

# Linguistic Diversity and the Preservation of Endangered Languages


A Case Study from Nepal




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Mark Turin



# About ICIMOD

The International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) is an independent 'Mountain Learning and Knowledge Centre' serving the eight countries of the Hindu Kush-Himalayas – Afghanistan 🇦🇫, Bangladesh 🇬🇧, Bhutan 🇧🇹, China 🇨🇳, India 🇮🇳, Myanmar 🇲🇲, Nepal 🇳🇵, and Pakistan 🇵🇰 – and the global mountain community. Founded in 1983, ICIMOD is based in Kathmandu, Nepal, and brings together a partnership of regional member countries, partner institutions, and donors with a commitment for development action to secure a better future for the people and environment of the extended Himalayan region. ICIMOD's activities are supported by its core programme donors: the governments of Austria, Denmark, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland, and its regional member countries, along with over thirty project co-financing donors. The primary objective of the Centre is to promote the development of an economically and environmentally sound mountain ecosystem and to improve the living standards of mountain populations.

The '**Talking Points**' series from ICIMOD contains short presentations of topical, controversial, or problematic themes, where general consensus has not yet been reached or where action may be appropriate. They are intended to stimulate thought, and discussion, their contents should not be seen as definitive statements.

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

**A Case Study from Nepal**

**Mark Turin**

**International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD)**  
Kathmandu, Nepal  
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# Contents

Foreword	
Acknowledgements	
Summary	
Acronyms and Abbreviations	

## **Part 1: Setting the Scene 1**

The Greater Himalayan Region: A Language ‘Mega Centre’	1
The Linguistic Wealth of Nepal	1
The Status of Nepal’s Endangered Languages	5
Preserving and Promoting Linguistic Diversity in the Himalayan Region	10

## **Part 2: The Position of Language in Nepal’s Bio-cultural Context 13**

Language and Ecology: An Intimate Symbiosis	13
Language and the Constitution: Promise versus Delivery	14
Language and the Law: Linguistic Advocacy and Municipal Debate	18
Language and the Census: Who is Being Counted and Why?	20
Language and Media: Nepal’s Minority Voices on Air and in Print	22
Language and Education: the Mother Tongue Debate	23
Language and Gender: the Central Role of Women	25
Language and Conflict: Maoists, Politics, and Sanskrit	26
Language and Culture: Identity in Difference	27

## **Part 3: Sustainable Futures: Promotion of Diversity at all Levels 29**

Language Policy in Neighbouring Himalayan States	29
Signs of Hope: Projects Underway in Nepal and the Himalayas	30

## **Web Resources 37**

## **Bibliography 39**

# 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

# Acknowledgements

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.

It would be impossible to name all the people at ICIMOD who have helped to make my time there enjoyable, but a few deserve special mention. Within CEGG, I continue to enjoy discussions about the passions that we share with Nani R. Subedi, Krishna Prasad Oli, Joy Dasgupta, and Radhika Gupta. Without the patience of Govinda Shrestha, I would have been lost, and I thank him for his ever-ready help. A. Beatrice Murray, C.N. Anil, Prativa Chhetri, Jenny Vaidya, Milan Raj Tuladhar, and the amazing Saisab Pradhan have all helped in countless ways to make ICIMOD a colourful and dynamic place to work. Thank you. Special thanks also to Joyce M. Mendez, my editor, for her ongoing support during the production of the book, and to Punam Pradhan for the layout and for patiently overseeing numerous corrections to the maps.

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.

I have also benefited from helpful comments made by Yogendra Prasad Yadava, Professor at the Central Department of Linguistics at Tribhuvan University. His attention to detail and critical engagement with my work are truly appreciated. Finally, I should like to spare a word for Mark Flummerfelt and Sara Shneiderman, both of whom have read drafts of this document and offered valuable and constructive criticism. Needless to say, I take full responsibility for any errors, oversights, or historical inaccuracies which may have crept in, and for any important omissions which may have crept out.

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

# Part 1

## Setting the Scene

### **The Greater Himalayan Region: A Language ‘Mega Centre’**

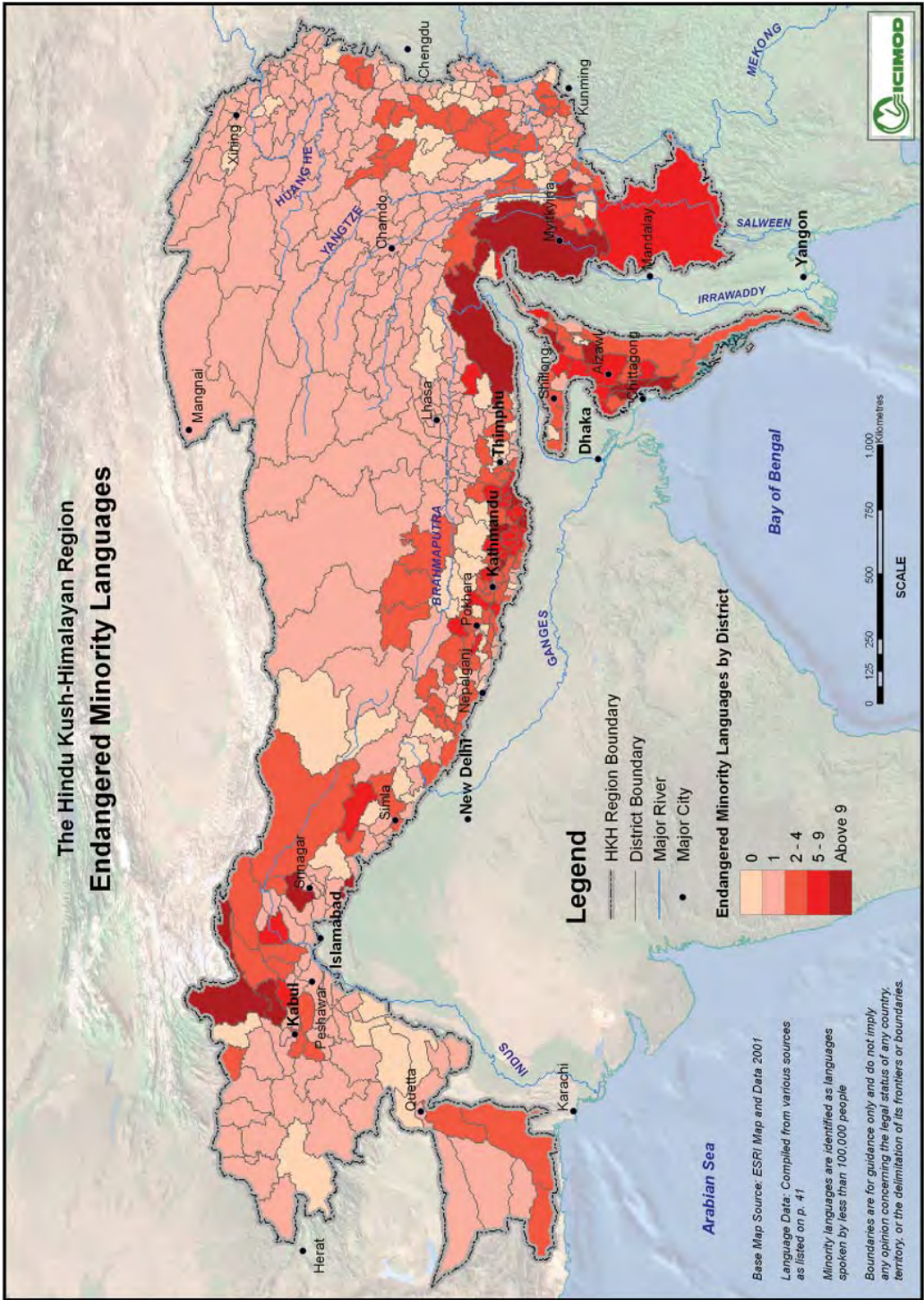
The greater Himalayan region, which extends for 3,500 km from Afghanistan in the west to Myanmar in the east, sustains over 150 million people and is home to great linguistic diversity and many of Asia's most endangered languages. Moving across the region in alphabetical order, Afghanistan boasts 47 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

