

## 네팔의 다양성, 다중 언어 그리고 민주적 실천: 사회-역사적 관점

### Diversity, Multilingualism and Democratic Practices in Nepal: A Socio-historical Perspective Bhim Lal Gautam, Ph.D.

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반구 국가의 관련 문학을 참조하여, 언어적 다양성의 보존에 영향을 미쳐 온 민주적 정책 내에서의 풀뿌리 단계 문제들을 거론할 것이다. 최종적으로, 민주주의 안에서 다언어주의 유지의 희망을 구체화하기 위한 미래의 정책결정과 계획수립을 위하여 몇 가지 가정을 도출할 것이다.

### 국문요약

본 논문에서는 네팔의 다언어주의 및 다양성의 주요 특성들을 몇 가지 역사적인 민주 실천을 통하여 살펴본다. 본 논문에서는 또한, 네팔의 민주적 실천과 관련된 언어 다양성과 관련된 최근의 양상에 대해 서술한다. 본 논문은 특히 언어 다양성의 역사적인 측면에 관심을 두고 있는데, (본인이 취합한 데이터 자료를 통해) 언어의 변화하는 지위 그리고 일부 선택된 사회들 속에서의 언어 행위들의 예시를 통해 역사적인 측면을 분석한다.

본 논문은 또한 다언어적 다양성의 보존과 국가 정체성의 고양을 위하여 사멸화되어 가는 언어들의 보존을 목적으로 최근 진행되고 있는 정책(법적 및 정책 문서의 분석을 기반으로)과 실행(네팔 언어 위원회와 같은 공인 기관에 의해 채택된 계획 및 실시된 조치들의 분석을 기반으로)에 대한 본인의 비판적 평가를 제안한다. 네팔의 다언어주의와 관련된 정책과 실행에 대한 본인의 깊이 있는 탐구를 기반으로, 본인은 남

### Abstract

This paper highlights the major features of multilingualism and diversities of Nepal with some historical democratic practices. It also reports the recent trends on linguistic diversity in relation to Nepal's democratic practices with special reference to its historical dimension drawing on the instances from the changing status of languages, and the linguistic practices in the selected societies (from which I took the sample of data). I will also present my critically evaluation of the current policy (based on the analysis of legal and policy documents) and practices (based on analysis of initiatives taken and actions accomplished by the authorized institutions such as the Language Commission of Nepal) targeted to preserve the endangered languages for the promotion of multilingual

diversity and identity of the country. Based on my in-depth exploration of the policies and practices in relation to multilingualism in Nepal, I will report, with reference to the relevant literature from the countries in the global south, the grassroots level problems within the democratic polities that have impacted on the preservation of the linguistic diversity. Finally, some implications will be drawn out for future policymaking and planning initiatives to materialize the dream of maintaining multilingualism within democracy.

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## 1. Prologue

Nepal is multilingual, multicultural, multiracial and multi-religious country. Despite its small size, Nepal is a country of linguistic diversity with four major language families namely Indo-Aryan, Tibeto-Burman, Dravidian (Munda) and Austro-Asiatic and one language isolate i.e. Kusunda. The Census 2011 records the number of speakers for 123 plus languages and also includes an additional category of ‘other unknown languages’ with close to half million speakers. The state intervention to preserve and promote these languages remained inconsistent along the history, as some governments intentionally discouraged the planned promotion compared to others which designed some measures to promote them. Both monolingual and multilingual ideologies remained as the points of debate in political and social spaces. For instance, the recognition of linguistic diversity in Nepal can be observed clearly after the establishment of multiparty democracy in 1990 following the Nepali-only monolingual policy of the absolute monarchy (alternatively the Panchayat regime). Sonntag (2007) stated that “the Nepali-only policy was discarded in favour of an official language policy that recognized Nepal’s linguistic diversity” (p. 205). This shows that the democratic political system that remained open to the neoliberal economy embraced the linguistic diversity as a resource, due to which the multilingual identity of Nepalese society was officially recognized. However, at the same time, this political system could not preserve the minority languages as expected,

which prompted to question on the co-existence of diversity and democracy. The fundamental question now is that whether democracy can really promote the linguistic diversity, or it narrows down the diversity by marginalizing the ethnic/minority languages.

