

MULTILINGUALISM AND THE LANGUAGE SITUATION IN NEPAL*

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1. BACKGROUND

Nepal represents a complex cross-section of linguistic and cultural diversity. The Census Report of 1991 records at least 60 different ethnic communities or castes and a distribution of over 70 languages spoken within the country's present day political boundaries. Grimes (1991) estimates a total of about 100 languages spoken in Nepal. This was perhaps calculated on the basis of over 30 distinct Rai languages which are usually subsumed in the Census Reports under the single heading of "Rai-Kirāt", and under the category of "other unspecified languages". These languages and their innumerable satellite dialects have genetic affiliations to at least four language families, namely Tibeto-Burman (about 56 languages), Indo-Aryan (14 languages), Austroasiatic/Munda (1 language), and Dravidian (1 language), together with one controversial language isolate — Kusunda. Despite the mutual influences among these languages of different genetic stocks, the channels of communication between groups of speakers are not ideal due to natural and social barriers of caste or professions.

Nepali, designated in the Constitution of 1990 as "the official language of the nation", claims 50.3% of the population as native speakers, and has a dominant role in the life of the country, including its extensive uses for official purposes, as the medium of instruction at various levels of education, as well as in commerce, law, and in the public communications media. Among the Indic languages of Nepal, Sanskrit, Nepali, and Maithili (11.8%) have a long history of written literature and a variety of modern linguistic descriptions including grammars, dictionaries and teaching materials, as do Tibetan, Newar (3.7%) and Limbu (1.6%) among the nation's Tibeto-Burman languages. There are, however, a large number of minority languages spread over a wide geographical area that are characterized by a declining number of speakers.

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This trend toward the degeneration of Nepal's numerous languages can be seen clearly in the statistics compiled in the various Census Reports over the past four decades. But according to one demographer (V.B.S. Kansakar 1989:42) "the linguistic composition of the population of Nepal in different censuses seems to be rather ambiguous". This ambiguity arises from the failure to identify the ethnic origin of speakers of various languages or to recognize the distinction between a language and a dialect. The census of 1952/54 for instance recorded more than 54 languages, and these have progressively declined from 35 in 1961 to 17 or 18 languages in the reports of 1971 and 1981. I shall return to this problem later. There is therefore a strong case for adequate codification, description and expansion in the uses of these endangered languages, for their preservation, development and standardization. It is against this background that we need to examine the multi-lingual and multi-ethnic situation in Nepal, in the context of current democratic processes operating in the country.

2 GOVERNMENT POLICY AND LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

The configuration of Nepal's ethnic, cultural, and above all, linguistic diversity is a unique national asset. Governments in the past have not always recognized this reality, nor have they taken any measures to promote the various languages of the country. In my earlier paper "Language planning and modernization in Nepal" (Kansakar 1995) I referred to the absence of a clearly defined language policy and the government's failure to implement any consistent program of language planning in the country. The various Constitutions in the past had designated Nepali as the national language in view of its status as a *lingua franca* among diverse linguistic communities and its role in the national life of the country. While no one has disputed the status of Nepali as the national language, it was abundantly clear that the policy of His Majesty's Government was to promote only the use of Nepali in education, administration, publication, and the media. Only two Nepalese languages, Maithili and Newar, are introduced as optional/elective subjects in the school and higher education curricula. Recently, there has also been a considerable decline in the use of English as a medium of instruction in higher education. The Government's efforts to increase the use of Nepali at all levels of education, however, have not been matched by the production of an adequate number of textbooks or reference materials in Nepali. The situation that has prevailed in the country since the Rana regime is one of a single language policy where the non-Nepali speakers have been at a disadvantage in education, employment, and other social benefits. In Nepal where languages enter into dominant majority vs. minority relationships, it is important that language

issues not be politicized as they are in India, where tensions and conflicts on linguistic and communal lines come to the surface regularly (e.g. Hindi vs. regional language vis-à-vis English) or the Tamil-Telegu conflict in Sri Lanka arising plainly out of disputes over language issues.

