

THE ROLE OF THE NEPALI LANGUAGE IN ESTABLISHING THE NATIONAL UNITY AND IDENTITY OF NEPAL

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This paper proposes to discuss the role of the Nepali language in establishing and fostering national unity and identity in Nepal. Keeping in view the theme of Nepali linguistic nationalism, it will focus on the route that Nepali has taken during the course of its history -- first as a *lingua franca* then as an official language and ultimately as the national language. It will also assess the factors that helped it to perform its role internally and externally and finally it will try to explain the present state of Nepali as the language of a developing country together with suggestions for its development.

Unity and identity are two factors integral to the concept of a nation. 'The ideal' of 'internal cohesion and external distinction' that Haugen (1966) presents in defining the nation includes both unity and identity. In our context, the internal cohesion is the unity that has been at work in the evolution of Nepali nationalism and the external distinction is the identity that has been established as Nepalese. Before proceeding, it may be noted that there was a socio-cultural integration in progress before the politico-geographical integration of the land and therefore a brief historical sketch of the Nepali language seems appropriate at this point.

I Geographical Setting and Historical Background

Present-day Nepal comprises an area of 147,181 sq. kms with a length of 885 kms from east to west and with a mean breadth of 193 kms from north to south. The topography is rich and varied in the range of mountains, hills, valleys and plains of varying degrees of altitude, rainfall and climate. The total population is estimated at 18 million

in 1988, and there is an increasing tendency of population to flow from mountains and hills toward the urban and plain areas. The urban population is estimated at no more than 10 percent of the total. Only 17 percent of the total land is cultivated but 57% of this cultivated land lies in the terai area.

More than fifty languages are spoken in Nepal belonging to four language families: Indo-European (Indo-Aryan -- Nepali, Maithili, Bhojpuri, Awadhi, Tharu, Rajbansi, Danuwar, Darai, Majhi, Bote and Kumale), Sino-Tibetan (Tibeto-Burman -- Newari, Tamang, Magar, Gurung, Rai, Limbu, Sunuwar, Chepang, Dhimal, Pahari, Meche, Jirel, Thami, Thalaki, Raji, Raute, Hayu, Byasi, Lepcha, Sherpa, Manange, Kaike, Kham, Tibetan, Chantel, Kagate, Lhomi, Lhoke, Dolpa, Tchurong, Dura, etc.), Austro-Asiatic (Munda -- Santhali or Satar) and Dravidian (Northern Kurux -- Dhangar or Jhangar). Some of the languages are spoken by a small group of people and some others are dying out. The hills and mountains are occupied by the speakers of Nepali and its dialects as well as most of the Tibeto-Burman languages. The terai is occupied by the speakers of Indo-Aryan languages with some speakers of Jhangar, Santhali, Dhimal, Meche and a few others. The major languages of Nepal with the numbers of speakers and their percentages are given in table 1.

The figures in the table show that 58.4% of the total population speak Nepali as their mother tongue. This leaves 41.6%, as the number of the speakers of all other languages which is about 6 million. Though the number of the speakers of Nepali as a second language has not been given in the last census, it is estimated that more than 80% of the population speak Nepali. Only the people of the remotest parts of the country have difficulty in comprehending and expressing themselves in Nepali. On the other hand the people in the areas in which the languages other than Nepali are dominant may have difficulty communicating in Nepali. Though bilingualism among the speakers of other tongues is higher than among people with Nepali as vernacular, the individual non-literate bilinguals may total half of the entire population. Political, educational, developmental, administrative and other activities greatly helped other language speakers to learn Nepali but little motivation existed for the speakers of Nepali to learn other languages. The teaching departments of Newari and Maithili, which run up to the post-graduate level are joined mainly by the admirers of these respective languages while Sanskrit and Tibetan are taught as parts of the courses in traditional teaching-learning systems. These teaching programmes together with the modern schooling system which introduces English in its primary grade do certainly produce bilinguals of various degrees, but do not bring about a sizable number of bilinguals.