## 2. Diversity and multilingualism in Nepal

Following the Gorkha<sup>2)</sup> conquest Gorkhali or Khas (now known as Nepali), the language of ruling elites and mother tongue of many people in the Hills, was uplifted as the national official language in Nepal. After unification,<sup>3)</sup> a hegemonic policy in terms of language and culture was formulated which promoted the code (linguistic and dress) of the Hill Brahmins, Chhetries and Thakuris to the ideal national code (i.e., Nepali language and Daura Suruwal Topi<sup>4)</sup>-dress). This has been interpreted as one of attempts to promote assimilatory national policy (in terms of language and culture) that contributed to curbing both linguistic and cultural diversity. However, for the rulers then, it was an attempt to establish stronger national identity and integrity. The Rana regime further prolonged this 'one nation-one language' policy by uplifting Nepali language in education and public communication (as the language of wider communication within the territory of Nepal). The Rana, during their rule, suppressed the Newar and Hindi language movements, which serves as an evidence of their deliberate plan to eliminate all but one language, viz. Nepali. In this sense, we can understand that Nepal's diversity and Multilingual identity were suppressed historically in the name of nation-building and promoting national integration among people with diverse ethnic and cultural orientations.

Following the end of Rana oligarchy in 1950, with the establishment of democracy, some changes were noticed concerning the recognition and mainstreaming of the other ethnic/indigenous languages. This instigated the policy changes in terms of language use in education as well. However, the status quo of Nepali language further strengthened as it was made the prominent language of governance and education. The National Education Planning Commission (1956), the first national report on education, basically reflected the ideology of monolingualism with the influence of H. B Wood. It stated, recommended the following in relation to language. It stated, "If the younger generation

is taught to use Nepali as the basic language then other languages will gradually disappear, the greater the national strength and unity...”. Though this report formed the backbone of Nepal’s education system, it also paved the way for minimizing the potential for empowering the languages of the nation. Pradhan (2018) also writes that this commission attempted to “coalesce the ideas of Nepali nationalism around the “triumvirate of Nepali language, monarchy and Hindu religion as uniquely Nepali” (p. 169). The same was reinforced by K. I. Singh government in 1957 by prescribing Nepali as medium of instruction in school education.

The Panchayat regime also promoted the use of Nepali as the only language of administration, education and media in compliance with the Panchayat slogan ‘one language, one dress, one country’ (eutaa bhasha, eutaa bhash, eutaa desh), again providing a supportive environment for strengthening of the monolingual nationalistic ideology (in other words the assimilatory policy). Such ideology can be seen in the report of the All Round National Education Commission (1961) as well. Not only in education, but also in governance, English or Nepali were made mandatory in recording all documents of companies through the Company Act (1964) as well. Following the Panchayat system, with the restoration of democracy in 1990, the Constitution of Nepal (1991, part 1, article 6.1 and 6.2) provisioned Nepali language written in Devnagari script was made the national language, while also recognizing all the mother tongues as the languages of the nation with their official eligibility as medium of instruction upto primary education. The Interim Constitution of Nepal (2007), which came as a collective outcome of the Maoist insurgency and Andolan II continued to strengthen Nepali language, but ensured (in its part 1, article 5[2]) that each community’s right to have education in their mother tongue and right to preserve and promote their languages, script, and culture as well. The recognition of all the mother tongues as the languages of the nation was a progressive step ahead provisioned by the Interim Constitution of Nepal (2007). Apart from further confirming the right of each community residing in Nepal to preserve and promote its language, script, culture, cultural civility and heritage, this constitution (Part 3, Article 17) clearly discussed the right to each community to get basic education in their mother tongue as provided for in the law. The same was well-articulated in the Constitution of Nepal (2015) as well, and each state was given the authority to provision one or many

languages spoken by the majority population as the official languages. Along with, language commission was established to study and recommend other matters relating to language (part 1, article 7 of the constitution). However, it can be realized that these policy provisions that embrace the diversity will have less effect if the concerned communities or agencies do not translate them into practice.

### **3. Methodology**

Along with the extensive reading of the available literature in relation to language policy and planning (such as legislative documents, policy paper), in this small-scale case study, I have also obtained the data from two individuals who have extensive work experience in the field of education, governance, constitution making and advocacy for language preservation and promotion. Mr Kailash and Mr Parbat (the names and gender anonymized for privacy, and pseudonyms used) emerge from two different backgrounds. Mr Kailash worked at the Ministry of Education for more than 30 years, achieved his PhD in Multilingual education from a University in Europe. On the other hand, Mr Parbat worked as a politician and teacher educator who later joined Radio Nepal, engaged in various cultural advocacy forums of the ruling Communist Party of Nepal, and again moved to politics at the later part of his life. He was a member of the parliament in the Constituent Assembly. While Mr Kailash is the native speaker of Nepali, Mr Parbat is a native speaker of Bhojpuri, and learnt Nepali as a second language. In that, both of the individuals have active engagement in language politics and planning, however are from different cultural, linguistic and geopolitical backgrounds. I have assumed that their ideas would have made my understanding of linguistic diversity and democracy more enriched.

