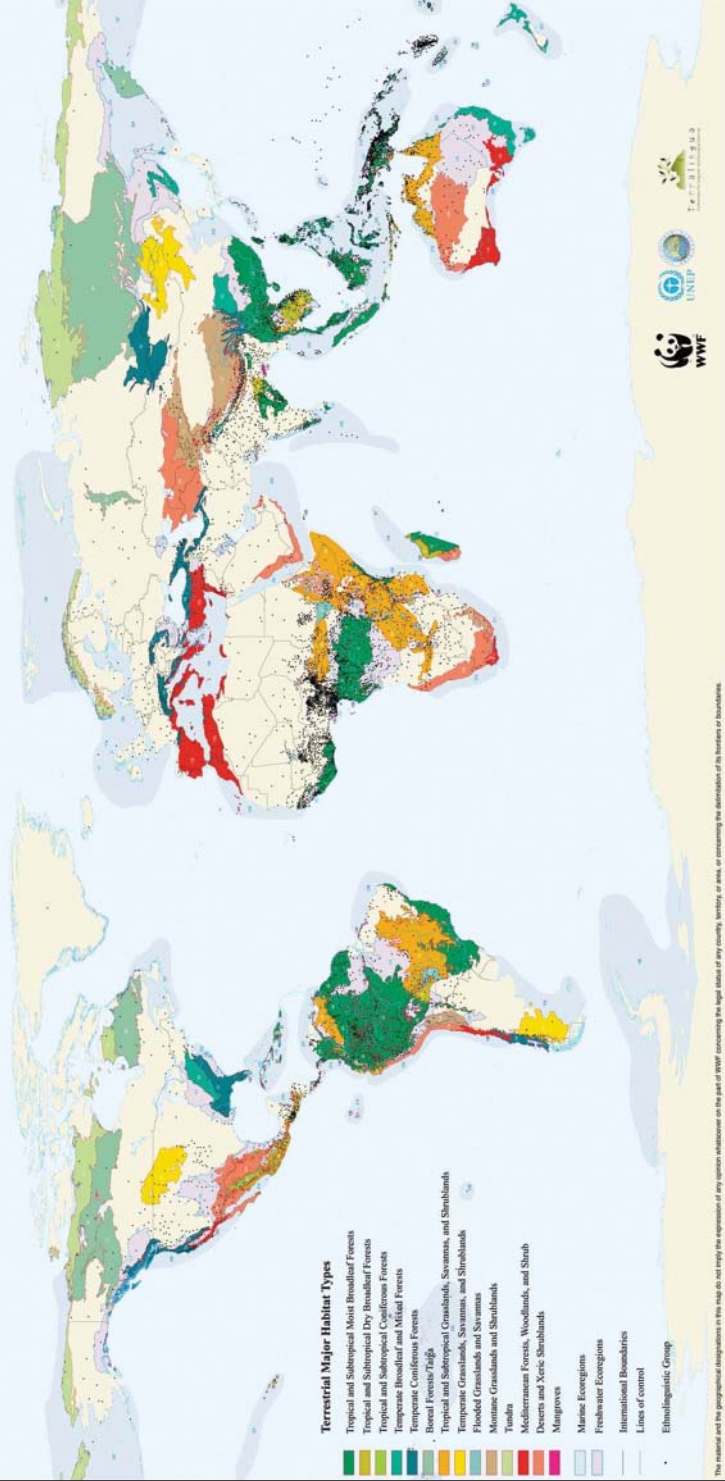


Figure 9: Indigenous and Traditional Peoples in the Global 200 Ecoregions

Source: WWF, UNEP, and Terralingua 2000

As the Nepalese linguist Chura Mani Bandhu has noted, Nepali made great inroads “first as a lingua franca, then as an official language and ultimately as the national language” (Bandhu 1989, p. 121). Widely spoken both within Nepal and across large swathes of northeast India and some of Bhutan, the position of Nepali as a major South Asian language is assured. The inclusion of Nepali in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution in 1992, providing governmental recognition for its use in state legislature, only served to strengthen the position of the language across the region.

