



WRITING SYSTEMS OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN NEPAL

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Abstract. The linguistic diversity of Nepal is a treasure house of both wildlife and human culture in the Himalayan range. Languages are the vast resources for the prosperous and dignified life of the human world. The writing systems, in their turn, capture and preserve the language in time and space, thus accumulating the experience and knowledge of individuals and communities. Language and culture are intertwined, and without a writing system both cannot exist. Language is also one of the fundamental rights of indigenous peoples. This paper attempts to explore the writing systems of the indigenous languages of Nepal. The study applied the “armchair” method for the collection of data. The authors critically examined the journals, books, government documents, magazines, official papers and other materials from museums, libraries and other agencies working in the fields relevant to the present study. The findings show that the linguistic diversity exists and sustains only on condition that the exploration, codification, recognition, appreciation, and celebration of the existing languages are properly carried out. In this regard, public awareness is a must, while prevailing government efforts to date have not been enough. To prevent language loss, the government of Nepal needs to work intensely to explore this issue, and both the national and international community should also show prime concern for this rich cultural and traditional heritage preserved by writing systems as national and local cultures are part of the world patrimony. The study also indicates that further in-depth research into the scripts of indigenous languages is necessary.

Keywords: Nepal, indigenous languages, writing system, knowledge system, language loss, critical awareness

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СИСТЕМЫ ПИСЬМА В ЯЗЫКАХ КОРЕННЫХ НАРОДОВ НЕПАЛА

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Аннотация. Лингвистическое разнообразие Непала представляет собой сокровищницу дикой природы и человеческой культуры в Гималаях. Языки являются обширными ресурсами для процветания и достойной жизни мира людей. Системы письма, в свою очередь, фиксируют и сохраняют язык во времени и пространстве, аккумулируя, таким образом, опыт и знания отдельных людей и сообществ. Язык и культура переплетены между собой, и без письменности они не могут существовать. Язык также является одним из основных прав коренных народов. В данной статье предпринята попытка изучить системы письма языков коренных народов Непала. В исследовании применялся «кабинетный» метод сбора данных. Авторы проанализировали журналы, книги, правительственные документы, журналы, официальные бумаги и другие материалы из музеев, библиотек и иных учреждений, работающих в областях, имеющих отношение к настоящему исследованию. Результаты показывают, что языковое разнообразие существует и сохраняется только при условии, что изучение, кодификация и признание ценности существующих языков осуществляются должным образом. В этом отношении информирование общественности является совершенно необходимым, а имеющих место усилий государства на сегодняшний день недостаточно. Чтобы предотвратить утрату языков, правительству Непала необходимо интенсивно работать над изучением этой проблемы, в то время как и национальное, и международное сообщество также должно проявить первостепенную заботу об этом богатом культурном наследии и традиции, сохраненных системами письменности, поскольку национальная и местная культуры являются частью мирового достояния. Исследование также показывает, что необходимы дальнейшие углубленные исследования систем письма языков коренных народов.

Ключевые слова: Непал, языки коренных народов, система письма, система знаний, утрата языка, критическое осознание

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Background of the study

Geographically, Nepal consists of four distinct zones: the Himalayas, the Mahabharata range, the Siwalik, and the Terai. All these geographical zones are divided into seven administrative provinces and 77 districts. The great geographical diversity of Nepal has been enriched by its cultural and linguistic diversity. The 2011 national census mentioned 126 castes and ethnic groups and 123 living languages in Nepal [10]. The latest census (2021) showed that there are 123 plus six languages belonging to four language families [12], which is an impressively large number for a country with such a small land mass.