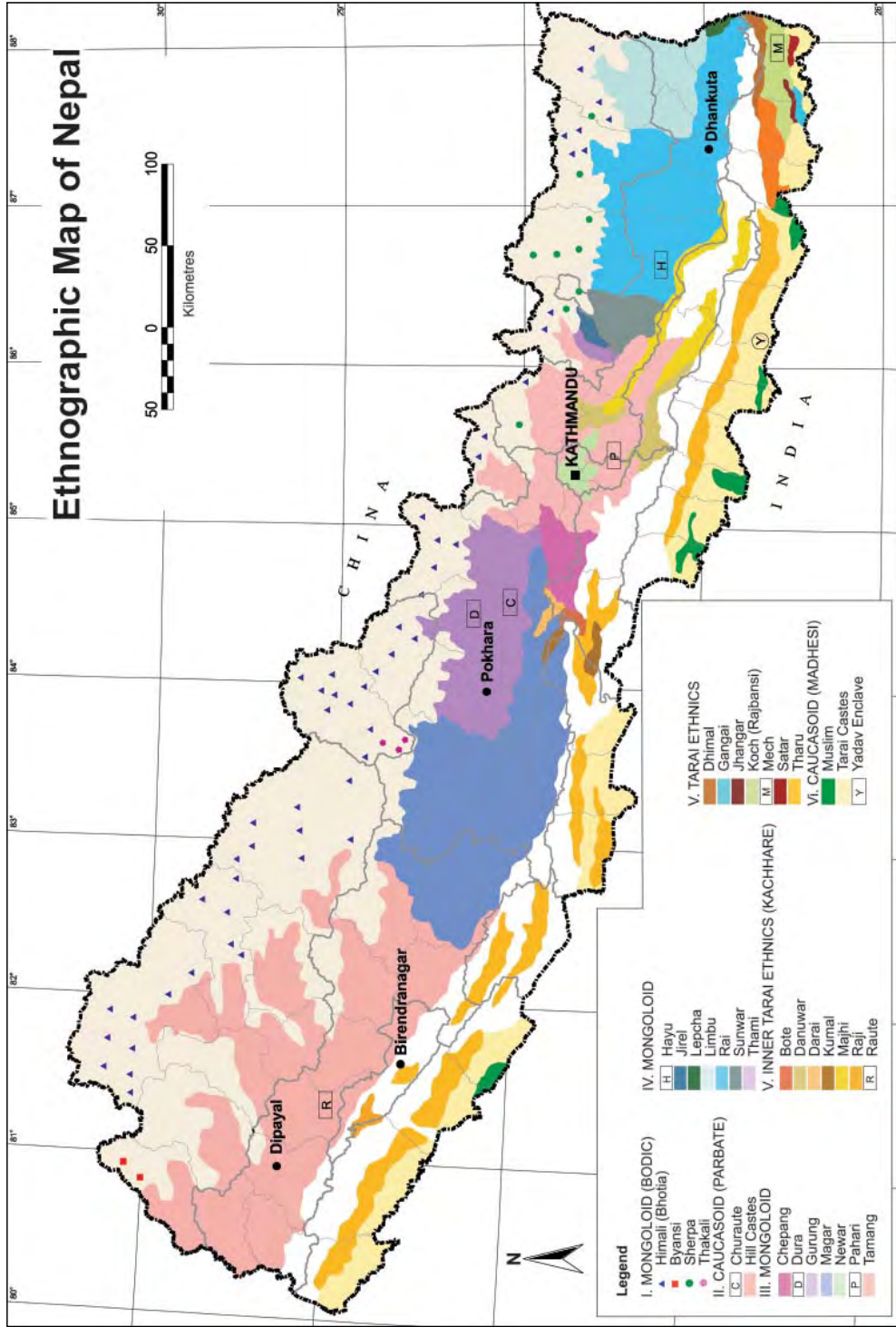


Figure 2: Ethnographic map of Nepal showing the distribution of caste and ethnic groups  
 Source: Harka Gurung (2006). Nepal Atlas and Statistics. Himal Books, reprinted by permission



