

# WEEKEND SPECIAL

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MORE NOW! TO END THE WEEK WITH

## MY TONGUE OR YOURS?

UNDERSTANDING MOTHER LANGUAGE  
ISSUES FROM EXPERIENCES ELSEWHERE

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THE  
TRUTH  
HAS TO  
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## BECAUSE BHASAS NEED MANYATA

Over half of the world's 6,000 languages are endangered. As per Unesco figures, 96 per cent of the world's 6,000 languages are spoken by 4 per cent of the world's population; 90 per cent of the languages are not represented on the internet; One language disappears on average every two weeks!

With fewer people speaking most of the languages, they start losing their utility as modes of communication and as they get pushed out of the public domain [no representation on the world wide web for instance], they start learning vanishing tricks instead of getting more refined. The disappearance of one language per day is frightening. Recognizing this, 21 February is marked as International Mother Language Day. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [Unesco], which oversees the day, the event strives for all languages to remain in use alongside major international languages.

The day commemorates the events of 21 February 1952, when current day Bangladesh was part of Pakistan. The question over what should be the national language caused fierce debate, with Pakistani authorities arguing it should be Urdu and Bengalis saying there should be two national languages. The conflict led to demonstrations on February 21, in which several people died, and has been commemorated since as Bangladesh's national language day. In 1999, the Bangladeshi Government approached Unesco to declare the day International Mother Language Day.

This 'Weekend Special' is devoted to issues of Mother Language. Save the data on Mother Tongues recorded in Sikkim, the rest of the articles speak of mother language issues elsewhere in the world - from Nepal to Canada to Kenya. This is intentional. The readers will notice that even when the writers featured here contemplate on local issues, their arguments, situations and solutions are as much at home in the Sikkimese context as they are for audiences they were originally written for. The concern of vanishing languages and the need for coherent policies for revival and sustenance find universal resonance. In going through these opinions from distant lands, we hope the message rings home in Sikkim too.

-editor

# My Tongue Or Yours?

**Celebrating International  
Mother Language Day  
in Nepal**

**MARK TURIN**

International Mother Language Day on February 21 has particular resonance for South Asia. On that day in 1952, a number of Bangladeshi language activists were shot and killed by police as they demonstrated for Bengali language rights.

Established at the UNESCO General Conference in November 1999, and first celebrated in February 2000, International Mother Language Day (IMLD for short) was established to promote linguistic diversity and multilingualism. In 2005, IMLD was devoted to Braille and sign languages, last year's topic was languages and cyberspace and this year the theme is very pertinent to Nepal: the links between mother tongues and multilingualism.

UNESCO states unequivocally on its website that 'all moves to promote the dissemination of mother tongues will serve not only to encourage linguistic diversity and multilingual education but also to develop fuller awareness of linguistic and cultural traditions throughout the world and to inspire solidarity based on understanding, tolerance and dialogue'. While certainly honourable and even noble, this suggestion remains contentious. In Nepal, language policy and linguistic rights are thorny political issues, and recent statements by language activists show a tendency towards isolationism, exceptionalism and division in the name of inclusion and participation. Even the United States and the United Kingdom, two nations held together by so much cultural background and shared history, may be said to be divided by a common language. So what about Nepal and its close to 100 languages? What implications does International Mother Language Day have for this nation in transition, and how should it be celebrated?

A helpful point of departure for understanding the emotional attachment to mother tongues in Nepal is the constitution, particularly because the ground has recently shifted. While Article 4 of Part 1 of the 1990 constitution declared Nepal to be multi-ethnic and multi-lingual, Article 6 stated that the Nepali language in the Devanagari script would be the official language



of the nation. Almost as a concession, all the remaining languages spoken as mother tongues across the then Kingdom were declared 'national languages of Nepal'. The recently promulgated Interim Constitution makes a small but significant compromise on the issue of language: even though the Nepali language in the Devanagari script retains its place as the official language, all the mother tongues spoken in Nepal are to be regarded as languages of the nation, and all mother tongues may be used in local administration and offices. The responsibility of translating from these indigenous mother tongues into Nepali for public records falls on the shoulders of the government.

The symbolic importance of these constitutional changes should not be underestimated, as the topic is

deeply emotive for many citizens of Nepal whose mother tongue is not Nepali. However, whether these new constitutional provisions will make any practical difference to the lives of non-Nepali speakers remains to be seen.

There are two clear sides to this debate. On the one hand, some argue that using Limbu in court or Maithili at school are luxuries that one can only afford when the fabric of the state is already providing security, peace and a steady supply of basic provisions such as water, electricity, petrol and cooking gas. Moreover, by demoting the role of Nepali from 'the' language to one of many, and even making Nepali an optional subject for *janajati* students in school, as some more strident activists advocate, aren't the disadvantaged ethnic groups simply buying into the very discourse of