The languages spoken in Nepal are from four language families, viz. Indo-European, Sino-Tibetan, Austro-Asiatic and Dravidian. Besides, Kusunda is a language isolate without genetic relationship with any other language. The Indo-European language family constitutes the largest group of speakers (82.1%) whereas the Tibeto-Burman languages (a part of the Sino-Tibetan family) occupy the second position (17.3%). Similarly, Austro-Asiatic languages and Dravidian languages rank third (0.19%) and fourth (0.13%), respectively [15]. The Tibeto-Burman group within the Sino-Tibetan family of languages is represented by 57 languages in Nepal [9, p. 4], this being the largest number of distinct mother tongues of any linguistic grouping, but with noticeably fewer speakers than the Indo-Aryan group. Two other language families are also found in Nepal: the Munda branch of the Austro-Asiatic family and the Dravidian family, each represented by a couple of languages along the southern belt of the country.

The need of time is to foster an approach to indigenous peoples based on the respect of individual rights, free from domination, oppression and alienation, and aimed at their empowerment. Without the preservation and promotion of indigenous languages this is impossible. Hence, it has been critical to analyze the linguistic diversity of Nepal by reference to the evidence of the writing systems available in the prevailing context.

As for Nepal's languages, only a few of them have well-developed literary traditions. These include Nepali, Maithili, Tibetan/Sherpa, Newar, Limbu, Bhojpuri, Awadhi, and Lepcha, in particular. These languages have a long history of written literature. The political change in the country has brought new perspectives on diversity, equality, freedom, and respect of human rights. The reality of linguistic diversity is one of the main pillars of the existing cultural heritage of Nepal. In the words of Yadava [15], Nepal is a linguistic mosaic in the Himalayan range. However, studies in such fields as languages, writing systems, genetic affiliations, culture and arts are still limited. The researchers usually focus on the theoretical perspectives on literature, scripts, and affiliations of languages in Nepal.

Theoretical stand

One of the important aspects of Nepal's identity is its linguistic heterogeneity, which is not only the property of the concerned ethnic and linguistic groups but also the heritage of the nation as a whole [11]. In this context, preservation of national languages is protection of the national heritage. What is more, language preservation not only protects the national heritage but also prevents the language death. Regarding this issue, Crystal mentions a 1994 declaration by the Linguistic Society of America saying, "The loss to human kind of genetic diversity in the linguistic world is... arguably greater than even the loss of genetic diversity in the biological world, given that the structure of human language represents a considerable testimony to human intellectual achievement" [3, p. 34]. People who continuously have to express ideas in a language other than their native one may "never achieve adequate self-expression" [4, p. 83].

Language represents the most substantial evidence of human intellect in history. Though many languages are spoken in Nepal, most of them are still confined to their oral tradition. Each of them has a rich oral heritage of traditional folk stories and songs handed down from parents to children over a long time, e.g. Salhes in Maithili and Mundhum in Kiranti languages. However, they are disappearing with the growth of literacy and a language shift. Codification of these languages seems essential.

Nabi argues that there is a deeply rooted relationship between language and culture [8, p. 91]. In brief, as languages die, the culture also dies, and the death of a language is a great loss to human society. A language is a mirror of a culture reflecting its values and traditions, and, at the same time, a culture identifies itself through a language. As Hamid writes, "Language is a legacy sustained by generations; and the language legacy of the future generations would be comprised of few spoken and many techno-mechanized languages" [7, p. 726].

Languages cannot survive without a community of people who speak them and pass them on to the next generation. For example, Rahman points out that "the less powerful indigenous languages of Pakistan are becoming markers of lower status and culture shame" [13, p. 1]. However, the Punjabi community has all the features that are usually necessary to constitute ethnicity: a shared territory, history, geography, and cultural roots. Similarly, the basis of people's cultural heritage is their common language. Actually, Pakistan was created according to the basic principle of its founders: "one nation, one religion, and one language" [16, p. 32].

Methods and material

The present study aims to explore the writing systems of indigenous languages of the Himalayan range in Nepal. This qualitative inquiry used the "armchair" method for collecting information from secondary sources. Articles published in journals, books, policy papers, government documents, seminar and working papers, magazines and newspapers were gathered from libraries, museums and internet sources, along with the publications of the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), where the writing systems of indigenous languages were recorded and preserved. The information accumulated was analyzed in the narrative research framework using analytical and descriptive methods. The data gathered was then interpreted based on the theoretical stand and existing literature, and, finally, conclusions were drawn.