They were interviewed online, using Zoom interactive platform. The interviews lasted for one hour each (excluding the personalized greetings and endings during the talk). The interviews were recorded, transcribed and translated into English, and were checked for accuracy and reliability. I have analyzed the data not being strict to any particular theory, rather I have taken our take on the critical theories that challenge the

historical and structural practices contributing to the understanding of inequalities and marginalization of the languages. Such practices have been promoted by democracies of various types (usually in the global North and the South) instead of facilitating the promotion of linguistic diversities.

## 4. Findings and discussion

This section presents the findings of the data reported in the following themes.

### 4.1. ‘One nation’ ideology and the linguistic diversity

Nepal’s modern history starts with the unification campaign of Prithvi Narayan Shah, the first Shah king of Nepal. Prithvi Narayan Shah’s unification modality (one nation) worked indirectly to promote the ideology of “singularity” in nation-building, national integration and identity. Roughly, all other systems of governance following the unification adopted similar ideological orientations, which directly/indirectly contributed to the marginalization of other mother tongues. Mr Parbat puts his view as, “Historically, even before the unification of Nepal, there were several principalities in which the Kings used to speak their own languages, and the linguistic diversity was preserved and strengthened”. He further claimed, “The geo-political, historical, socio-political and anthropological history recognized the multilingual social dynamics, however, the national policies after the unification could not embrace such diversity”. He relates the current political systems, and the ideologies of Nepali nationalism are guided by the notion of ultra-nationalism. Mr Akela’s emphasizes that the government’s plurilingual policies would not operate as the practice has largely shaped people’s orientation towards Nepali and English, side-lining the regional and local languages. The same perception was reported by Mr Kailash as, “Though deliberate efforts are made in the policy level to promote the regional/local languages through status planning, there still lies the attitudinal problem which undermines the potential of bringing local languages into practice.” Their claims also adhere with the statements made in the documents of educational commissions as well.

## 4.2. Diversity and democracy

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) asserts that democracy assures the basic human right for self-determination, and full participation of people in the aspects of their living such as decision-making in relation to their language and culture. It also provides them with ways of assuring social benefits such as equal opportunities and social justice. In Nepal, diversity was promoted by democracy through the policy provisions, especially after the promulgation of the constitution of Nepal in 1990 following the Nepali-only monolingual policy of the absolute monarchy (alternatively the Panchayat regime). The basic rights for the use of indigenous languages were assured in the constitution as well as other educational acts formed as outcomes of democratic political turns. The changes in the policy provisions provided opportunities for the linguists, language rights activists and advocacy groups/individuals to explore more about their languages and cultures. Due to their attempts, also supported by the democratic political system, new languages were identified, and some others were streamlined through the preparation of the educational materials such as textbooks upto grade 3. However, pragmatic actions remained fragile for education in the schools to support the aspiration for promoting diversity, which ultimately resulted in squeezing multilingualism. The statistical data shows that the number of languages spoken as mother tongues in Nepal are 129 (Language Commission, 2019), some scholars still doubt whether these languages functionally exist in reality (Gautam, 2019), or if they are there, then the practice may be fragile. In having such a fragile practice in the field, it can be noted that various factors played key roles, including lack of community participation, hegemonic attitude and agency of the individuals who could have purposive actions.

For instance, the recognition of linguistic diversity in Nepal can be observed clearly after the establishment of multiparty democracy in 1990. Sonntag (2007) stated that “the Nepali-only policy was discarded in favour of an official language policy that recognized Nepal’s linguistic diversity” (p. 205). This shows that the democratic political system that remained open to the neoliberal economy embraced the linguistic diversity as a resource, due to which the multilingual identity of Nepalese society was officially recognized. However, at the same time, this political system could not preserve the minority/indigenous languages as expected, which prompted us to question the co-existence of

diversity and democracy. Also, “It is very much a matter of democracy that everyone has the right to language and that society has a common language that everyone can understand and use” (Rosen & Bagga-Gupta, 2015, p. 59). As democratic states (e.g., Nepal, India, and Sweden) which have to address the contradictory discourses of language rights and developing an equal access of everyone in a common language (e.g., Nepali in Nepal) are struggling to settle the language issue. However, the fundamental question still not well-answered, at least in the case of Nepal, is whether democracy can, in a real sense, promote linguistic diversity, or alternatively it narrows down the diversity by marginalizing the ethnic/minority languages. While responding to this unanswered concern, I have observed that the diversity as a resource and diversity as a problem are the two distinct discourses emerged during the evolutionary process of democracy in Nepal, which was also emphasized by the two participants.