Nepali is developed from Sanskrit -- the cultured language. A branch of the original Indo-European family, it has assimilated the phonology, grammar and voca-

bulary of the Dravidians, Austrics and Kiratas and has become the most natural vehicle of a composite Aryan-cum-non-Aryan culture (Chatterji,1974:4). This culture has been handed down from generation to generation through the languages directly developed from Sanskrit and is heavily influenced by it. Sanskrit remained the most powerful vehicle of this culture which was the composite product of the various races and languages. As a spoken language Sanskrit changed, and various Prakrit languages emerged. These Prakrit languages gave birth to Apabhranshas and these in turn produced the languages collectively called the modern Indo-Aryan languages. Nepali is one of them. From the old Nepali available in copper and gold plate inscriptions dating back to

Table 1: Major Languages of Nepal (1981)

<u>Mother Tongue</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Total	15,022,83	100.0
Nepali	8,767,361	58.4
Maithili	1,668,300	11.1
Bhojpuri	1,142,805	7.6
Newari	448,746	3.0
Gurung	174,464	1.2
Tamang	522,416	3.5
Awadhi	234,343	1.5
Tharu	545,685	3.6
Magar	212,691	1.4
Limbu	129,234	0.9
Rai Kirati	221,353	1.5
Bhote Sherpa	73,589	0.9
Thakali	5,289	--
Rajbamsi	59,383	0.4
Satar	22,403	0.1
Sunuwar	10,650	0.1
Danuwar	13,522	0.1
Santhali	5,804	--
Others	764,802	5.1

Source: Central Bureau of Statistics, HMG, Nepal

the 13th century A. D., the history of the Nepali language can be traced, and its relation to Apabhramsha, Prakrit and Sanskrit can be shown. The discoveries in western Nepal show that Nepali was a spoken language in the time of the Khasa dynasty and was not the language brought by the Rajputs fleeing from the midlands of India. According to Chatterji, '... probably the Dardic speaking Aryans (Khas and other tribes) were penetrating into the central Himalayan area (the western Pahari and eastern Pahari regions) and their Dardic khasa speech was later overlaid by Indo-Aryan from the midland' (Chatterji, 1978:52). As the time of these khasa kings (Ashokacalla: 1153 A. D.) was the time of emergence of the modern Indo-Aryan languages and the last stage of the Apabhramshas, scholars have related Nepali with the Khasa Apabhramsa and Dardic/Paishachi Prakrit which again is related to the form of Sanskrit called '*udicya*'. Several assumptions have been made about the origin of Nepali but they remain to be proven with sufficient linguistic evidence. A historical comparison of Nepali with other Pahari languages can reveal various facets of the evolution of the Nepali language.

Nepali which was used mainly in Western Nepal expanded towards the east on a large scale. After the 14th century the khasa kingdom of western Nepal broke up into small principalities and the people moved eastward. Slowly they scattered in the mid-hills and then in the eastern hills where the people who spoke different Tibeto-Burman languages were present. They called these immigrants Khasas and their speech Khaskura 'the tongue of the Khasas'. This language was influenced from time to time by the speech of the people immigrating from the Indian midlands and spreading over the Nepalese mid-hills, but it was also enriched by the languages of the plains such as Awadhi, Bhojpuri and Maithili, especially during the period of the Sen kings who unified the terai and hills of central Nepal. The unification was not only territorial but also socio-cultural. The period of contact of the Nepali speakers with those of the other languages of the plains and hills was a crucial period in the history of Nepali itself. At the time when modern Indo-Aryan languages such as Braja, Awadhi, Maithili and Bhojpuri were expanding as literary languages in northern India and the Sen rulers had closer contacts with these, Nepali remained as a contact language in the central hills. But the result of this contact of Nepali with other languages of the hill and the terai areas was that it was helped to become a common language of this area. It got a new way of expression, its vocabulary was enlarged, its grammar became simplified and its phonology was softened. Nepali developed as a simple and easily learnable medium of expression in the areas of non-Nepali speaking communities. Though the languages of the southern plains such as Tharu, Bote, Majhi, Danuwar, Darai and Kumhale reached certain parts of the inner valleys and Maithili got its place to develop as a literary language in Kathmandu valley, they could not develop as a lingua franca in the areas where they were used. Nepali got much to enrich itself through these languages. Sorathi and Ghatu which probably came from the terai to the Gurung and Magar areas bear some Bhojpuri elements in them. Nepali

developed as a vehicle of common culture not only between speakers of it and other languages of the area but also between speakers speaking various other languages. Khaskura, the language of the immigrant Khasas was as a good choice for a Tamang meeting a Majhi, a Thami or a Sunuwar at the bank of the Sunkoshi as it was for a Magar speaking to a Bote, a Gurung, a Thakali or a Dura at the bank of the the Gandaki.