Results and discussion

As indicated above, Nepal is a multilingual country with more than 123 plus six officially recognized languages [12]. Nepali is spoken by 44.63% of the total population of Nepal as the first language and uses only the Devanagari script. The other languages with speakers of more than 1% are Maithili (11.6%), Bhojपुरी (6%), Tharu (5.8%), Tamang (5.1%), Newar (3.13%), Bajjika (2.99%), Magar (2.97%), Dotyali (2.97%) and Urdu (2.61%), and remaining smaller languages have less than 1% [10], [12]. To draw conclusions, the study discussed the issues related to the information collected in the historical context of the writing systems of Nepal (i.e. the Devanagari script) and in the light of the government efforts in this field.

The historical context of writing systems

The major root of the languages of the Himalayas is the ancient language, Sanskrit. The sacred scriptures of Hinduism, the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads, and other philosophical and spiritual texts of Hindu intellectuals were written in Sanskrit. The grammars of the Nepali language originally existed in the oral form. Panini, the first grammarian, used the Devanagari script while composing his first grammar.

The Archaeological Department of the Government of Nepal has recorded the historical origins and development of the writing systems of languages in Nepal. The history of writing originated in the Lichchhavi period (ca. 5th to 8th centuries AD), continued in the Malla period (AD 1200 to 1769) and extended up to the present. The history of indigenous languages in Nepal has seen different writing traditions being practised over time. The rulers of Nepal in the past belonged to the Gopal, Mahispal, Kirat, Lichchhavi, Malla and Shah dynasties. Modern Nepal was unified under the leadership of Prithvi Narayan Shah, a brave king of the Shah dynasty. The writing systems of the Nepali language were not developed in Nepal during the reign of the Gopal and Mahispal dynasties. In the Kirati dynasty period, some scripts, inclu-

ding those used in Mundhum¹, were developed. Only after the Lichchhavi period, evidence of the writing system used at that time was found. In fact, the systematic recording of languages started in the Shah period (1769–2008) as the very concept of modern unified Nepal took shape at that time².

The table below shows the evolution of scripts in Nepal as recorded in the Archaeological Department (Fig. 1).

श्री ५ को सरकार

शिक्षामन्त्रालय, पुरातत्त्वविभाग, राष्ट्रिय इतिहास अनुसन्धानशाखाको

अभिलेख-उपशाखाले प्रस्तुत गरेको

लिपिविकास-तालिका

आदि LICHCHHIVI PERIOD	लिच्छिवी LICHCHHIVI	मल्ल एवं शाहकाल MALLA AND SHAHA PERIOD	मल्ल एवं शाहकाल MALLA AND SHAHA PERIOD
आदि LICHCHHIVI PERIOD	लिच्छिवी LICHCHHIVI	मल्ल एवं शाहकाल MALLA AND SHAHA PERIOD	मल्ल एवं शाहकाल MALLA AND SHAHA PERIOD
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१३	१४	१५	१६
१७	१८	१९	२०
२१	२२	२३	२४
२५	२६	२७	२८
३१	३२	३३	३४
३७	३८	३९	४०
४३	४४	४५	४६
४९	५०	५१	५२
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६७	६८	६९	७०
७३	७४	७५	७६
७९	८०	८१	८२
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९१	९२	९३	९४
९७	९८	९९	१००
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९१७	९१८	९१९	९२०
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९६९	९७०	९७१	९७२
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९८१	९८२	९८३	९८४
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सातौं इतरमा

SEVEN LETTERS MONOGRAM

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Fig. 1 displays the evolution of scripts in Nepal as an attempt to develop writing systems appropriate to the phonetics of respective languages and to their practical use in the society. However, only a small number of indigenous languages have access to publishing their documents in their own script as a result of the “one nation, one language” type of policy promoted during the Panchayat system (1961–1990). Among the 123 languages in Nepal, only eight indigenous languages have their published documents [10]. The historical evidence shows that Brahmi was the origin of scripts for Nepal’s languages while the Devanagari script is a more recent development. Yet, it does not represent all the indigenous languages in Nepal.

