

River—Names of the Nepal Valley: A Study in Cultural Annexation*

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1. Introduction

This paper attempts to analyse the river-names of the Nepal Valley in an ethnolinguistic perspective. The river is an unmistakable element in the topography of any settlement, more so in agricultural settlements where the river may be their life-line. River-names are, therefore, an important index to the linguistic, cultural, and above all, ethnographic history of a settlement.

Ancient river-names of the Nepal Valley are examined in this paper as evidence of prehistoric ethnic contacts between the aborigines and the Indo-Aryan immigrants. Different strata of river-names are documented as evidence of the process of cultural absorption or Sanskritisation.

2. Sources

Ancient river-names are collated from the extent corpus of Licchavi epigraphy (A.D. 464-879). Later medieval documents, such as land grants and endowment inscriptions, contain some river-names. For modern river-names, the main source used are the Kathmandu Valley Maps (1:50 mile scale). However, these maps use what the transcribers call "Nepalized" forms of river-names.

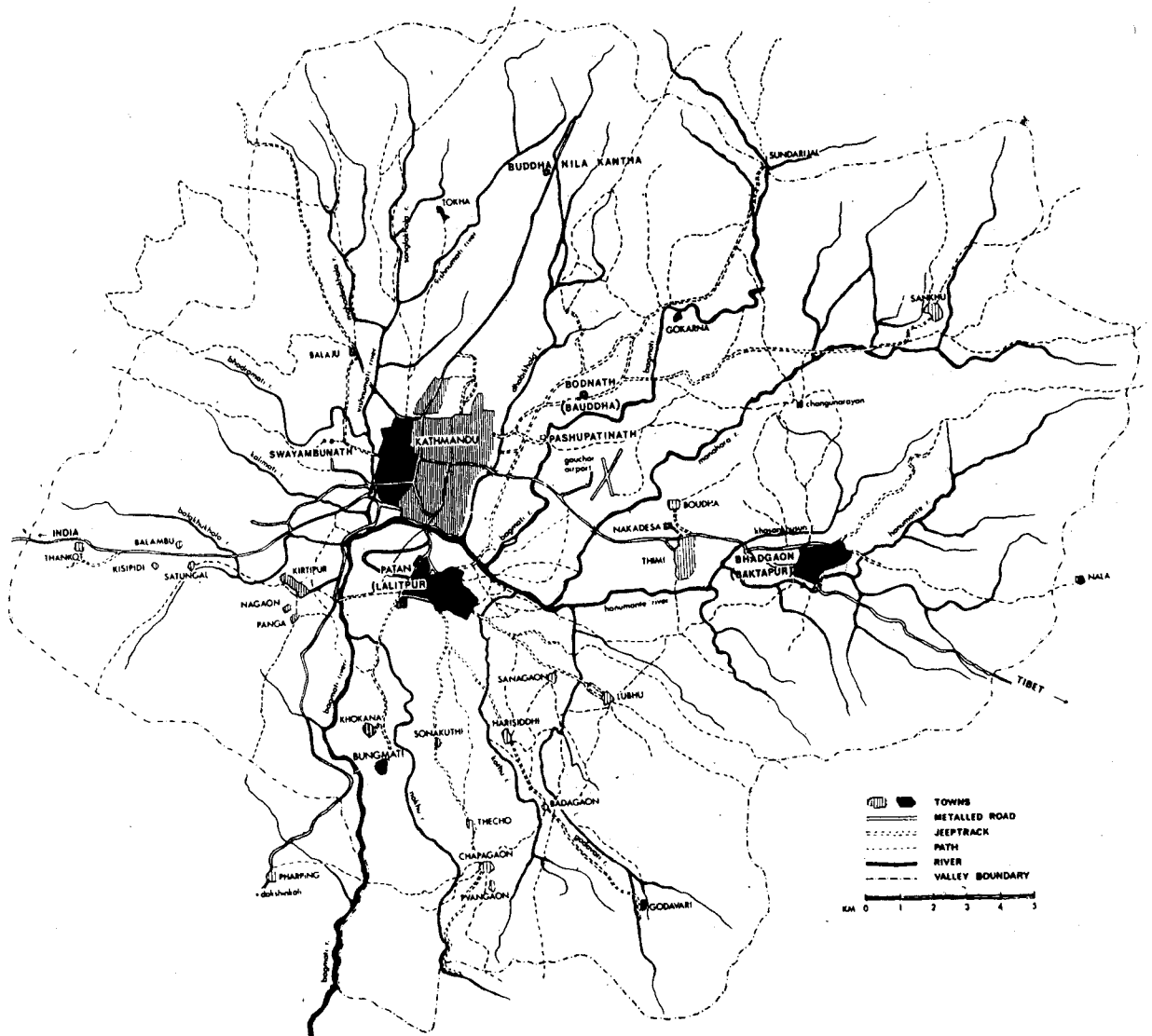
3. Ancient River-Names

Ancient river-names of the Nepal Valley are preserved in some 200 Licchavi inscriptions. They are all in Sanskrit, engraved in Gupta syllabic script, almost entirely on stone. There are altogether 35 river-names and names of water-sources such as springs and artificial canals. These hydronyms are given below with their dates (where available) and in situ location of the inscription:

* A paper presented at the Third Annual Conference of the Linguistic Society of Nepal, November 26, 1982.

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<u>Date</u>	<u>Hydronym</u>	<u>Type</u>	<u>Location</u>
A.D. 477	Vāgvatī	River	Devapātan
557	Bunlu	River	Pharping
573	Manimatī	River	Pātan, Saṅkhamula
Ca. 595-605	Udalmalaka	Water-source	Cāngu
	Śātuntī	Water-source	Cāngu
	Burdumbradul	River	Cāngu
	Ripsīnko	Water-source	Cāngu
	Vilhaṅkho	Water-source	Cāngu
	Projñjambu	Junction	Cāngu
	Proṅnipraṅ	Junction	Cāngu
	Proṅprovāṅ	Junction	Cāngu
	Dhelanti	River	Banepā
	Tekhumdul	Water-source	Banepā