Between 1952 and 2001, according to official census statistics from Nepal, the number of mother tongue Nepali speakers inside Nepal almost trebled from 4 million to 11 million (drawn from tables in Yadava 2003, p. 141). Revealingly, while 49% of the population returned Nepali as their mother tongue in the 2001 census, 53% of respondents stated that Nepali should be the only official language, compared to 31% who felt that other languages should also be recognised as official languages, and 16% who reported that they would like to see minority languages used as official media of communication at the level of local governance (Hachhethu 2004, p. 187).

From the emergence of Nepal as a modern nation-state in 1769, through the Panchayat rule from 1962-1989, the ruler powers promoted a doctrine of ‘one nation, one culture, one language’ and the nation building project of that era was intolerant of minority



Poster for International Mother Language Day
Source: UNESCO

languages, much like the Rana era which preceded it. Under Panchayat rule, 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 minority languages.

Until as recently as 1990, it was considered natural and even preferable for Nepal to be monolingual, with the consequence that minority languages were disparaged and linguistic rights 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, and presently under revision, stated 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 [HMGN 1990])

The ambiguity of the Constitution here is notable: while Nepali is promoted as the 'language of the nation' and the 'official language', mother tongues spoken by indigenous peoples were defined as 'the national languages of Nepal'. Some commentators see this distinction as highly nuanced, while others are critical of what they perceive to be an intentional semantic confusion, and reject the claim that the 1990 Constitution of Nepal was a robust, modern document which championed diversity and minority rights.

At the time of going to press, Nepal was once again going through a profound political transition. The popular movement and nationwide strikes which reached a head in April 2006 ended the direct rule by the palace and helped reinstate the parliament. The transitional government has presided over the drafting and promulgation of an interim constitution, including proposals to protect the rights of cultural and linguistic minorities. Article 5 of Part 1 of the interim constitution addresses the issue of language, and reads as follows:

- (1) All the languages spoken as mother tongues in Nepal are the national languages of Nepal.
- (2) The Nepali language in the Devanagari script shall be the language of official business.
- (3) Notwithstanding whatever is written pursuant to clause (2), the use of mother tongue in local body or office shall not be considered a barrier. The state shall translate the language used for such purpose into the language of official business for record.

While the interim constitution is a step towards greater recognition of and support for linguistic diversity, including enshrining the preservation of one's mother tongue as a fundamental right, questions remain about how change will be effectuated. How will

this revised constitution be able to deliver what earlier documents did not? How will policy makers ensure delivery of constitutional provisions, and what are the penalties if they do not? In short, what are the modalities for change? As the following section makes clear, there are good reasons to be sceptical.

Language and the Law: Linguistic Advocacy and Municipal Debate

The constitutional ambiguity explained above sets the stage for the key linguistic tension of modern Nepal. While Nepal's linguistic minorities have no shortage 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 Nepali 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 the 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 Newari and Maithili, respectively, as official media of communication in addition to (and not instead of) Nepali. This right, it was 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. However, 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 wide discontent and public resentment among minority communities, and a number of action committees were promptly formed to address the ruling.

On June 1, 1999, the Supreme Court nevertheless 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 Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) organised a national conference on linguistic rights on March 16-17, 2000, with support from the International Work Group on Indigenous Affairs. 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 of 2055 which contains provisions for the use, preservation and promotion of mother-tongues by local bodies (Nepal Federation of Nationalities 2000, p. 8).

As the example illustrates, many language activists in Nepal have felt powerless to guarantee their rights in the face of government opposition. Moreover, disagreements exist between different indigenous peoples' movements regarding the correct path to achieve political equity and social equality. At opposing ends of the continuum are advocates who propose working to change the system from within, and militant organisations 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 number of organisations 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 countless legal provisions towards 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 state infrastructure, have very limited access to existing legal provisions to defend their rights, and are often intimidated by the very institutions which are meant to represent and protect them.