The tradition of writing is a very important criterion of language endangerment. Currently, 93.07% of the newspapers published in Nepal are in non-indigenous languages, namely *Gorkhapatra*, *Kantipur*, *Nagarik*, *Madhupark*, *Nayapatrika*, *The Kathmandu Post*, and so on. Some of the indigenous languages exist only in the oral tradition. Such languages face an even higher risk of endangerment. Most of the indigenous languages of Nepal are in endangered situations as the government has not paid much attention to them. In the modern period, the preservation of writing systems is based on the efforts and initiatives of various language communities directed to raising the awareness of their respective mother tongues.

Writing systems of languages in Nepal

After the establishment of the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal (May 28, 2008), a powerful Language Commission was formed to study the country’s languages and to resolve the problems related to them. Most of the languages found in Nepal exist exclusively in the oral form. Despite the value and originality of the spoken form of a given language, a written tradition is necessary for the preservation of the writing system of any language. Without codification no language can survive as the written form is essential for its sustainability.

According to the Language Commission, popular scripts in Nepal are Devanagari, Dham, Kaithi, Khema, Limbu, Magar Akkha, Mithilakshar, Ol Chiki, and Tamyang [12, p. 43–48]. Similarly, the Nepali, Maithili, Tibetan, Sherpa, Newar, Bhojpuri, Awadhi, Tharu, Tamang, Magar, Rai, and Lepcha languages have literary traditions [15, p. 23]. These languages employ different writing systems. Most of the Indo-Aryan languages such as Nepali, Maithili (originally written in the Mithilakshar or Kaithi script), Bhojpuri, Awadhi, Hindi and Rajbanshi are written in the modern Devanagari script with small adjustments and additional letters. The modern Devanagari script has evolved from an ancient writing system called Brahmi, which is used in the Sanskrit language. Bengali is written in the modern Bangla script, which was developed from the Kutila variety of the northern type of the Brahmi script. Newar has its own traditional script called Ranjana (developed from the proto-Bangla script) but it has also adopted the Devanagari script for convenience in reading and printing. Limbu uses its own Kiranti Sirijanga script. Lepcha is written in the Rong script. One more writing system, Perso-Arabic, is used in the Urdu language while the Punjabi language is written in Gurumukhi.

At present, some languages have started developing their writing systems. These languages are Tharu, Tamang, Magar, Gurung, Rajbanshi and the Rai group of languages such as Bantawa, Thulung, Chamling, Khaling, Kulung, and others. Tharu, Tamang and Gurung use the Devanagari script but some of the Gurung speakers advocate for the use of Latin and Khema scripts in their language. Magar has developed its own script called Akkha. Recently, these languages have started developing some written literature in the form of newspapers, magazines, textbooks for adult literacy and primary education, and folk literature. Some of the languages have adopted the Devanagari script. The writing systems used in the various languages of Nepal are as follows [6, p. 46]:

<i>Language</i>	<i>Script</i>
Nepali, Maithili, Bhojpuri, Avadhi, Newar, Tamang, Rajbansi, Magar, Tamang, and Kirat	Devanagari
Maithili	Mithilakshar / Tirhuta
Maithili	Kaithi
Tibetan, Sherpa	Sambota
Tamang	Tamhig
Newar	Ranjana
Limbu	Rong
Lepcha	Srijanga
Magar	Akkha
Punjabi	Gurumukhi
Urdu	Perso-Arabic
Santhalim Gurung	Latin
Gurung	Oi Cemet' / Oi Chiki / Oi
Bagla	Khema