597	Jñātikḥṛin	River	Tokhā
	Tilamaka	Canal	Tokhā
	Saṅko	Water-fall	Bhaktapur, Kumhāla Tole
	Sanjarā	Water-fall	Bhaktapur, Kumhāla Tole
613	Custuṅ	River	Tistung
	Cupriṅ	River	Tistung
695	Teṅkhu	River	Lagan, Kāthmāndu
	Cisimaṅḍā	Canal	Lagan, Kāthmāndu
697	Mekaṅḍidul	Canal	Paśupati
	Sreṣṭhidul	Canal	Paśupati
705	Puttī	River	Balambū
	Lulju	Canal	Balambū
	Yavadu	River-junction	Balambū
	Himanadī	River	Balambū
	Utthimanadī	River	Balambū
	Gollam	Canal	Balambū
	Samvaidya	River	Balambū
Ca. 713-733	Yaku	River (?)	Naxāl
	Japtikhū	River	Naxāl
	Hudikhū	River	Naxāl
	Vṛhannadī	River	Naxāl
	Lamkhu	River	Naxāl



Main Rivers of the Nepal Valley

Since the dawn of recorded history the Nepal Himalaya has been the retreat of the Mongoloid Tibeto-Burman-speaking tribes, known to the Indo-Aryans as Kirātas. The Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain literary sources indicate that the Indo-Aryan speakers from the Himalayan foothills were in regular contact with the relatively secluded Nepal Valley at least as early as the 4th or 5th century B.C. The north Indian traders in wool, the missionaries of India's great apostolic religions, and above all the fugitive Vrijjis, Śākyas, Kōlis, and Licchavis had begun to penetrate the Nepal Himalaya long before the beginning of the Christian era. There is, however, no unanimity of opinion among scholars on the approximate date of the arrivals of the Licchavis in the Nepal Valley. It ranges from 484 B.C. (J.C. Regmi, 1978: 31) to the 4th century A.D. (Jhā, 1970: 100-113)! The Licchavis may have arrived as fugitives, but as their influence grew steadily they--unlike other immigrant clans of Indian origins--appear to have subjugated the aboriginal Kirātas of the central Nepal, finally establishing their rule in ca. 1st or 2nd century A.D. The Licchavi rulers prior to Mānadeva (A.D. 464-505) were, in all likelihood, nominal feudatories, accepting the suzerainty of the Gupta Emperors of India. As the Gupta Empire begin to decline, particular with Skapḍa Gupta's death (A.D. 467), the Licchavis seemed to have consolidated their hold on Nepal. Classical and purānic Hinduism, Gupta art, Gupta script, and above all, the Sanskrit language arrived in the Nepal Valley with the Licchavis, if not earlier.