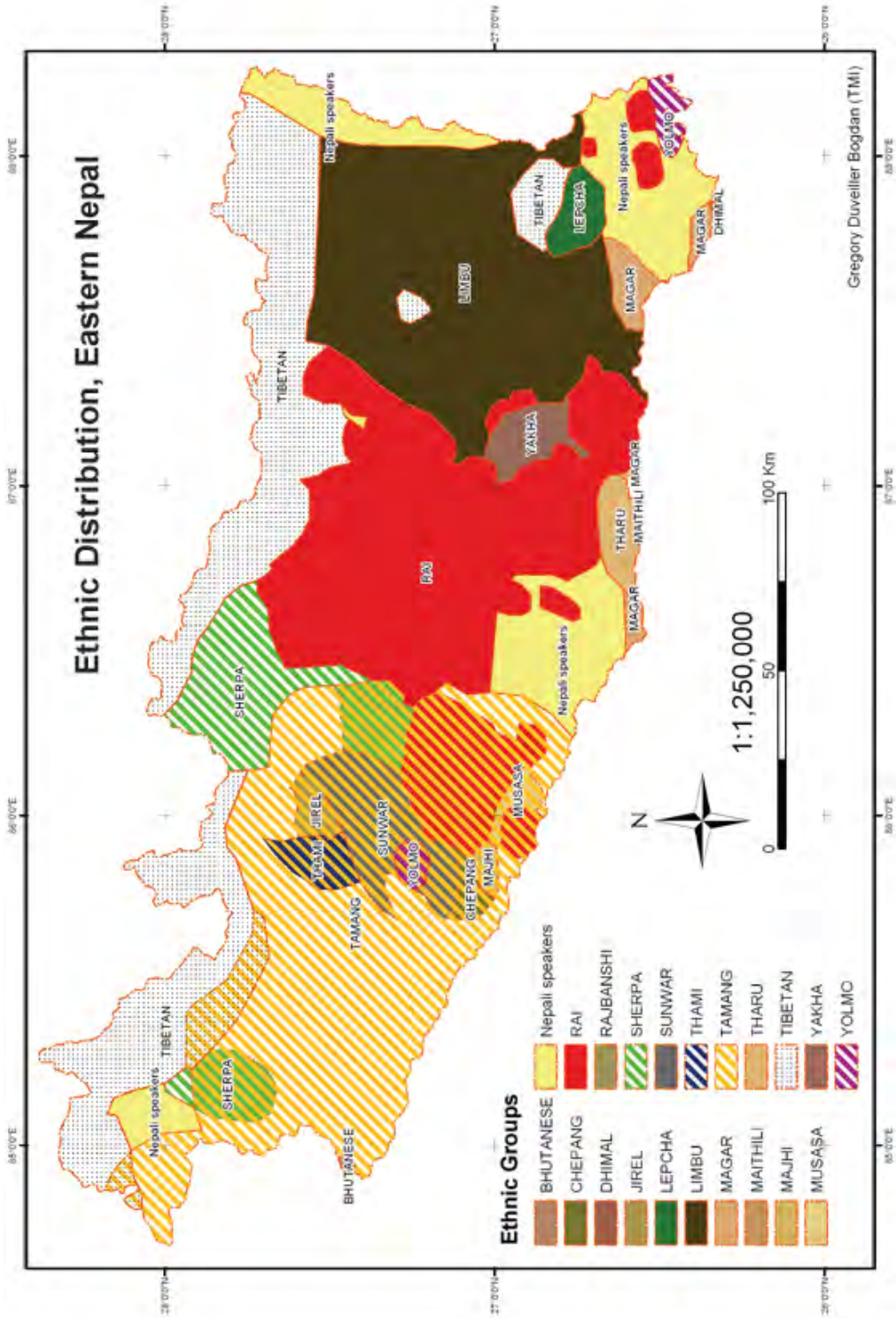


Figure 3: Ethnic distribution map of Eastern Nepal  
 Source: The Mountain Institute

(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 languages<sup>1</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> Minority languages are identified as languages spoken by less than 100,000 people.

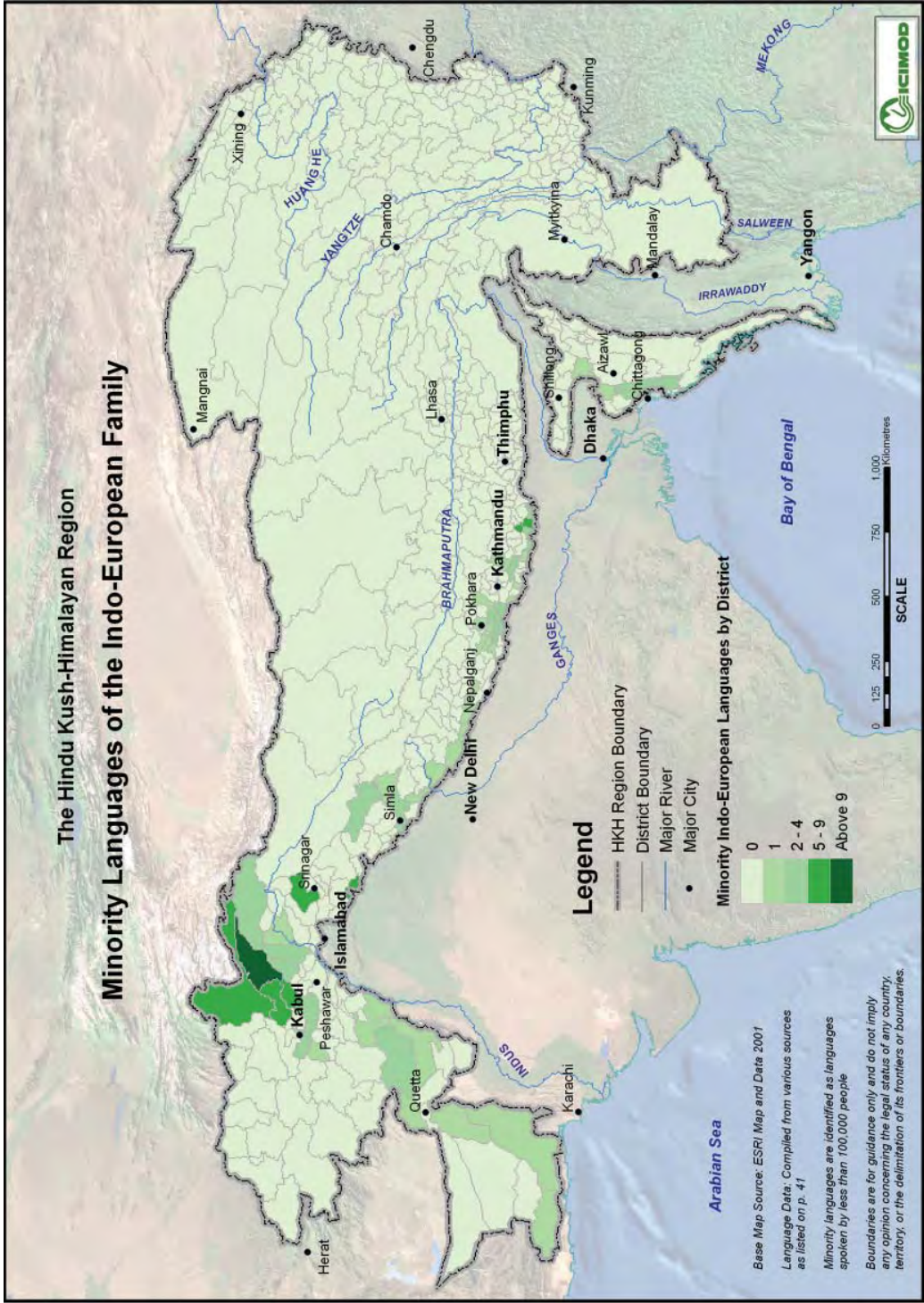


Figure 4: Map of minority languages of the Indo-European family in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region  
 Source: CD-ROM (in preparation), based on language data sources found on page 41