The beautiful valley of Kathmandu flourished during the time of the Mallas. Maithili penetrated to the valley and developed as a literary language. Nepali was also widespread in the valley as is evident in the inscriptions of Laxmi Nrisimha Malla (1641 A.D.) and Jaya Pratap Malla (1670 A.D.). By the middle of 18th century Nepali became an official language of some of the smaller states of that time while it remained the most powerful contact language for the people of different ethnic groups and of different states. At that time the king of Gorkha, a small hill state, unified Nepal and made Kathmandu the centre of the newly united kingdom. King Prithwi Narayan Shah the Great who was known as the Gorkhali king at the time of the unification had to engage himself in building a strong nation: Nepal. He did not divide his newly acquired territories among his family and followers which was a practice of that time and which had happened in history after the death of Mukunda Sen, the king of Palpa and Yaksha Malla, the king of Bhaktapur. He declared his nation a garden of all communities, a point to which this paper will return again.

The domain of the use of the Nepali language was limited for centuries. Apart from being the spoken language of the people, Nepali had extended its scope in the 18th century as an official medium. Some of the available manuscripts show that translation work in Nepali started in the 15th century. Now it seems that for Nepali speaking migrants it was difficult to preserve what they wrote. As far as original creative writing is concerned, we are able to discover only some of the works of the unification period -- from the later half of the 18th century. The Nepali version of the *Rāmāyana* by Bhanubhakta Acharya (1814-1869) was brought to light by its being published by another Nepali literary figure, Moti Ram Bhatta (1866-1896). With Moti Ram Bhatta the Nepali language entered into the age of printing and the domain of the Nepali language got widely extended in various genres of literature. With the extension of administrative activities and contacts with the outside world, words from Arabic, Persian, English and other languages were borrowed.

Nepali was used in the traditional learning centres in the hill areas as a medium of instruction. In the beginning of this century only schools with Nepali as a medium and as a subject of study were opened. Attempts were also made to publish general books, prepare textbooks and edit newspapers and magazines. The beginning of the publication of the *Gorkhāpatra* in 1901 was another event in the history of the Nepali language and

it marks the beginning of Modern Nepali. As publication activities in Nepali grew, a government-sponsored publication agency named *Gorakhā Bhāṣā Prakāśini Samiti* came up in 1913. With the growth of Nepali nationalism, the first word of the title of this agency was changed to *Nepali*. This agency played a significant role in the development of the Nepali language and literature in the 30s and 40s of this century. Standardization of the usage and spelling of Nepali, inclusion of Nepali in the curriculum of Indian universities, publication of dictionaries and grammar books of the language as well as a speedy growth in the literary activities in the Nepali language helped to secure for it the position of a national language. After the change of 1951, the domain of the use of Nepali was widely extended into all fields of national activity such as administration, law, education and communications. Now, Nepali is used in the internal administration of His Majesty's Government and in law. Nepali is the medium of higher education in the humanities and social sciences, though for obvious reasons it is not yet possible to use it extensively in technical and scientific fields. It is the medium of secondary level education throughout the country, though some English medium schools have been allowed. Nepali has been used in radio for the last three decades and, since its establishment, also in television. It is the medium most used in books, newspapers and magazines. Nepali is used in creative writing, high level discussion and research work even if one may face difficulty using it in scientific and technical reporting.

II National Unity and Elements of Integration

After the unification of Nepal, the successors of King Prithwi Narayan Shah continued to extend its territories. The 1816 Treaty of Sugauli fixed the territories of present-day Nepal. After the territorial unification, it was easier for the people to move from one part of the country to another. Priests and astrologers from the west, pundits and scribes of the terai, and artists and traders from the valley of Kathmandu migrated to other parts of the country. After unification, the language was not only enriched by creative writings but also by folksongs and ballads. The professional *gaines* kept the indigenous tradition of music alive through entertainment and at the same time promoted unification and national identity through heroic ballads.

Pant (1968) refers to the advent of another unifying force at that time -- the emergence of modern *jhyāure* folksongs. During the Anglo-Nepal war, Gorya Siras and Manabir Khatri, who had been posted on the western frontiers of Kumaon and Garhwal, remained there for some time after the Treaty and learned the local Kumauni folksongs and music. After returning to Baglung, they adapted the local Nepali Jhyaure to the tunes they had learned in the west. The Jhyaure folksong thus developed as a powerful element of unification in the multi-lingual society of Nepal, especially in the central and eastern hill-regions.