4. Non-Indo-Aryan River-Names

Sanskrit epigraphy is one of the cultural artefacts which the Licchavi rulers brought from India. No wonder that out of 35 hydronyms in Licchavi inscriptions only four, Vāgvatī, Maṇimatī, Himanadī, and Vrḥannadī, are Sanskrit. Yavadu, Samvaidya, and Sanjara may be Prakrit. Yavadu, Himanadī, and Utthima all come from Balambu--a Prakrit stronghold, and chronologically they are relatively late. The Nepal Valley has no major river system. Among the ones that drain the Valley, the Vāgmatī and Manoharā alone are the major ones. The Viṣṇumatī was still a peripheral river in ca A.D. 590s. Its name was not yet Sanskritised, (and was it called jñātikhr̥n?). Evidently, the major rivers are the first ones to be baptized in Sanskrit, leaving the lesser and peripheral rivers and rivulets undisturbed with their aboriginal names.

In the Sanskrit texts of Licchavi epigraphy, non-Indo-Aryan river-names float like insolvent flotsam and jetsam. As the linguistic and ethnographic relics of a people already politically and culturally overrun, these river-names reveal several interesting genetic and formal features. In order to bring these features into relief the data can be examined in identifiable groups.

1. cu+

cu-stuñ

cu-priñ

2. +ko/kho

sañ-ko

ripśiñ-ko

vilhañ-kho

3. +khu/ku

te-khum
teñ-khū
japti-khū
huḍi-khū
ya-ku

4. +ti/di

śātunti
dhelanti
mekandi-
niti-
japti-
huḍi-
putti-
jnāti-

5. +dul

burdumbra-dul
tekhum-dul
niti-dul
mekandi-dul

Of all these non-Indo-Aryan river-names, tenkhu > tekhu alone has survived full thirteen centuries of social, cultural and political vicissitudes. Cu (water/river) has a cognate in several Tibetan river-names, e.g., dNal-chu, Nañ-chu, Ra-Chu, Dag-chu, 'Bri-chu, etc. Khu, on the other hand, (with dialectal variants ko/kho), is related to Tibetan Klūñ and Chinese klūn/koñ (river). A Sanskrit-Newari lexicon, dated NS 501 (A.D. 1380), gives kho as gloss for Sanskrit nadī. The deaspirated Kosi < Khosi drains the Kirānt land in Eastern Nepal. Although the Indo-Aryan speakers have Sanskritised all its tributaries, fortunately for us there still is Likhu (brass river). The so-called Indrāvati Kosi, one of the seven Kośi rivers, was actually called Milamchi or Milamchu (milamha = the third one) until the A.D. 1840s (Hodgson, 1848: 646, Hodgson, 1874; Part II: 5). The same appears to be true of the Gandakī river-system, where Ankhu still survives. (Note the Newari child-word for water ākhu, and water-pot with a spout, ānkhudhā). Till A.D. 1958, the Triśuli (trident) river was known by its aboriginal name, salankhu < swa-lam-khu (three-pronged river) (Hodgson, 1874, 63-64).

Ko/kho/khu are more archaic than either cu or ti/di because the latter roots are Tibeto-Burman rather than Sino-Tibetan. However, what appears ethnolinguistically interesting is the fact that in the Nepal Valley, khu is more widespread than ti/di -- indicating a more primitive stratum of ethnic and/or linguistic contact with the north. For example, we have even today several river-names with +khu, nwa-khu, bal-khu, sāmā-khu, te-khu, bhacā-khu, gā-khu, tu-khu, kot-khu, tabyā-khu, and hijā-khu, to mention only the familiar ones. Ti/di are, of course, verifiable Tibeto-Burman roots for water/river. In modern Newari, however, they have survived, not in river-names, but in such nominal compounds as hi-ti

(washing water), lhu-ti (bathing water), quā-ti (lintel broth), khi-ti (body dirty), ca-ti (perspiration), and tun-ti (well) etc. In the Lic-chavi epigraphy there occurs an interesting nominal compound tilamaka (canal). The A.D. 1381 Sanskrit-Newari lexicon mentions tilam as Newari gloss for Sanskrit word kulyā (canal). In the inscriptions, the word appears in its Indo-Aryan garb as tilamaka < ti+lampkha (liquid water, i.e., flowing water). It is worth noting that just as khu is dominant in Central Nepal Valley, ti/di are widespread west of the Valley, particularly in the Gurung-Magar-speaking areas, e.g., Marsyān-di, Daraū-di, Ri-di, Tā-di, Myāg-di and possibly even Rāp-ti, and Se-ti.