In Nepal too, the dominant language policy of the government has been questioned and resisted in recent years. The national referendum in 1979 raised the demand for assigning functional roles to various native languages so that each ethnic group could preserve and strengthen their linguistic and cultural identity. Following the restoration of democracy in 1990, the new Constitution recognizes all indigenous languages of Nepal as "national languages" and guarantees each community the right to preserve and promote its language, script and culture. The Constitution also asserts the fundamental right of each community to operate schools up to the primary level in its own mother tongue for imparting education to its children. Although this is a remote possibility for most minority languages which lack teaching materials, functional script, or written literature, the new Constitutional provisions provide grounds for hope and encouragement among various ethnic groups to work towards the preservation and promotion of their language, culture and educational opportunities in the mother tongue. Minority language groups such as Tibetan, Newar, Magar and Limbu have developed primary level materials in the mother tongue, and unwritten languages such as Chepang and Tamang are attempting to devise scripts for producing newspapers and other printed materials. While these are laudable enterprises, the majority of the languages of Nepal would need to elaborate orthographic, grammatical, and lexicosemantic features so that these languages could become more functional to meet the demands of a developing society. Such a requirement is but natural in a country like Nepal, where a large number of minority languages are poorly developed in form and usage. The national language, Nepali, itself lacks a comprehensive and authoritative grammar, and languages with rich literary traditions such as Maithili, Newar and the Kiranti languages still lag behind in standardization. In my 1995 paper on language planning I have referred to the importance of "status planning", where the national government must recognize the position of one language in relation to others. More specifically, there is a very urgent need to develop the functional uses of minority languages (or language varieties) in written and spoken social discourse. The use of a language in literacy programs and mass media (such as radio/TV broadcasting or publications) also serves to upgrade the status of a language, both socially and politically. The efforts that have so far been made by the recent democratic governments in Nepal to promote the uses of certain regional languages must therefore be seen as steps in the right direction.

3. THE NATIONAL LANGUAGES POLICY RECOMMENDATION COMMISSION AND THE MINORITY LANGUAGES

One important Government-sponsored venture concerning the languages of Nepal was the formation of a National Languages Policy Recommendation Commission, which compiled vital information and data on the language situation in Nepal, and made a number of significant recommendations for the preservation and development of the country's minority languages in particular. The Commission submitted its Report to the Minister of Education, Culture and Social Welfare on 31 Chaitra, 2050 B.S. (1993), and among the 58 recommendations made under various headings, the following have been identified as the main ones:

1. To conduct a linguistic survey of Nepal in order to identify and determine the actual number of languages spoken in the country.
2. To promote the languages of the country through codification and linguistic descriptions, and to develop the uses of these languages in education, administration and as vehicles of mass communication.
3. To identify the endangered languages and take steps for their preservation.
4. To establish a Council of National Languages for the purpose of study, research and promotion of national languages.
5. To classify languages into three groups: first those with established written traditions, such as Nepali, Newar, Maithili, Limbu, Bhojpuri, Avadhi, Tibetan; the second with an emerging tradition of writing, e.g. Tharu, Tamang, Magar, Gurung and the Rai group of languages; and the third without any script or written literature that could be used for imparting primary education in the mother tongue. The third category would include a large number of minority languages including Bote, Byanshi, Chepang, Danuwar, Darai, Dhimal, Kagate, Kaike, Kham, Kumal, Jhangadh, Majhi, Sattar/Santhal, Thami and several languages of the Rai group.
6. To promote monolingual or bilingual education in the mother tongue and/or Nepali on the basis of the ethnic composition of students in particular areas.
7. His Majesty's Government to approve and support those primary schools in the mother tongue which have been established by the local people.
8. All children to have the right to receive education either in the mother tongue, mother tongue with Nepali, or Nepali alone.
9. Students at the lower Secondary level to have the option to study their mother tongue as a subject in place of Sanskrit.
10. To establish a Department of Linguistics in the University to promote study and research in linguistics, and to produce trained manpower in linguistics.