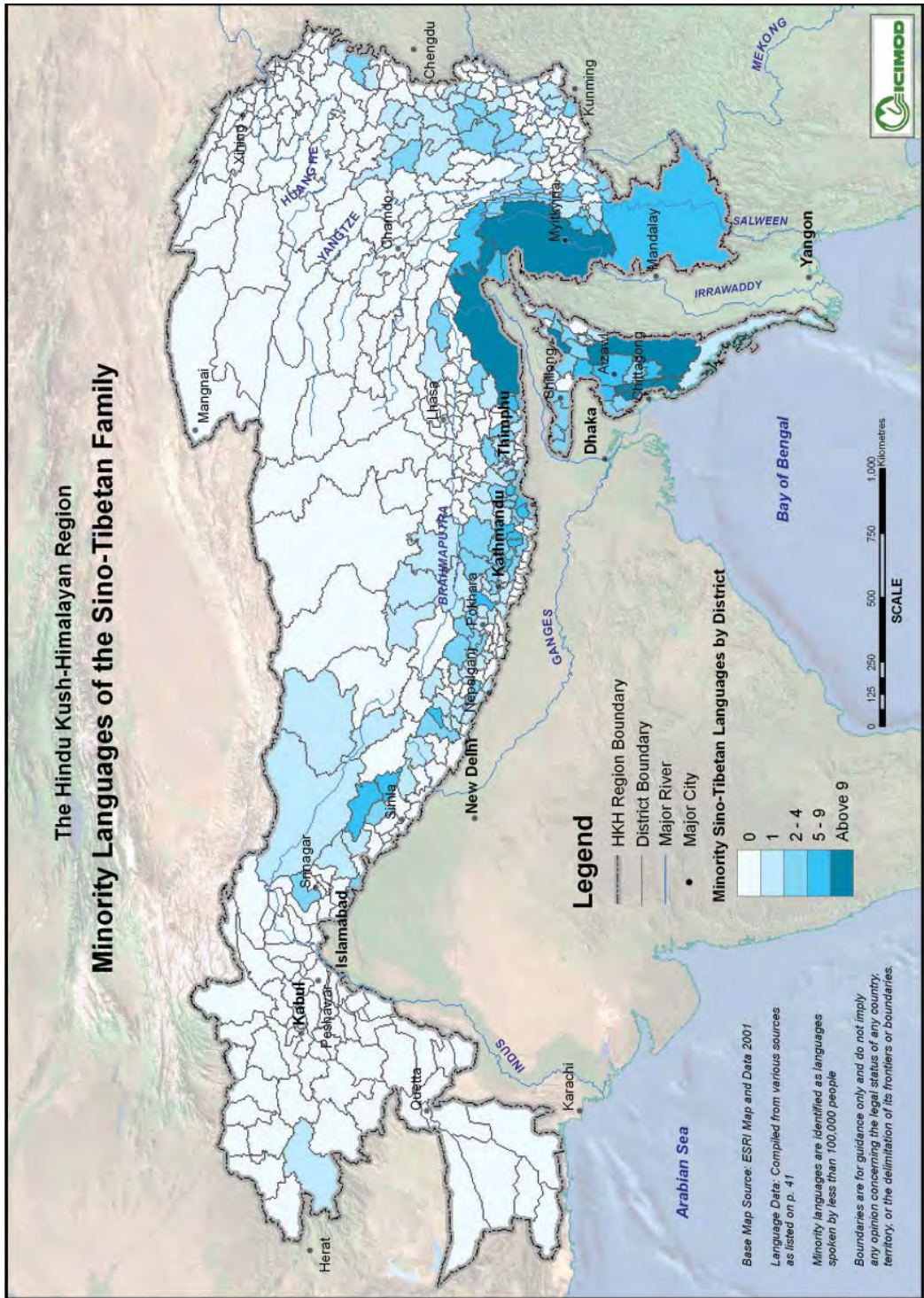
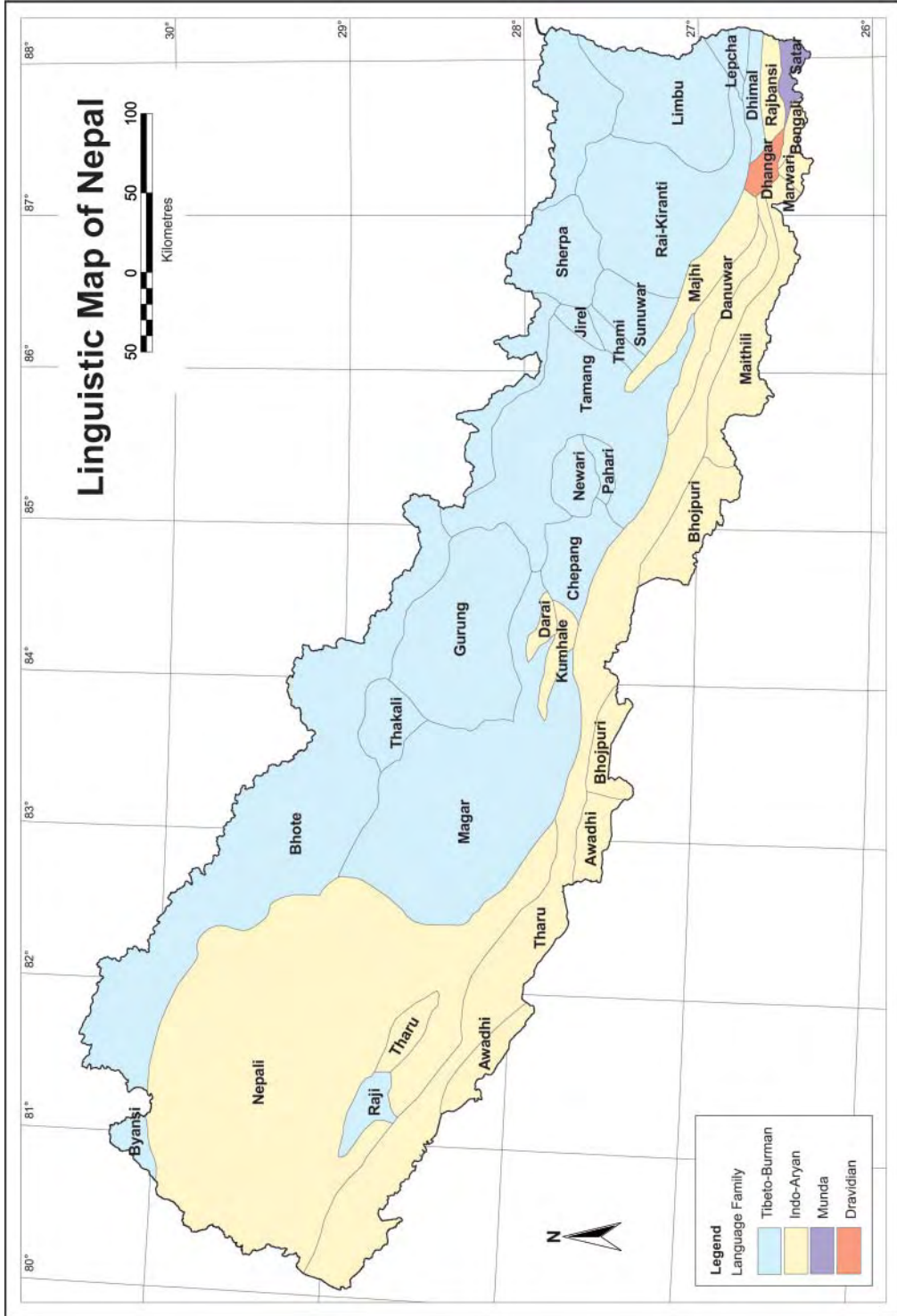


Figure 5: Map of minority languages of the Sino-Tibetan family in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region  
 Source: CD-ROM (in preparation), based on language data sources found on page 41