As for dul, there is no doubt that it is an archaic form of du, which survives in such modern Newari river-names as dol-ḍu, Gunḍu, Hundu, Khodu, and Naldu. The retroflex ḍ in the first three names is, undoubtedly, a consequence of the so-called "Nepalized" transcription, rather like Newari quāti becoming Nepali quāti, and Newari hiti becoming Nepali hiti (see Sharma, 1962, for these forms).

5. River-Mythi of the Nepal Valley

The transformation of some of these 'rude', 'barbarous', and 'cacophonous', river-names (Ācārya, 1938) into the graceful -vati-s and -mati-s of the Indo-Aryan speeches must have been a slow but interesting process of cultural conquest and annexation of one naming-system by quite another one. Fortunately for us, there still survives a species of texts in Sanskrit which document the process, albeit in mythical metaphors. Myths do not have dates, but texts are dated or relatively datable. Nepāla Mahātmya, Paśupati Purāna, Swayambhū Purāna, Himavat Khaṇḍa, Vāgmati Mahātmya, and some of the 19th-century vernacular chronicles, drawing upon the above purānic sources, contain interesting myths about the baptizing of the rivers of the Valley. The traditions which this literature draws upon may be older than the texts. But they are clearly an outgrowth of the 15-16th century religious nationalism in the Valley. The oldest known copy of Nepāla Mahātmya is dated NS 774/A.D. 1654; the oldest available copy of Swayambhū Purāna is dated NS 678/A.D. 1558. This literature appears to have grown, at least in part, out of the cultural need to glorify and legitimatise the local shrines, particularly the rivers and their confluences, by some or other kind of divine or numinous association. Not only Hindu ideologues but also Buddhist pundits seem to have succumbed to this myth-making urge. What strikes the student of mythology is not the sectarian bias of these purānic texts. What strikes us are the conflicting versions of the same or similar myths pertaining to the origins of the river-names.

Take for example, the myth relating to the origins of the river-name Vāgmati. According to Paśupati Purāna, the river got its name because she was born from the mouth of Śiva as he was contemplating the penances of Pralhāda. So she is called Vāk (mouth) + matī (river). According to Nepāla Mahātmya, on the other hand, Vāgmati sprung out from one of the horns of Paśupati when Śiva transformed himself into an antelope to mislead the gods. The Buddhist version of the river-myth is totally different. It is the very water of the Ganges which sprung out from the rock when it was struck by the Manuśi Buddha Krakkucchanda by

the power of mantra or Vāk (speech or magic spell) when he was in search of a stream to ordain the very first Buddhist monks in the Valley. The same is the case of Viṣṇumatī. To the Hindus, Viṣṇumatī is so-called because she began to flow, like the Ganges, at the feet of Lord Viṣṇu. The Buddhists, however, call her Keśāvati because she derived her name from the shaved hairs thrown mid-stream when Krakkucchanda had ordained the first Nepalese monks. The Buddhists connect Manimatī to the famous Buddhist Prince Maṇicūda who granted the jewel from his head to his suitors on the banks of the river. The Hindus connect it to the jewel-like drops of perspiration of Lord Viṣṇu. Hanumatī or Hanumante, the main river in Bhaktapur, receives its name from the monkey-god Hanumān, who despite his hurry to reach Lānkā, managed to stop for a moment on the banks of the Bhaktapur river (in all likelihood with the aboriginal name Khāsyāṅkhu) only to baptize it as Hanumatī ! Thus there is no source of water in the Nepal Valley, no matter whether it is a river, or a streamlet, or a humble string of water, without some divine association or a godfather.