Table 1. Languages of Nepal and their scripts

Table 1 represents the major languages of Nepal having different scripts for their codification. The authors of this paper visited the Department of Archaeology to collect materials for this study. The documentation of languages in Nepal was initiated in 1950s. The statistics on the mother tongues of Nepal were first made available after the 1952/1954 census. A total of 52 mother tongues were reported, according to Harka Gurung [5], of which five were Terai dialects related to Awadhi, Bhojpuri, and Maithili, and two were duplications (Bhote-Sherpa and Tibetan, and Santhali and Satar). Subsequent censuses (1961, 1971, and 1981) reported progressively lesser numbers of mother tongues. The number of languages reported in the Panchayat era declined from 36 in 1961 to 17 in 1971 and 18 in 1981. The number of languages has increased since the establishment of democracy in Nepal. This meant a proliferation of reported languages from 31 in 1991, to 92 in 2001, and 123 in 2011 [10]. The scripts used in the languages of Nepal were recorded in one of the issues of the *Abhilekha* magazine [1, p. 1], which is presented in Fig. 2.



Figure 2. The front page of the *Abhilekha* magazine published by the National Archives of Nepal

Fig. 2 displays various scripts used in Nepal, which gives an idea of what it should take to collect and describe the writing systems used in such a variety of languages. These scripts are used to represent and record the indigenous languages of Nepal and thus explain the religion, culture and lifestyles of their speakers. The Department of Archaeology has the sole responsibility for research, recognition and recording of these writing systems. A limited number of dictionaries, books, journals, and papers have been produced in indigenous languages. Their diverse writing styles represent variations of human life

but their exact number is still to be explored. Among the newspapers published in Nepal, 68.42% are published in the official language, Nepali, and 24.65% in English and Hindi. The media in indigenous languages accounts for only 6.58% of the total while indigenous peoples make up 37.2% of the national population. Now, there are 43 Newari, 13 Tharu, 10 Tamang, and two Rai language newspapers. Apart from these, other languages have only oral traditions.



Figure 3. The Ranjana script in a hoarding board at Kathmandu Metropolitan City Office (the second line from the top)

Ethnic communities are raising voices to preserve their languages. The official recognition of some of these languages is the result of such demand. Kathmandu Valley, where the Newars are the major community, has recognized Newar as an official language. This is reflected, for example, in the use of Newar in the Ranjana script in the sign board at Kathmandu Metropolitan City Office (Fig. 3). Most cultural heritage objects, works of art and crafts found in Hindu temples and Buddhist monasteries and Bihars⁴ in Kathmandu have writing in the Ranjana script of the Newar language. However, other indigenous languages of Nepal are in endangered situations as their respective ethnic communities do not have access to the power and resources to preserve, protect and promote them. These languages require wider public awareness, research, codification, and practical use.

Writing systems in Nepal: the Devanagari script

The indigenous languages which do not have a writing system can disappear. As Gyawali noted, “Endangerment is one of the stages of language loss, which is a very critical issue in the 21st century because the extinction of each language results in the irrecoverable loss of unique expression of the human experience and the culture of the world” [6, p. 43]. Codification is the only way to maintain and pro-

⁴ Buddhist schools similar to monasteries in Nepal where monks and nuns study and live.

mote languages. The documentation of language is the process by which endangered languages can be preserved for the next generation. It is a “subfield of linguistics that deals with creating multipurpose records of languages through audio and video recording of speakers and signers along with annotation, translation, preservation, and distribution of the resulting materials” [2]. Woodbury defined language documentation as “the creation, annotation, preservation and dissemination of transparent records of a language” [14, p. 159].

Thus, without a writing system it is difficult to preserve any language. On the one hand, research and innovation in the field of indigenous languages have been challengeable as there are 123 languages, and resources are limited. On the other hand, there is no idea of a unified script in Nepal. The Devanagari writing system is proposed with the idea that, if all the languages of Nepal can be written in a single interoperable orthography, it could be a great help for language development, revitalization and mother-tongue-based multilingual education through the use of this orthography in education, media, and technology. It would be in line with the constitutional and legal provisions, and with the strategy of social inclusion. However, many ethnic communities do not agree as they fear this would destroy the originality of their languages. This concern can be appeased by the fact that the said proposal is not presented against the existing traditional writing systems or at the cost of the identity of the linguistic communities. It could be useful to the communities which want to use the Devanagari-based standard orthography and to the linguists working with multi-language data.