Bikash Karki

A woman protests outside Parliament in February 2007. Her placard reads: "Let's enforce a trilingual language policy recognising all languages as official languages..."

While these issues are complex, there are three principal reasons why indigenous people rarely resort to legal means to defend their rights. First, the machinery of government is still primarily controlled by 'high caste' Hindu groups who have held power for the last 250 years and have little incentive to 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 weighed against their interests and consider their chances of success to be limited. This is an understandable concern, 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. As illustrated above by the rulings against Newar and Maithili, when indigenous activists have tried to use legal channels to pursue their rights, they have been unsuccessful. Third, many indigenous peoples and linguistic minorities in rural areas are simply not aware of their rights, or if they are, they 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 inclusion of minority communities and indigenous peoples in Nepal's legal processes.

Given the disjuncture between the legal and constitutional provisions for linguistic equality on the one hand, and the reality of the overwhelming dominance of Nepali on the other, the dejection of activist groups representing minority ethnic and linguistic communities is understandable. The crisis lies not in the formulation of policy or law, but rather in the lack of desire of the governing classes to change the status quo. Since most obstacles to asserting linguistic rights relate to implementation, concerned groups may do better to focus their energies on offering a pragmatic roadmap for achieving their goals within the existing framework of the new constitution rather than formulating new bills, acts, and amendments.

Language and the Census: Who is Being Counted and Why?

While a regular and detailed national census is an essential tool for understanding the composition of a nation, censuses are often manipulated and politically contested. As Bernard Cohen wrote about the 1931 Indian census, "the consciousness of the significance of the census operation had reached a point where Indians...set out to influence the answers which people would have given in the census" (1987, p. 249-250).

Since many countries do not even include questions about language or ethnicity in their surveys out of fear of the political ramifications of research in such sensitive areas, the Central Bureau of Statistics in Nepal should be commended for collecting information on mother tongue and ethnicity in recent decades. Many more questions need to be asked before we can derive meaningful results from the data that the census provides. In particular, it would be helpful to know more about the usual language of the home, subsidiary languages spoken, practical multilingualism, and disaggregated data distinguishing between reading skills and writing skills in any given language.

The challenges of census-taking in Nepal are accentuated by a weak information infrastructure, the extremity of the physical terrain, a dearth of motorable roads, and the cultural prejudices of some of the ruling elite. The disjuncture between urban educated

Nepalis and their often semi-literate rural cousins is stark, and both literal and figurative miscommunications are common when the former ask potentially invasive questions of the latter. Walks of up to a week from roadheads to access alpine valleys are also known to discourage census collectors from actually visiting these areas, and the decade-long Maoist insurgency only served to further deter enumerators from visiting more remote regions where the state could not guarantee their security.

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 reported in 1952-1954, 36 in 1961, 17 in 1971, 18 in 1981, 32 in 1991, and 92 in 2001. This massive oscillation is not indicative of the actual state of languages spoken in Nepal, but reflects rather the changing political ideologies of the nation-state over the last half century and a top down perspective on the acceptability of linguistic diversity. Census statistics are routinely conscripted to argue for both monolingual and multilingual visions of Nepal, even when each side agrees that the data remain unreliable.



Beware this mother tongue!

The 2001 census was by far the most rigorously enumerated poll to date, with data collected on both ethnicity and language. Two specific questions pertaining to language were asked: 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 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" (Yadava 2003, p. 138).

Working with the baseline data collected in the 2001 census, a number of recent publications (see Gurung 2006; Gurung, Gurung and Chidi 2006) have disaggregated the findings to produce charts and maps which show the distribution of different speech and ethnic communities across Nepal's 75 districts. Such granular data is essential for the effective implementation of central government policy and for targeting needy groups in integrated development programmes.