**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

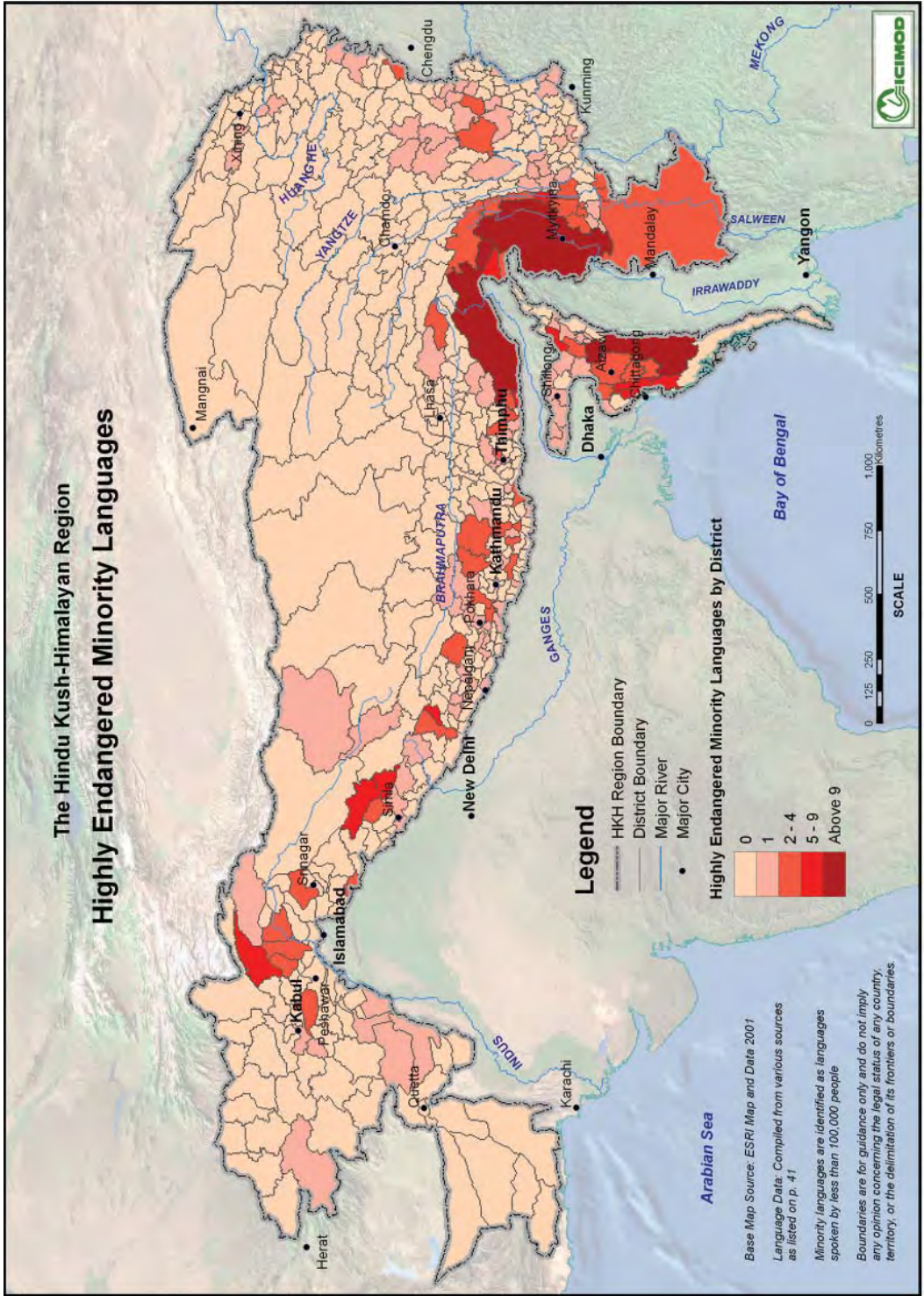


Figure 7: Map of highly endangered minority languages in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region

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**

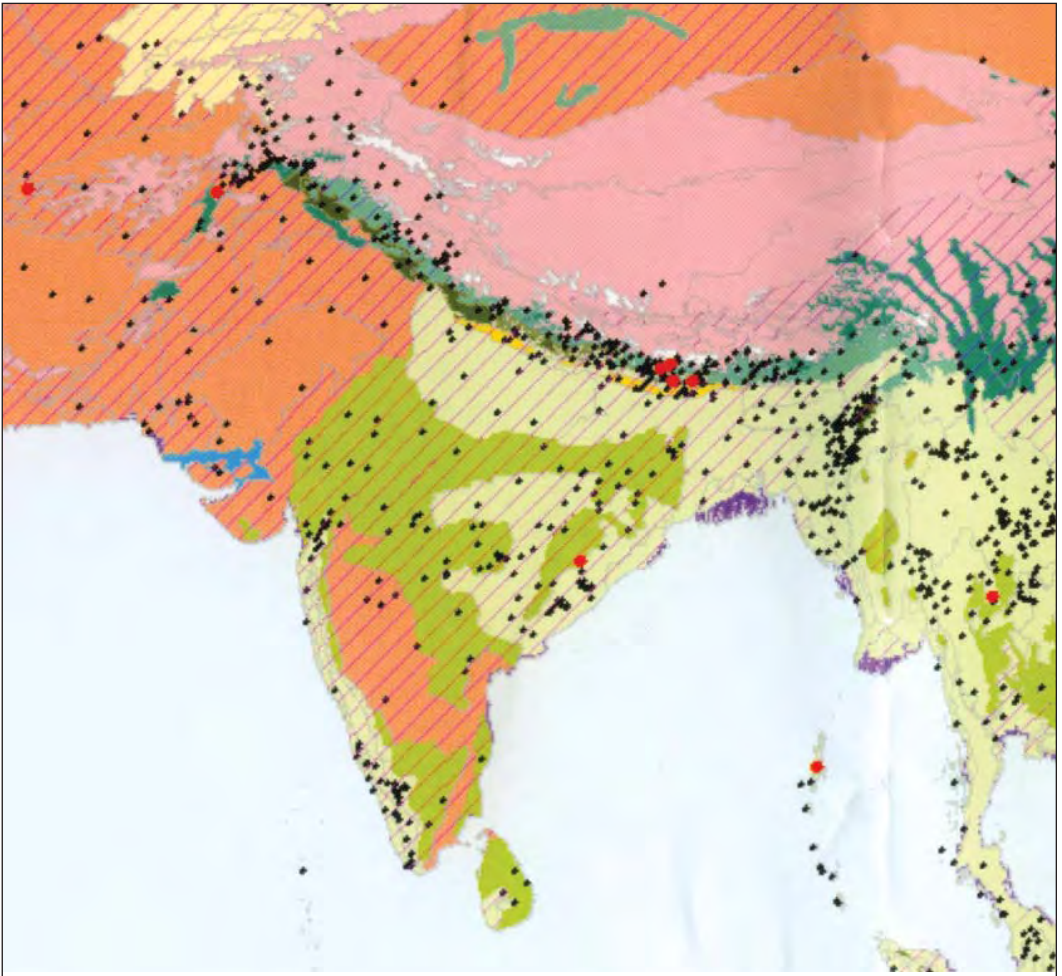
Why should development workers and scholars be concerned with the extinction of endangered languages? After all, since 96% of the world's population speak 4% of the world's languages, and over 1,500 languages have fewer than 1,000 speakers, is it feasible or realistic to support minority tongues (Crystal 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).

## 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.

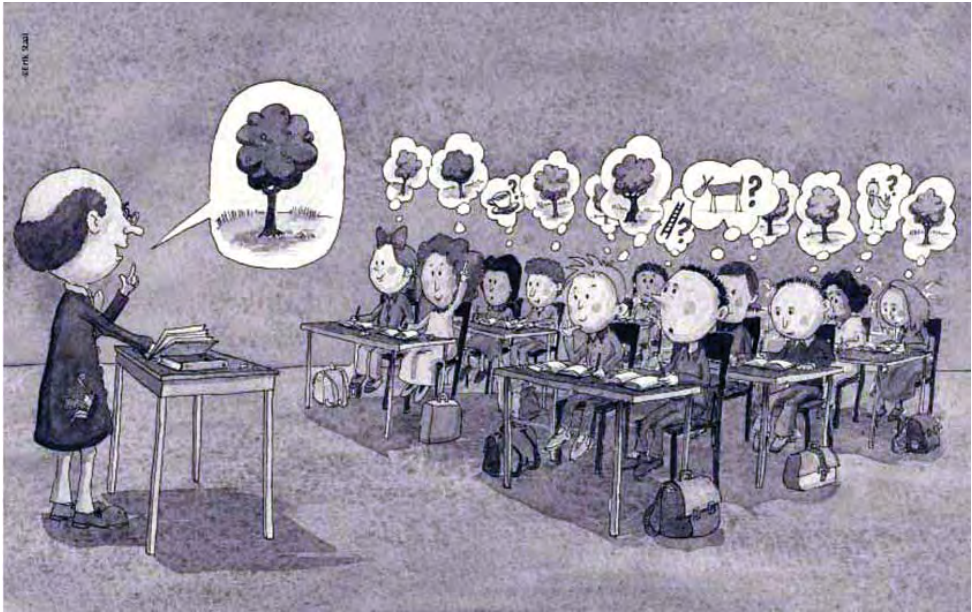
Why is mother tongue education an issue at all? Instead of learning Gurung and Bhojpuri at school, should children who speak minority languages at home not be taught Nepali and English to give them the very tools they need to compete with mother tongue Nepali speakers? Would not focusing on their ethnic 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.