Recruitment of the Nepalese youth into the British army that started after the Sugauli Treaty marked another phase in the development of national unity and identity. This enabled Nepalese of the central and eastern hill areas to come closer and to know each other better. The people of the different ethnic groups who had never met before within the country, came into closer contact on foreign soil and returned home with feelings of solidarity. The various ethnic groups of Nepal, living in the interior parts of the central and eastern hills were now unified with a common vehicle of communication: the Nepali language. The soldiers brought back a common Nepali culture with them as well as a literature in the form of printed books and a more standard form of the Nepali language. The unity of the fighting Gorkhas not only strengthened nationalist sentiments but also gave them an identity as Nepalis in the external world. During the period of British rule in India, Nepalese not only fought at various fronts in the first and second World Wars but were widely scattered in the various corners of the world. Gradually, they settled in Deharadun, Benares, Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Assam and spread further into Sikkim, Bhutan and even Burma. As consciousness of this part of the world grew, they tried to foster their unity identifying themselves as Nepalis. However, in western Nepal, except for some people connected with the official establishment, it was difficult for nationalist Nepali sentiments to take root among the common people who continued to identify the authorities and easterners as Gorkhali exploiters and themselves as Jumlis and Dotyals. Except in rare cases, neither the Gaines nor the Jhyaure singers could go there to entertain as these people had their own professional singers known as *hudkes* and a rich heritage of their own forms of folksongs. Printed literature could hardly penetrate into this vast area, and it took some time for the people even to hear about Bhanubhakta Acharya.

In addition to the contribution of Gorkha recruitment, there was another element at work in the evolution of Nepali nationalism. The term *Nepali* as a language was used and made popular by the missionaries and British scholars. Ayton (1820) Turnbull (1887), Grierson (1916) and Turner (1921, 1922, 1931) not only popularised the name *Nepali* but also greatly contributed to the establishment of a distinct identity for Nepali as one of the important languages of this part of Asia in the academic world. Turner's *Comparative and Etymological Dictionary of the Nepali Language* (1931) stands as a monumental work of high academic level and a symbol of love for Nepali that had grown in the years of friendship.

During the 104 years of Ranarchy, elements of integration were at work in the society, but there were no concrete activities to promote national unity and identity. The priesthood protected by the aristocracy was not only against the popularization of Nepali as a literary language but also against the group activities of singing and dancing. Writing and singing in Nepali and participating in the folk dances remained activities of the so-

called low caste people only, looked down upon by the high caste Brahmans, aristocrats and authorities as well. Thus, the unifying forces were weakened by the authorities. The Ranas identified themselves as *Rājput*s, the Brahmans either as *Kumāi* or *Kanyakabuja*, and since most of the people were illiterate and ignorant they could not change the status quo. Only another wave of nationalism awakened them to the feelings of unity and identity.

III Nationalism and National Language

We have seen that unifying forces had been working both in and outside the country. The Nepalese living in India were called to unite and work for the promotion of their common culture and language. The freedom movement of India was a great source of inspiration for them. The integration of the Nepalese people at the socio-cultural level has certainly helped to uplift their economic and educational standards. Nepali language was a distinct factor in their identification, the poet Bhanubhakta Acharya remained a symbol of their identity as a *Jātiya Kavi* -- a national poet. During the first half of this century important steps were taken to promote Nepali language and literature. Books, newspapers and magazines were published and circulated throughout Nepali populated areas of India; schools, libraries and organizations were established and gradually Nepali linguistic nationalism gained momentum. The feeling of Nepali linguistic nationalism that grew in India was now able to replace terms like *Khaskurā*, *Parbatiyā*, or *Gorkhālī* with *Nepālī*. It also influenced the authorities in Nepal. After the fall of the Ranas in Nepal, the people enjoyed greater freedom of movement, speech and writing, and the sentiment of nationalism did naturally grow among them. Various political parties came up with programmes for national development. As people's aspirations increased in the open atmosphere, the national language also emerged as an issue. Some leaders were in favour of Hindi (Hutt, 1988:45) but most of them felt that only Nepali deserved the status of national language. In fact, during the 50s a large part of teaching in the terai was done in Hindi. There were no textbooks in Nepali and there were not even sufficient numbers of teachers who could properly teach in Nepali. The students in the terai may have had difficulties in understanding courses taught in Nepali, but literary Hindi was not their mother tongue either. They spoke different terai languages. The Nepali language had yet to penetrate into the terai villages. In view of the problem that existed, HMG proclaimed Nepali the medium of instruction in the secondary schools encouraging teachers to learn Nepali and use it in the class rooms.