It is encouraging to see that the Nepali authorities have come to appreciate the difference between language and ethnicity, and that the census enumerates both. In previous decadal censuses, language data came to serve as a substitute for enumerating ethnicity. Now that this obstacle has been overcome, the Central Bureau of Statistics should give serious thought to adding further questions on bilingualism and multilingualism in the census of 2011. Further work is also needed to make sense of the over 160,000 speakers whose languages the 2001 census returned as 'unknown'. While apparently insignificant from a statistical viewpoint, it is highly likely that this amalgam contains a number of endangered and poorly documented languages. The clarification of such data will help to provide a more vivid and realistic picture of language use in modern Nepal.

Language and Media: Nepal's Minority Voices on Air and in Print

The freedoms enshrined in Nepal's 1990 Constitution led to a boom in all forms of media production, but particularly in the print sector and FM radio. Ethnic and linguistic minorities have used media 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 18 mother tongues including Hindi, Magar, Maithili, 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 helped instill a sense of civic and community pride in local languages and minority mother tongues, and marked a genuine 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 often portrayed as a nation formed in large part through a common language: Nepali.

Some of the most exciting recent developments in media have emerged in the digital sector. Nepali language information and communication technologies (ICTs) have blossomed over the last decade, with software localisation projects and newly standardised Nepali Unicode fonts making it easier for first-time computer users who have little or no literacy in English to gain basic computing skills in 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 disadvantaged 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 encouraging. A number of language activists are already constructing databases of lexical corpora making use of the Devanagari Unicode. While the Devanagari keyboard layout and the associated fonts were designed for rendering Nepali, they can be easily retasked to represent many of Nepal's minority mother tongues whose speakers are working towards standardisation and creating literacy materials. The dual processes of standardisation and lexical extension (the creation of new words) are essential components in ensuring the ongoing viability and sustainability of indigenous speech forms. Whether it be pop music in Newari, Tamang language publications, or political speeches in Maithili, Nepal's languages need to embrace new arenas of communication and all forms of media to survive. While the government can definitely provide a supportive backdrop for such developments to take place, the maintenance and growth of local speech forms requires clear commitment from the community in which the heritage language is valued. The long-term future of these languages hinges in large part on education policy, which is discussed in the following section.



An example of Nepali Unicode localisation

Source: Google.com 2007

Language and Education: the Mother Tongue Debate

Around 42% or 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 tongues (UNESCO 2003a). Nepal is one such country.

The issue of mother tongue education is highly politicised in Nepal, in part because many assumptions about the role of the Nepali state are attached to the various positions on this topic. Mother tongue education means different things to its supporters and detractors: the former see it as a way to make schools more inclusive and receptive to the needs of children from non-Nepali speaking backgrounds, while the latter fear that mother tongue medium instruction would be the first step towards eventual federalism and the end of a united Nepal.

To contextualise the issue, we should recall that the New Education Plan of 1971 discouraged any language other than Nepali as the medium of instruction in schools. As illustrated by the following citation from the National Education Planning Commission report, the educational policy of the preceding era also overwhelmingly favoured Nepali:

“...And it should be emphasised that if Nepali is to become the true national language, then we must insist that its use be enforced in the primary school... Local dialects and tongues, other than standard Nepali, should be vanished [recte banished] from the school and playground as early as possible in the life of the child.”

College of Education (1956, p. 97) as cited in Gurung (2003)

After 1990, on paper at least, education policy became more favourably disposed to linguistic diversity. Article 18 of the 1990 Constitution stated 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 largely unimplemented to this day.