- (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.

# Sustainable Futures: Promotion of Diversity at all Levels

The preservation of a language in its fullest sense entails the maintenance of the speech community. Reversing language death therefore requires the preservation of the culture and habitat in which a language is spoken. While many of the languages spoken as mother tongues in the Himalayas today will likely only survive as second languages in the coming years, that is in itself no small feat. Supporting minority languages and halting linguistic decline must become an integral element in securing the sustainable livelihoods of diverse mountain peoples. Integrated development programmes which focus on the vulnerability of marginalised peoples in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region should introduce a component of support for the languages which are presently under threat.

## Language Policy in Neighbouring Himalayan States

Given the incredible linguistic diversity of the region, it is worth comparing how other Himalayan states do, or do not, address the linguistic rights of minority language communities within their borders. This comparative perspective is instructive as the linguistic provisions in Nepal's new interim constitution are being framed.

Article 3 of the Constitution of Bangladesh as adopted on 4 November 1972 defines the 'state language of the Republic' as Bangla. Article 1.8 of the entirely bilingual (Dzongkha and English) Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan of 2005 clearly states that 'Dzongkha is the National Language of Bhutan'. The Constitution of Pakistan, adopted on 10 April 1973, is similarly unambiguous on the importance of its national language in promoting unity: 'the national language of Pakistan is Urdu, and arrangements shall be made for its being used for official and other purposes' (Article 251.1). However, unlike Bangladesh and Bhutan, the Constitution of Pakistan accepts that 'the English language may be used for official purposes' until the transition to Urdu is complete, and that provincial assemblies may 'by law prescribe measures for the teaching, promotion and use of a provincial language in addition to the national language' (Article 251.3).

While the laws of Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Pakistan promote a monolingual national identity, the Constitution of the People's Republic of China adopted on 4 December 1982 is in text at least more tolerant of minority languages. While the state 'promotes the nationwide use of Putonghua [Mandarin]' according to Article 19, 'people of all nationalities have the freedom to use and develop their own spoken and written



languages, and to preserve or reform their own ways and customs' particularly in autonomous areas or in local government (Articles 4 and 21).

The Republic of India has a more nuanced view of linguistic diversity, particularly compared to its regional neighbours, and many clauses of its constitution, most recently updated in 1996, allude to or explicitly specify the rights of minority language communities. Although Article 343 of the Constitution states that the 'official language of the Union shall be Hindi in the Devanagari script', parliamentary business may also be conducted in English (Article 120). Across India, however, individual states have considerable control over which languages should be used as the official media of state legislative and administrative business, and the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution lists 21 languages which have been officially endorsed by the central government as languages of state communication.

Looking at constitutional and legal provisions alone, then, Nepal appears to boast a fairly forward-looking policy with regard to minority languages, particularly when compared to its neighbours. It can be argued that smaller nations, almost by definition, must strive to foster linguistic unity – in the manner that Bhutan is attempting – to avoid balkanisation and ethnic strife. Large nation states, such as China and India, being at once so vast and heterogeneous, have little choice but to tolerate and even encourage local languages as tools of administration and education.

Another conclusion which might be drawn is that constitutional ambiguity is a shrewd form of governance. Ram Kumar Dahal, writing on the multiplicity of speech communities in India, notes that the aim of including English as the 'auxiliary language for at least fifteen years' was to help standardise and institutionalise Hindi 'all over India' (2000, p. 156-157). India's failure to achieve this goal has resulted in two languages of administration, education, and prestige, best illustrated by the kind of code-switching and rampant Hindi-English bilingualism which is so often seen in Bollywood films.

## **Signs of Hope: Projects Underway in Nepal and the Himalayas**

To date, there are no active projects on languages and livelihoods in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region which interweave biological and cultural diversity with the aim of building sustainable futures for disadvantaged mountain communities. The Culture, Equity, Gender and Governance Programme (CEGG) at ICIMOD, which promotes the equality and empowerment of vulnerable mountain peoples for enhanced social security and reduced conflict, is planning to introduce a layer of project support for linguistic and cultural diversity to initiatives previously focused exclusively on biological and ecological diversity.

This author has been involved in a recent ICIMOD initiative to develop an atlas of minority languages of the Himalayas. Using scalable vector graphics (SVG) and JavaScript, this digital interactive Atlas of Minority Languages of the greater Himalayas allows users to search and retrieve data on endangered mother tongues in the region. The central interface is a scalable and zoomable map of the administrative districts





# HKH Region Linguistic Mapping

**HKH LANGUAGES**

**LANGUAGE FAMILY**  
ALL

**LANGUAGES**  
Kati (Bashgali, Katiwiri)  
Lasi (Lasi)  
Gangte (Gangte)  
Angika (Anga)  
Pangwali (Fahari, Pangli)  
Tseku (Tseku, Tzuku)

Extinct  
 Moribund  
 Highly Endangered  
 Endangered  
 Safe

**MAP**  
Zoom (0%)  
MOVE MAP  
LAYERS  
 HKH Cities  
 HKH Rivers  
 HKH Boundaries  
 River  
 Cities

**QUERY**  
Min No. of Speakers  
Values: 10, 100, 500, 1000, 2000, 5000, 10000  
Refresh Find

**LEGENDS**  
Language Family  
all  
Extinct (Red)  
Moribund (Orange)  
Highly Endangered (Purple)  
Endangered (Blue)  
Safe (Light Blue)  
Language Family (Circle)  
Districts (Square)

**GRAPH**  
Bar chart showing counts for Language Family and Districts.

**INFO**  
User Location Other

Figure 10: Linguistic Diversity: An Atlas of Endangered Languages in the Himalayas (in preparation as a CD-ROM and web resource)