At this time preparations for the establishment of a national academy and the opening of a university for higher education were also underway. The main objectives of the academy established in 1957 were to promote Nepali language and literature. The university, established in 1959, declared its goal of giving higher education in Nepali. It was certainly an ambitious goal motivated by linguistic nationalism, but it was timely as

Nepali was given the status of the national language in the constitution of 1958. From the part of Tribhuvan University there were attempts to develop Nepali as a medium of higher education in science and technology, but no systematic programme was carried out. As time passed, the feeling grew that Nepali could not replace English in higher education and that the two are not mutually opposed, but complementary to each other (Ibid:47).

The constitution of Nepal declared that 'Nepali in the devanagari script will be the national language of Nepal', but no statutory provision was made to promote the national language. The national language of a developing country needs to be cultivated to modernize it in order to make it an effective medium of communication, education and administration. Unless the language is developed to cope with the speed of development in the process of dissemination of knowledge, flow of information and transfer of technology, the nation cannot be developed. The Royal Nepal Academy has started to devise technical terms in Nepali which is one of the aspects of language modernization. Attempts for the promotion of the national language have been made at various levels, but they are not sufficient to meet the challenges of present-day Nepali as the national language of the country. In a conference on Nepali grammar held recently, it was suggested that there should be a provision for the promotion of the national language as there is in the Indian constitution (Bandhu, 1988:532).

IV Nepali Language and Contemporary Nepal

The Nepali language is used today as the medium in all spheres of official communication, administration, law and education. An attempt is made here to outline the status of the national language at present and put forward some of the problems that it faces:

- a. With the growing momentum in different fields of life, the national language faces new challenges in different fields of knowledge and information. A project of creating technical terms is in progress at the Royal Nepal Academy, but some other studies should also be undertaken to promote the power of expression in the national language in various fields of knowledge including science and technology. Present activities in studies and promotion of Nepali are hardly adequate, and the progress is slow. This has not only retarded the language itself but also several other fields of national life. Unless programmes are launched with specific goals for the promotion of the national language, it cannot meet the challenging demands of the time.

- b. The national language, which is a powerful vehicle of culture, should be able to carry the message to the people in an effective way. Otherwise people's alienation will grow and the process of national integration will suffer. If the content and presentation of the books, magazines, radio and television programmes where the Nepali language is used as a medium do not satisfy the Nepalese audience, they will be apathetic to the Nepali language media. In the absence of the development of quality in literature and the performing arts, the imported technology of broadcasting and printing alone will not serve the purpose.
- c. English medium primary and pre-primary schools have been allowed throughout the country in recent years. To satisfy and feed their ego and status feelings parents are spending their fortunes on the education of their children in English medium. But this does not assure them of a good future for their children as respectable citizens of the nation. Children can be trained well at an early stage in a foreign language if sufficient time can be spent in language activities. In our situation, most of the teachers are not trained in English and what they teach remains weak and flawed. This means that the bright students will have to unlearn at the later stage and the weak students will not make any use of the learning. Thus, teaching at the primary level in English medium is a burden on the heads of the children which may retard their development. Teaching a child in his or her mother-tongue is more beneficial since the mother-tongue is a means of self-identification and socialization. The tendency to send their children to English medium primary schools that has recently developed in the common people will hamper the process of class coordination which is a national goal as well as a powerful element of national integration. Instead of burdening the children with courses in a number of languages (some of whom must study three languages at the same time) a foreign language may be postponed to a later stage.
- d. Though several languages have been used in oral communication for centuries in the country, only Nepali and English are used in written communication and education. Although Newari and Maithili are also in partial use in communication and creative writing most of the other languages are unwritten. Now, with the spread of education, the consciousness of the various ethnic groups of their ethnic identity has grown considerably. Occasionally voices are heard for the recognition of other languages and for equal treatment of them. In a multilingual country like Nepal,

ethnic and group identities are bound to emerge with growth in education. Each group, whether small or large, feels that the preservation and promotion of its culture is a fundamental right. By protecting and promoting the individual ethnic identities and loyalties they can be channelized toward the strengthening of a single national identity.

V Conclusion

The Nepali language has been a medium of national unity and a symbol of identity in Nepalese national life and will remain so. The history of the language shows that it is capable of carrying messages to the people. But the situation has drastically changed. Nepali now faces the challenges brought by science and technology. It must prove equal to the task in competing with other languages. It can become a language of self-identification and socialization for Nepalese children if it is used to educate them in early childhood. The ethnic loyalties and identities now developing in Nepalese society can be encouraged so that people can preserve and promote their languages and cultures while channelizing them to consolidate national unity. Thus, in place of the "melting-pot" and "salad-bowl" paradigms, it is still possible to work for the blooming "flower-garden" (*sabai jātko phūl-bāri*) model, but only sound language planning can make it a reality.

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