The purānic river-myths are unacknowledged statements of the process of cultural conquest of toponyms, and their spurious nature is betrayed by the conflicting etymons and interpretations. What is more embarrassing is that a majority of aboriginal names have survived if only to uncover this cultural subterfuge. Thus we know how Tibeto-Burman nwa-khu (mouth-river or murmuring river) has become Indo-Aryan, Vāk-matī = Vāgmātī. Beyond the pale of the urban and Sanskritised culture-belt, the river is still called nwa-khu (cf. Newari nwa-wā-ye, to speak, nwa-sil-e, to wash one's mouth, etc). Now we also know how Newari sugarcane-river Tu-khu became Indo-Aryan Ikṣumatī. Sā-khu, doubtlessly, was the name of the river retained now only by the town, but lost by the river itself for Manimatī. Lakhu became Dhanāvati because this was the river where the legendary sand was collected which later on became gold, enabling the merchant of Kathmandu, Sākhwā to pay off all the outstanding national debts and found a new era. Hijākhu became Rudramatī, Balkhu became Ratnāvati, and most interesting of all, Bhacākhu, shallow or gentle river, became Sanskrit Bhadramatī!

6. Recent Phenomena

Unfortunately for the myth-makers and ideologues, few of these ancient and medieval -matī-s and vati-s have survived. The only exceptions seem to be Vāgmātī, Viṣṇumatī, Manoharā, and Hanumante. This, however, does not mean that the process of cultural annexation is dead or dying. On the contrary, it is now a more militant process than ever before in the Valley's cultural history. Only a couple of decades ago, Kāng-chomolungnā, the world's highest peak, was renamed as Sagarmāthā on the basis of a very dubious etymological interpretation by a pundit (Acārya, 1938). In order to show the more recent trends in hydro-nomenclature, we give below some river-names listed in the Kathmandu Valley Maps:

Aśwa Kholā	Kalanti Kholā
Bajeni Kholā	Kalcure Kholā
Bākhre Kholā	Kamero Kholā
Bihābar Kholā	Karmanāsā Kholā
Cārkhaṇḍa Kholā	Kāttike Kholā
Charropāni Kholā	Kalbhāj Kholā
Cihān Kholā	Khahare Kholā
Chare Kholā	Khāni Kholā
Chare Kholā	Lāmāchaur Kholā
Chapne Kholā	Lāmbagar Kholā
Chop Kholā	MaruwāKhahare
Damai Kholā	Māi Kholā
Dhobi Kholā	Māiti Kholā
Ghatte Kholā	Narkaṭe Kholā
Jagare Kholā	Paire Kholā
Jantri Kholā	Sāṅglā Kholā
Junge Kholā	Sāngu Kholā
	Thāro Kholā
	Thulo Kholā

With the exception of Dhobi Kholā (obviously, a translation of Newari Hijā-khusi = washing-work-river) nearly all the rivers or rivulets listed here drain the periphery (kānth) of the Valley. Nearly all these rivulets are in the areas lately settled by the Khas Brahmins and Chhetris and their subservient occupational castes such as Kāmi, Damāi, Sārki, Gāine, Bhāt, and Dhobi.

The Khas assaults on the Nepal Valley started in the late 13th century A.D. Between A.D. 1288-1328, there were several recurrent Khas invasions of the Valley. However, "these were only raids carried into Nepal with an intent to plunder the riches" (D.R. Regmi, 1965: 244). Pockets of permanent Khas settlements in the Valley were few and far between earlier than the 17th century A.D. Kathmandu's King Ratna Malla (A.D. 1484-1520) began enlisting Khas and Magar mercenaries in his army. A major Khas-Magar attack on the Valley took place in A.D. 1525/26 when the Pālpā Magar chieftain, Mukunda Sena invaded the Valley twice--once with a horde of 51 and the second time with a horde of 61--and set fire in a number of Newar settlements. But these marauding hordes left the Valley after 4 days of rampage of destruction (Pant and Pant, 1979: 102). Major Khas immigration and settlement of the outskirts of the Valley was, in fact, encouraged by the later Malla kings (Vajrācārya et al., 1962: 181-187).