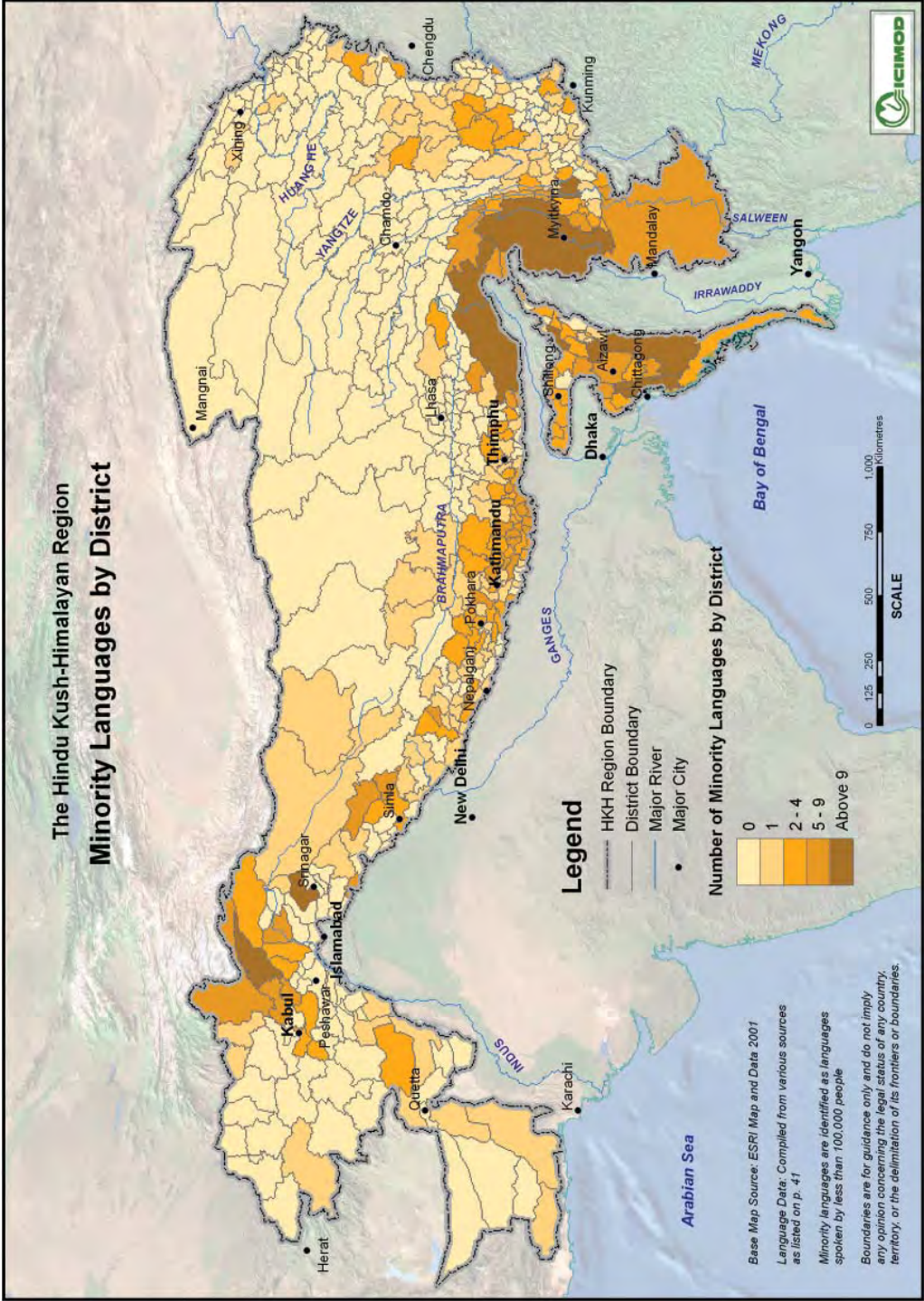


Figure 11: Map of minority languages by district in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region  
Source: CD-ROM (in preparation), based on language data sources found on page 41



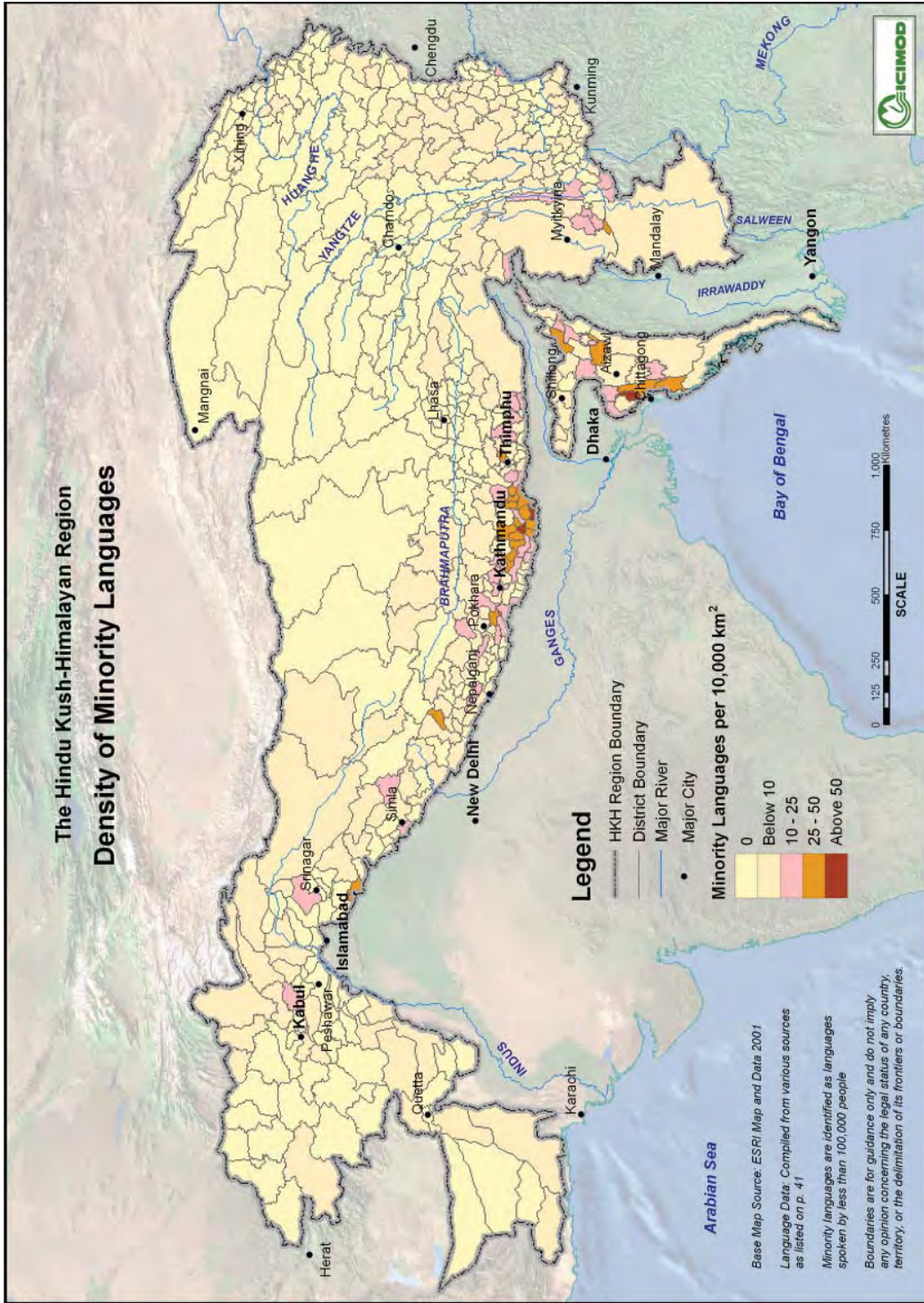


Figure 12: Map of density of minority languages in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region  
Source: CD-ROM (in preparation), based on language data sources found on page 41

The British Department for International Development (DFID), through its Enabling State Programme (ESP), recently provided a substantial three-year grant to the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) to support the empowerment of Nepal's marginalised ethnic groups. Entitled the Janajati (indigenous ethnic group) Empowerment Project (JEP), the programme has the explicit purpose of increasing the participation of Nepal's disadvantaged ethnic peoples in socioeconomic and political processes at central and district levels. Focusing on local capacity building and strengthening civil society networks, JEP proposes to preserve and further develop Nepal's ethnic languages and help advocate for linguistic rights. Following on from JEP, NEFIN has been granted substantial funding in the form of the Janajati Social and Economic Empowerment Project (JANASEEP). The project is funded by European Commission and will be jointly implemented by NEFIN and CARE Nepal. The project aims to enhance economic and livelihood opportunities through empowerment of Dhanuk, Thami, and Surel Janajatis in Dhanusha and Dolakha districts, with a particular focus on the preservation of linguistic and cultural forms.