#### **4.2.1. Diversity as a resource**

Both informants in this study argued that diversity has to be absolutely understood as a resource very significant for human beings at the global level. Mr Parbat claimed, “If any language of a community dies, the culture and life-style of that community disappears, reduces biodiversity, and that ultimately will be a threat to humanity”. He understands the linguistic diversity as a part of ecology, and strongly argues that it should be protected. Agnihotri (2017) also echoes a similar belief as “Just as biodiversity enriches the life of a forest, linguistic diversity enhances the intellectual well-being of individuals and groups, both small and large” (p. 185). Mr Parbat added, “No language should die for our own existence as well”. Both Mr Parbat and Mr Kailash pointed out that the discourse on diversity and multilingualism in Nepal has been strengthened and institutionalized after 1990 when the country entered into a multiparty democratic system. However, Mr Parbat thinks that the current legislative provisions have partially addressed the diversity needs to fit Nepals’ super diverse context. He also points to the influence of the global north in bringing ultranationalist values in Nepal’s policy making. He does not think that the identity issues raised and addressed through policy processes would make significant differences as they were just brought into the field as agendas of political bargains. He stated, “The agendas of identity are just the forked tongues’, trans-

lated from [pahichanko sabal ta dekhaune daat matra ho]”. He meant that the identity issues have been largely used by the political leaders to deceive the concerned communities for their political benefits. This perception of a political leader, who is also an activist and scholar from the concerned ethnic community is very much meaningful for us, as it indicates that Nepal’s democratic path initiated a comprehensive discourse for protection of diversity. However, such discourse has been mostly used for political goals, rather than changing the grass-root practice and engagement of the concerned communities to bring the indigenous knowledge and skills into the education systems. However, it has been well-agreed that multilinguality and variability are constitutive of human existence, and we engage in the dynamic dialogic interaction to construct our identity based on the diversity we have (Agnihotri, 2017). In many countries, the democratic ideals have formed policies to perpetuate the linguistic and cultural harmony in their communities, the practices have shown dismal results.

#### 4.2.2. Diversity as a problem

Linguistic, cultural and geographical diversities are the essences of Nepalese democratic practices in different periods in history. However, in many cases, diversities have also been understood as a problem. Mr Parbat indicates that the rulers for long “Undermined the potential of the linguistic diversity and wished to impose monolingual national system that marginalized the use of these languages” Mr Kailash also provided a similar view as “In Nepal, along the history, there remained an ideological problem that diversity was understood as a construct for division, rather than understanding it as a potential tool for nation building”. His understanding also reflects what was discussed in the west as well. For example, Nettle (2000) noted “Linguistic and ethnic fragmentation relates to low levels of economic development, since it is associated with societal divisions and conflict, low mobility, limited trade, imperfect markets, and poor communications in general” (p. 335). Therefore, the direct economic benefits from learning a language was a great motivation for the people in the communities. In other words, they have preserved the sentimental values/functions of the minority languages while have embraced the dominant languages associating them with educational and economic potential gains. This community level ideology and practice has led to the fragmenta-

tion of values associated with their languages, most probably harming the socio-historical harmony among languages. It has been argued that linguistic and ethnic fragmentation relates to low levels of economic development, since it is associated with societal divisions and conflict, low mobility, limited trade, imperfect markets, and poor communications in general. Gautam (2019) has rightly pointed out this concern as a cause of intergenerational shifts in languages among the youths of indigenous languages (such as Newar, Sherpa, and Maithili in Kathmandu Valley). Consequently, this trend has impacted the participation of the relevant communities in campaigns for re(vitalization) of their languages.