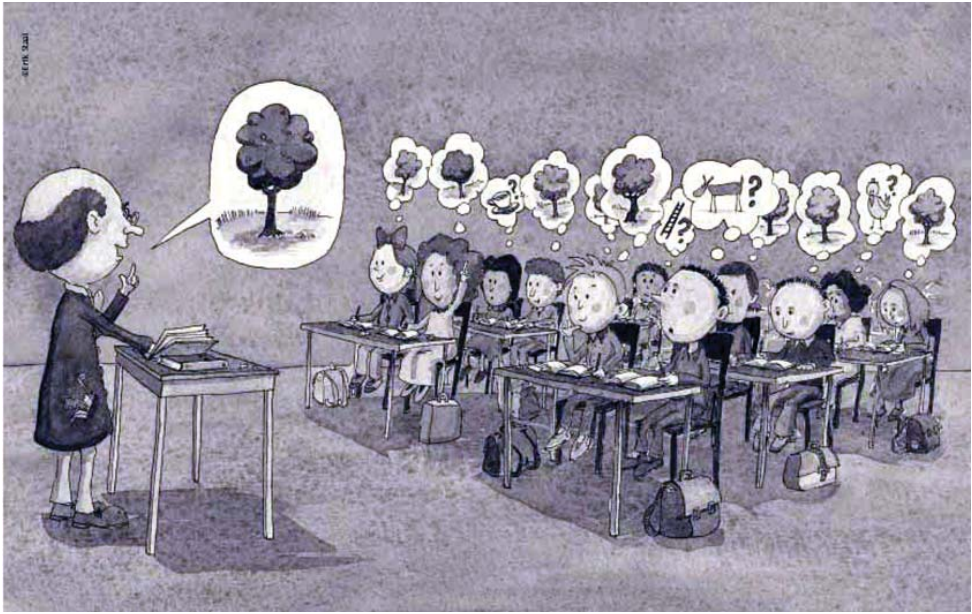
Why is mother tongue education an issue at all? Instead of learning Gurung and Bhojpuri at school, should children who speak minority languages at home not be taught Nepali and English to give them the very tools they need to compete with mother tongue Nepali speakers? Would not focusing on their ethnic heritage just deny disadvantaged students access to higher learning and eventual positions of power? The counter arguments to these challenging and provocative critiques are as follows. At the primary level at least, the verdict is clear. As John Daniel, Assistant Director-General for Education in UNESCO, has written:

“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.” (UNESCO 2003a)

The high rate of school absenteeism and drop-outs among the youngest students from non-Nepali speaking backgrounds has been correlated to the challenges they face in a culturally and linguistically alien classroom (HMG 2003). How can a Buddhist Tamang girl feel included and represented in a school environment which promotes Hindu Nepali-speaking male ideals? A classroom context in which cultural heritage is valued and where the use of a child's mother tongue provides a safe and trusted setting for learning must be the ideal for which we strive.

Curriculum development is an important element in the development of mother tongue language materials. Some government-funded mother tongue initiatives have simply translated the Nepali language primary school books into minority languages, without regard for cultural difference. Such schemes are doomed to fail, since the content of a school book must reflect the cultural values of its students.

As for the suggestion that if a student learns through his or her mother tongue, he or she won't learn the national language – let alone any international language – properly, we would do well to remember that most people are multilingual and that young minds



Educating Babel: the mother tongue dilemma. While studies show that students learn better through their mother tongue, the language has to be taught in school for the benefits to be reaped. This is rarely the case with minority languages.

Source: *Education Today*, The Newsletter of UNESCO's Education Sector, Number 6 July-September 2003, pages 4-5, copyright Erik Staal, printed by permission

have an amazing capacity to learn, absorb, and process language. In short, it is not a question of either the national language or the mother tongue, since many languages may be taught simultaneously. Moreover, a student's failure to learn three languages to a high standard is primarily a failure of instruction and educational policy, not one of curricular overload, as the Education for All global monitoring reports have shown.

Language and Gender: the Central Role of Women

Across the greater Himalayan region, a range of data demonstrate that women retain fluency in their mother tongue for longer than men, but are on the whole less literate (see Census 2001 [HMG National Planning Commission Secretariat 2003]). 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 across Nepal have plenty of cause to use their indigenous language in daily life.

The five-year Education for All Project recommended that Nepal 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 means of helping them transition to functional bilingualism. This would require a change of mindset: dispensing with the prevailing belief that Nepal's unwritten indigenous languages are

backward, primitive, and somehow shameful, and rather embracing ethnic languages as symbols of diversity and indigenous knowledge. The National Foundation for the Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN) is leading by example by training 200 indigenous women to work in schools 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 focused on achieving basic numeracy and literacy in Nepali, not in mother tongues. The results of such initiatives leave women from indigenous backgrounds in Nepal speaking their mother tongue at home and in the fields, but using Nepali to count, write lists and converse with outsiders. Apart from a few more prominent tongues, most of Nepal's minority languages have not yet made the transition from languages of the home and hearth to languages of status and prestige used in the workplace.