In terms of research output, the Central Department of Linguistics in Nepal has embarked upon an ambitious interdisciplinary project known as the Linguistic Survey of Nepal (LINSUN) which will identify and analyse Nepal's languages to produce an encyclopaedia and an archive for linguistic data on endangered languages. The Chintang and Puma Documentation Project, funded by the Volkswagen Foundation and administered jointly by the University of Leipzig in Germany and Tribhuvan University in Nepal, is working on the linguistic and ethnographic documentation of two endangered Kiranti languages of Nepal. The core objective of the project is to provide audiovisual documentation of language practice along with rich linguistic and ethnographic description. With financial assistance from the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project (HRELP) at the School of Oriental and African Studies, the Central Department of Linguistics has recently embarked on a new project to document Baram, a seriously endangered language of central Nepal, for its preservation and promotion.

Language revitalisation campaigns aim to increase the prestige, wealth, and power of speakers of endangered mother tongues, to give the language a strong presence in the educational system, and to provide the language with a written form to encourage literacy and improve access to electronic technology. Linguistic diversity is, after all, the human store of historically acquired knowledge about how to use and maintain some of the world's most vulnerable and biologically diverse environments.

As the writers of a hard-hitting UNESCO report conclude, "If during the next century we lose more than half of our languages, we also seriously undermine our chances for life on Earth. From this perspective, fostering the health and vigour of ecosystems is one and the same goal as fostering the health and vigour of human societies, their cultures, and their languages. We need an integrated biocultural approach to the planet's environmental crisis" (UNESCO 2003b, p. 44). Biocultural development projects need to involve and mobilise communities to revalue indigenous languages. Nowhere is this more the case than Nepal, where the country's vanishing voices are dangerously close to disappearing forever, taking with them much of the cultural heritage that makes the Himalayan region so unique.



# Web Resources

The World Wide Web is increasingly becoming a research tool through which publications, archives and legal documents can be conveniently accessed. Here, a list of informative and helpful websites is provided for interested readers. Due to the impermanent nature of Internet resources, however, the sustainability of the URLs cannot be guaranteed.

Mapping Linguistic Diversity: An Atlas of Endangered Languages in the Himalayas, ICIMOD (on CD and online, in preparation)

Biodiversity Hotspots

By Conservation International, a website devoted to areas of great biodiversity  
<http://www.biodiversityhotspots.org/xp/Hotspots/>

Chintang and Puma Documentation Project (CPDP)

A project aiming at the linguistic and ethnographic documentation of two endangered Kiranti languages of Nepal  
<http://www.uni-leipzig.de/~ff/cpdp/>

Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal 2047 (1990)

<http://inic.utexas.edu/asnic/countries/nepal/nepalconstitution.html>

Digital Himalaya

A project developing digital collection, storage, and distribution strategies for multimedia anthropological content from the Himalayan region  
<http://www.digitalhimalaya.com/>

Documenting Endangered Languages (DEL)

A US National Science Foundation (NSF) funded programme  
<http://www.nsf.gov/pubs/2004/nsf04605/nsf04605.htm>

Documentation of Endangered Languages (DoBeS)

A Volkswagen Foundation initiative to document the world's endangered languages  
<http://www.mpi.nl/DOBES>

Electronic Metastructure for Endangered Language Data (E-MELD)

To aid in the preservation of endangered languages data and documentation  
<http://emeld.org/index.cfm>

Endangered Language Fund (ELF)

Supporting endangered language preservation and documentation projects  
<http://www.endangeredlanguagefund.org/>

### Ethnologue: Languages of the World

An encyclopaedic reference work cataloguing all of the world's 6,912 known living languages

<http://www.ethnologue.org/>

### Foundation for Endangered Languages

To support, enable, and assist the documentation, protection, and promotion of endangered languages

<http://www.ogmios.org/home.htm>

### Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project (HRELP)

A documentation, academic, and archiving project based at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London

<http://www.hrelp.org/>

### Himalayan Languages Project

A programme of ongoing linguistic research on hitherto undescribed and little known languages indigenous to the Himalayan region

<http://213.207.98.211/himalaya/>

### Himalayan Linguistics

A free refereed web journal and archive devoted to the study of the languages of the Himalayas

<http://www.linguistics.ucsb.edu/HimalayanLinguistics/>

### SIL International: Endangered Languages

<http://www.sil.org/sociolx/ndg-lg-home.html>

### UNESCO Endangered Languages Programme

Culture > Intangible Heritage > Endangered Languages

[http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=8270&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=8270&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)

### World Congress on Language Policies

<http://www.linguapax.org/congres/indexang.html>

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**Language data sources used for the maps in the CD-ROM (in preparation) on Linguistic Diversity: An Atlas of Endangered Languages in the Himalayas**

Ethnologue: Languages of the World

An encyclopaedic reference work cataloguing all of the world's 6,912 known living languages, various dates

<http://www.ethnologue.org/>

UNESCO (2001, 2002) Language Survey Report Nepal. Kathmandu: UNESCO

HMGN (2001) Census data. Kathmandu: His Majesty's Government of Nepal



# About the author

Mark Turin holds a PhD in descriptive linguistics with a focus on Himalayan languages. He trained in social anthropology at the University of Cambridge and in linguistics at Leiden University in the Netherlands through the Himalayan Languages Project. His doctoral dissertation, currently in press with Brill, is a grammatical description of Thangmi, a little-known Tibeto-Burman language spoken in Nepal, with an ethnolinguistic introduction to the speakers and their culture. Turin has taught linguistic and visual anthropology at the University of Cambridge, and held a three-year research fellowship at Cornell University. He directs Digital Himalaya, an online project to develop digital collection, storage, and distribution strategies for multimedia anthropological information from the Himalayan region <[www.digitalhimalaya.com](http://www.digitalhimalaya.com)>. He has been a visiting scholar at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in Gangtok, Sikkim, where he initiated the first modern linguistic survey of Sikkim. He has also worked as a consultant for the World Bank, ICIMOD, and the United Nations, and continues to research and write about issues of language, ethnicity, politics, and technology across the Himalayan region. At present he heads the Translation and Interpretation Unit in the United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) in Kathmandu.

While many of us worry about the increasing loss of biodiversity from our planet, another kind of diversity loss – less widely publicised but equally disturbing – is affecting the world's languages and cultures. Over the course of this century, many spoken languages, especially minority languages and the cultures that they encapsulate, may cease to exist.

In this issue of *Talking Points*, social anthropologist and linguist Mark Turin draws our attention to this alarming phenomenon, and situates it in the context of contemporary Nepal and the Himalayan region. A large number of Nepal's over 100 mother tongues are in danger of being wiped out, reduced to mere markers of identity within our lifetime if nothing is done to reverse the trend. This would be tantamount to the loss of a piece of cultural uniqueness and heritage from this region and our diverse planet – a loss for all of humanity. Recent international research points to a link between biological and linguistic diversity, and preserving minority languages would also help to preserve minority communities, their culture and habitats, as well as bring attention to the need to improve their socioeconomic and political status. In this provocative document, Turin raises awareness about the importance of language protection programmes that support mother tongue literacy and educational reforms to preserve language and culture. ICIMOD supports these discussions in recognition of the fact that they form part of conserving the biological and cultural heritage of mountain communities.

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