Besides, the Nepali language in the Devanagari script is the official language as defined by the Constitution of Nepal (Article 7)⁵. Because of the status given to Nepali and Devanagari as its orthography, other linguistic communities have to learn and use Devanagari. Nepali is a compulsory subject and the medium of instruction in the national education system of Nepal from grade 1 up to the bachelor's level, and Devanagari, obviously, is used as the medium of instruction in the written mode. It is also the script of most of the print media published in Nepal. All these factors make Devanagari widely used among the linguistic communities of Nepal.

Language endangerment in Nepal

Language is a living entity which is intertwined with culture. All human intangible knowledge has been preserved by language. In the words of Hamid, “To preserve culture, we need to preserve its language, and losing a language means getting deprived of a culture, a viewpoint, a system, and a treasure of knowledge” [7, p. 726]. More than 90% of the languages of Nepal are in an endangered situation, which is a serious issue. It is believed that language is the vehicle of culture, faith, ideology, and history. Anthropologically, language is one of the major pillars of culture and both are mutually constitutive. Different languages across the globe are continuously dying, thus causing the death of the premise and the backbone of entire civilizations, whose heritage and tradition are being lost forever.

This stands true for Nepal's endangered languages as it does for any other country's language. Most of the mother tongues of the indigenous peoples of Nepal exist in the oral form and are spoken by the 60+ years of age group. These languages have no script, are not documented, and are not transmitted to the new generation. Most of the potentially endangered, endangered, seriously endangered, and moribund languages are on the verge of extinction. Hence, the study and documentation of endangered languages is a highly urgent and essential issue in the world as well as in Nepal. In this context, the government of Nepal needs to invest both fiscal resources and human expertise in the research, identification, and recognition of the writing systems of these indigenous languages. Such investment can hopefully preserve the wealth of the linguistic diversity of Nepal.

⁵ Constitution of Nepal, lawcommission.gov.np/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Constitution-of-Nepal.pdf (accessed 31 August 2023).

Government effort

The tradition of writing is a very important criterion of language vitality. Previously, the unitary government during the Panchayat system showed no interest in exploring the linguistic diversity of the country. Only after the establishment of the democratic system did indigenous peoples raise voices to call for the preservation of their languages and cultures. The government established the Language Commission and started a linguistic survey in the country. As the resources were limited, it took a long time to identify all the languages of Nepal.

However, linguistic surveys conducted by the government with the support of international projects are not sufficient, and indigenous peoples claim that the authorities are lacking a strong commitment to the protection of their languages as national resources. Thus, more work related to the exploration, documentation and dissemination of Nepal's traditional heritage is necessary for the sake of future generations. Adequate language planning on the part of the government also seems essential. The authorities should be committed to developing the writing systems of indigenous languages as cultural treasures of different parts of the country.

Conclusion

Linguistic diversity is a cultural treasure of the indigenous peoples living in the Himalayan range. The variations in the writing systems used in their languages create a mosaic of living styles, folk culture and traditional knowledge. In this light, the scripts of Nepal deserve exploration, recognition, appreciation and celebration for the preservation of the country's linguistic diversity.

In this paper, an attempt was made to give an overview of the state of affairs regarding the writing systems of the indigenous languages of Nepal in terms of the prospects of their preservation. It was indicated that most of the indigenous languages in Nepal are on the verge of extinction due to the use of majority languages in the media, education, and other official communication. The government of Nepal needs to work intensely in this area, and both the national and international community should also show concern for this rich cultural heritage preserved in the writing systems.

Increasing the amount of research information on this issue is one of the ways to raise public awareness of Nepal's indigenous languages and thus to contribute to their greater visibility and recognition. The authors believe this opens up a new direction in the exploration of the treasure of knowledge contained in the indigenous languages of Nepal.

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