However, Bista (1982: 7) has recently made a historically and linguistically most incredible claim that there was "a very heavy influence of the early Khas Prakrit language in the Nepal Valley" (Bista, 1982: 7). This claim is made on the basis of some Prakrit data collated by me from Licchavi epigraphy (Malla, 1981: 5-26). The New Indo-Aryan languages or dialects (of which Khas or Pahāri is one) began to diverge from the Middle Indo-Aryan languages or the so-called Apabhraṃsa-s in ca. A.D. 1000-1200. The Prakrit dialects which entered the Nepal Valley with the Licchavis were Māgadhī in origin whereas the source of the Khas or Pahāri dialects is Sauraseni-- entirely different phylum of Apabhraṃsa. Even the Middle

Indo-Aryan dialects had not yet been attested, let alone the New Indo-Aryan dialects, when the Licchavis brought their colloquial speeches into the Valley. Therefore, to hypothesize "a heavy influence of the early Khas Prakrit language in the Nepal Valley" may be comfortable fiction, but not history. The Licchavis were in power in Nepal for the first nine centuries of the first millennium A.D. The earliest evidence of Khas Prakrit attested so far comes from a bilingual Tibetan-Khas copperplate of Aditya Malla, dated A.D. 1321!

7. Stages of Cultural Annexation

An analysis of the river-names of the Valley--ancient as well as the modern ones--shows that there are three main stages of Sanskritisation of place-names. They are:

- a. Approximation
- b. Translation
- c. Substitution.

Approximation is the least aggressive linguistic process. When Bhacākhū is Sanskritised as Bhadramatī, the process at work is approximation. Both phonetically and semantically the two names are not irreconcilable. But when Thābahil (the monastery in the upper part of town) becomes Thamel, the approximation is only phonetic, not semantic. It is somewhat like the 18th-19th century European spelling Cāt-mān-do for Kāṭh-māṇḍou < Skt. Kaṣṭhamāṇḍapa (pavalion made of wood).

Translation is an intermediate process of cultural annexation. It takes place when Newari Nwakhū (mouth-river; murmuring river) becomes Sanskrit Vāgmatī, or when Tukhū (sugarcane river) becomes Skt. Ikṣumatī, or more recently Newari Hijākhūsi becomes Khas Dhobi Kholā. Translation is a cultural process which is possible only when the two ethnic groups each with a distinct linguistic and cultural system-- have been in contact for sufficiently long period for the bilingual to thrive as a bridge over the two systems. When translation takes place from Language A to Language B, the latter would have already been enthroned as the code of the prestige group.

Substitution is the final, and in a sense the most desperate, attempt to come to grips with unpalatable cultural and linguistic realities. When Khāsāñkhū becomes Hanumatī or when Balkhū is converted into Rātnāvati and Hijākhū had to be called Rudramatī, something radical is taking place. This process takes place, presumably, when the older place-names are either not-too-pleasant reminders to the new elites or not-too-comprehensible to their cultivated ears. The 'rude', 'barbarous', and 'cacophonous' names slowly begin to give way to the cultured and graceful -vatī-s and -matī-s. Substitution is an assertive rather than assimilative process. It takes place, perhaps, when the displacement of the older strata of settlers is complete--politically as well as culturally.

8. Conclusion

Few persons in Kathmandu would today know where Nara or Jala is situated. They would, however, be quite familiar with such place-names as Hārigāon or Harisiddhi. But neither of these names tell us much about the ethnic, social or cultural history of these places. On the other hand, ancient names such as Nara (Hārigāon) and Jala (Harisiddhi) clearly enable us to relate these settlements to a cultural stratum going far back at least to the 5th century A.D. For the place-name nara-priṅ occurs in a Licchavi inscription dated A.D. 490. Similarly, the place-name jol-priṅ occurs in an inscription dated A.D. 631. Whereas place-names such as Nara or Jala enable us to trace back the connected history of these settlements for full 1500 years, Hārigāon or Harisiddhi are relatively late and, above all, they are socially and culturally misleading clues to their antiquity.

An overwhelming number of older place-names of this ancient valley are increasingly submerged under the "Nepalized" (as the German cartographers have so agreeably put it) substitutions. Many more of the less familiar place-names are receding into the world of oblivion with each passing generation. Place-names are as much a part of one's cultural heritage as personal surnames are of one's social history. Unless they are systematically rescued, recorded, and studied by well-trained native speakers, one of the most valuable relics of our ethnolinguistic past is likely to be buried for ever under the burgeoning cultural debris, consisting of such drab coinage as Bāṅgemudhā, Pradarśanī Mārga or, if you will, King's Way! The loser, in any case, will not be the linguist alone.

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