Language and Conflict: Maoists, Politics, and Sanskrit

The deployment of language issues in public arenas, whether ethnic or national, can quickly become very politicised. The clamouring of linguistic minorities in Nepal for education in their mother tongues is as much about basic linguistic rights as it is a call for recognition and participation in the modern nation-state. Ethnic and linguistic differences are also quick to be invoked in times of conflict.

In Nepal, the violent conflict between the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and state security forces which claimed over 15,000 lives between 1996 and 2006, tapped into the pre-existing concerns of ethnic and linguistic minorities. It is beyond a doubt that the marginalisation of Nepal's disadvantaged communities and ethnic groups is one of the root causes of the Maoist insurgency. The Maoists have been very adept at co-opting the existing grievances of indigenous peoples and incorporating them into their overall political struggle for a constituent assembly and radical leftist reforms. In the 40-point demands they submitted to the government in 1996, the Maoist leadership addressed 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 Hindu Nepali identity. In both popular and scholarly writings, the Sanskrit language is often held up as the pinnacle of sophistication, with Nepali, as its offspring, portrayed as similarly cultured. Take as one example a comment by Professor Chura Mani Bandhu: "Nepali is developed from Sanskrit – the cultured language" (1989, p. 122). By implication, languages which are not Sanskrit-related are therefore not cultured, or at least lower on this imagined scale.

It is little surprise, then, that anti-Sanskritism has been one of the rallying cries of leftist groups, 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. Sanskrit was, until recently, the only language in Nepal for which government scholarships were available for university-level study, despite the fact that Sanskrit can

not really be counted as a mother tongue vernacular for anyone 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 introduction of compulsory Sanskrit up to high school level.

Language and Culture: Identity in Difference

“To be human you must have a tribe. To have a tribe you must have a mother tongue” stated a Shona tribesman, when asked by the fieldworker John Hofman for a definition of his identity (1977, p. 289). While not a universal truth, this assertion encapsulates a widespread sentiment held by both indigenous peoples – and those who study them – that language and identity are inextricably linked.

In the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001), languages are recognised as forming an integral part of a people’s cultural and historical identity. In Nepal, linguistic and cultural identities are closely interwoven, and many of the country’s indigenous peoples define themselves in large part according to the language they speak. Language is often used as a symbolic badge of membership in a particular community, and is a prominent emblem of pride in one’s social or ethnic identity. NFDIN also views the existence of a specific and unique language as one of the primary criteria for identifying an ethnic group or ‘adibasi janajati’, and 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 for mother tongue education more effectively when a lexical corpus has been prepared and the process of standardising an unwritten language is already underway.

However, the relationship between indigenous peoples and the languages they speak is highly varied and naturally diverse. In Nepal, these relationships can be divided into three categories:



The *Sikkim Herald* - the government newspaper of the Indian state of Sikkim - published in 11 officially recognised languages. Although largely symbolic, such initiatives are important.

Mark Turin

- (1) Situations in which a one-to-one correspondence exists between a community and their language, as among the Chepang, Dhimal, Raute, and Thami/Thangmi;
- (2) Situations in which members of one putative community speak several languages; for example, the members of the Rai-Kiranti community are often, albeit erroneously, considered to constitute a single ethnic group, but they speak a range of at least fifteen mutually unintelligible languages such as Bantawa, Chamling, Chintang, Dumi, Kulung, Puma, Sampang, and Thulung; and
- (3) Situations in which several distinct ethnic communities speak a single language, such as Newar, with dialectal variations.

The one-to-one correlation between language and culture as outlined in (1) above is easier for census enumerators and also facilitates the development and preparation of textbooks. Situations (2) and (3) are more complex, however, both in terms of enumeration and in the creation of culturally-appropriate pedagogical materials.