## **5. Ideological construction of the Global-North and impacts on Global South**

Nepal's growing engagement with the international community (through its membership in UN, WTO, IMF, etc.), and their political systems have largely influenced the attitudinal patterns in Nepalese society. From a geopolitical perspective, as Nepal is sandwiched between two giant countries India and China, and the changes in the neighbourhood would obviously influence it on a larger scale. In addition, the development in the global north would always have a chain effect in the countries of the global south. For instance, the British colonial government of India then promoted English amidst other languages, and a similar trend emerged in Nepal with the effect of the environment in the neighbourhood. Such geopolitical conditions and the waves gravely influenced the closely related communities to the development of nationalism and the creation of nation-states, including a new Europe perceived as superior to other parts of the world (Bagga-Gupta, 2010; Gal & Irvine, 1995; Rosen & Bagga-Gupta, 2013; Shohamy, 2006). The ideologies of the countries of the global north have influenced the countries of the global south in many ways, including ideologies of language planning and policy. This has generated a perception and a social space that differentiates 'us and the other' through the formation of linguistic-cultural ideologies (Gynne, Bagga-Gupta & Linio, 2013) in the communities that have multiple languages in place. This made some

languages valued more than the other in the domains of governance and educational spaces (Poudel & Choi, 2020; Poudel, 2010). In the case of Nepal, the first educational commission was influenced by Hugh B. Wood's ideologies, formed out of his involvement in Indian and the western world, and the committee under with huge influence in collaboration with academia and politicians, and then recommended for streamlining the education systems through monolingual ideology. The same ideological structure continued for long, and even today with maintaining Nepali as the national language to be used in governance and education, while at the same time allowing other regional or ethnic languages for such purposes as an outcome of democratic political development. It can, in a sense, be understood as an ideological link with the "Englishization" efforts of many countries in the global north.

The international political economic structure seems stacked against a substantial or near future diminishment of the North–South gap" (Thompson & Reuveny, 2010, p. 66). The neoliberal trends that emerged from the global north have travelled to the global south, impacting these countries through the language and culture of the countries in the global north. The unprecedented expansion of English as a global phenomenon (Deardon, 2014) can be a lively example of such effect.

The strategies employed to achieve this improved share of technologically derived output is not unfamiliar to the annals of North–South political economy. It involved various combinations of developmental states recapturing domestic markets from foreign exporters (import substitution) and the recapture of domestic business (nationalization). The outcome, aided by investments in education, was a new elite of technical managers and professionals who could build on historical experience and opportunities in the post-war environment to manufacture and market commodities involving increasing production complexity and scale. Migration and demographic changes have had variable impacts on the North–South gap. Nepali youths' labor migration and their English preference has also impacted the generational shifts in languages (Gautam, 2020a, p. 140). The youths' migration to the countries in the Middle East, and their participation in the global marketplaces in the global north countries have contributed to the reshaping of their ideologies towards the home languages and English. Mr Kailash's statement, "We have made whimsical choices in our social and education systems (e.g. choice of

language for education) lured by the ideologies formed even by our immigrant population usually in the western world”. Among many, this can be understood as one of causes for accentuated divergent tendencies in language shifts, usually from the indigenous and national languages to English.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper, I discussed briefly about the way a democratic country (here, Nepal) has undergone through a process of democratizing its macro policies for the promotion and preservation of its linguistic diversity, and provided evidences that such practices have minimal impact on the substantial results due to the processes of glocalization (Choi, 2017). The identification of new languages and recognition of multilingualism have been the visible results of democratic governance. However, largely mono and bilingual practices in governance, education and public communication remained rooted in every community throughout the country. It can be concluded that democracy in Nepal functioned as a “double-edge sword”, which on the one hand promoted efforts of preservation and promotion of linguistic diversity, while on the other hand, contributed to squeezing the size of diversity by vitalizing Nepali and English side-lining the potential of indigenous languages. The democratic ideology fundamentally borrowed from the global north had done more justice at the policy level, while creating inequalities in the practice, and that consequently made the investments and attempts in promoting linguistic diversity futile. Democracy also promoted monolingual/bilingual ways of thinking about multilingualism, which became counterproductive to the mission of protecting linguistic diversity in Nepal. Pillar’s (2015) critical understanding, “The monolingual ways of seeing multilingualism entails a focus on the product of the monolingual academic texts” (p. 32) was equally applicable in the case of Nepal, that democracy did not practically (emphasis added) contribute to promote the linguistic diversity though it developed awareness on the linguistic rights of the individuals and communities of minority languages. The state intervention to preserve and promote these languages remained inconsistent along the history, as some governments intentionally discouraged

the planned promotion compared to others which designed some measures to promote them. Both monolingual and multilingual ideologies remained as the points of debate in political and social spaces.

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**NOTE**

- 1) Assistant Professor, Tribhuvan University , Nepal
- 2) A hilly district from western part of Nepal where Prithvi Narayan Shah used to rule in ancient time
- 3) The movement started between 1736 to 1769
- 4) Formal national uniform of Nepal