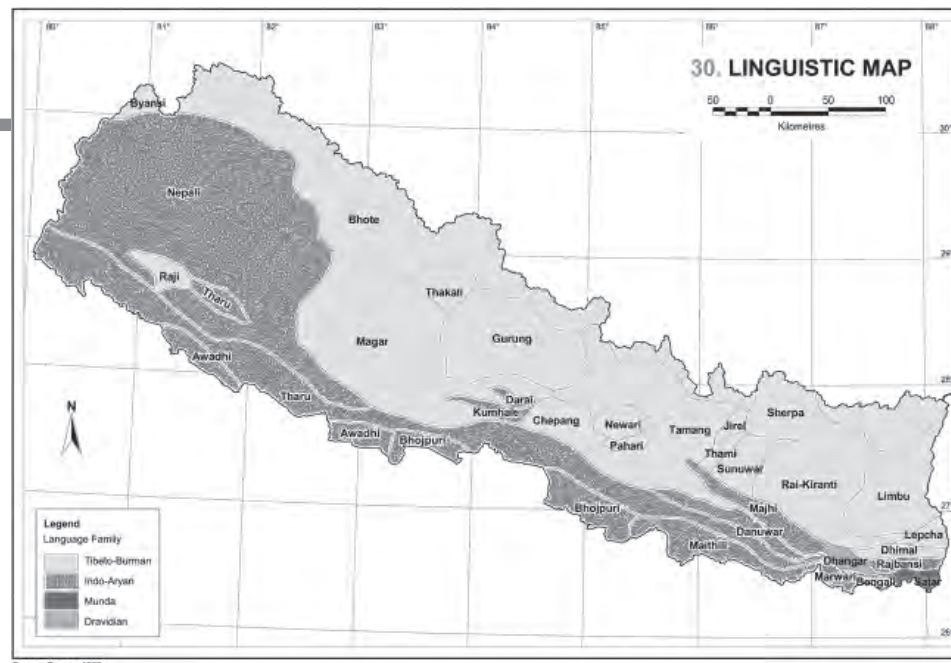
tribalism and non-participation that they accuse Nepal's ruling classes of having oppressed them with in the past?

On the other hand, speakers of minority languages have very real contemporary and historical grievances, and have been met with opposition at all levels when they have tried to implement the rights granted to them in the constitution. Non-Nepali speaking, non-caste Hindu ethnic groups have long felt excluded from full participation and recognition in the state by an overly homogenous vision of what it means to be Nepali. What better time than now, they argue, while the Nepali nation is taking its new shape, to voice their frustrations and redress those wrongs.

Part of the difficulty for Nepal is that much of the groundwork needed for formulating a robust, progressive language policy is lacking. Linguists still disagree about the number of languages spoken in the country, let alone dialects, and a comprehensive linguistic survey has yet to be conducted. Historically, the decadal census of Nepal has oscillated on whether it was counting discrete languages or ethnic groups, and only more recently have *bhasa* and *jat* been enumerated as distinct categories.

The gap between practical action and symbolic language policy in Nepal is steadily growing. On the practical side, we learned on February 1st that a project called Newa Schools in Newa Settlements (NSNS) will fund the establishment and operation of two Newar language schools in which the medium of instruction is Newa Bhae. This is excellent news, and entirely in line with best international practices and UNESCO's recommendations on primary education. On the symbolic side, it was announced on the same day that the Interim Constitution is being translated into a number of 'indigenous' languages, an effort which is more rhetorical than it is useful. How will phrases such as 'constituent assembly' be translated into Magar, and how many Chamling or Tharu speakers will actually read the document in their mother tongue?

Amid all the posturing, there is little discussion of a more fundamental question: what makes a language indigenous to Nepal? In the Nepali context, the claim to indigeneity is more about disadvantage than it is about



being autochthonous or *adivasi*. When language activists say that Nepali is not an indigenous language of Nepal (where is it indigenous to, then?), they are actually making a claim about oppression and inclusion, not about nativity. Likewise, when campaigners for *janajati* rights invoke history and territory to make claims for their own indigeneity, they tend to forget that the arrival of many well-known 'janajati' communities like the Sherpa far post-dates the settlement of Bahun and Chettri 'migrants' into the middle hills of Nepal.

Claims for ethno-linguistic autonomy need to be carefully balanced with an appreciation of the inherently heterogeneous and multilingual nature of modern Nepal. The map accompanying this article can easily be misinterpreted as suggesting that only Newa Bhae is spoken in Kathmandu, or that one unified language called Bhote is spoken across Nepal's northern border from the Far West to the Central regions, when in fact no such language exists. The reality, of course, is much more com-

plex, with layers of languages and mixtures of various peoples occupying most of Nepal's landmass. Truly homogenous regions are few and far between, and not representative of the diversity encountered in most areas.

Nepal is now at another crossroads in its turbulent history. Much is up for debate and negotiation, and members of communities who have been historically marginalised have legitimate aspirations and high hopes for a more 'inclusive' nation. Making flexible and lasting policies that genuinely support all of Nepal's languages will require considerable foresight, and due care should be taken to avoid replacing the divisive 'one nation, one culture, one language' rhetoric of the past with an equally divisive discourse of linguistic fragmentation.

-This article was first published in *Nepali Times*, Kathmandu  
[Dr. Mark Turin is a linguistic anthropologist and Director of the Digital Himalaya Project. He is currently overseeing a linguistic survey for Sikkim commissioned by the State Government.]

## Bilingual Children's Mother Tongue: Why Is It Important for Education?



**JIM CUMMINS** of the University of Toronto makes a case for the promotion of Mother Tongues in schools using data for Canada. His arguments hold true for any part of the world...

The term globalization is never far from the front pages of newspapers these days. It evokes strong positive or negative feelings depending upon whether it is being praised by the business community for opening up world markets to more extensive trade or condemned by those who associate the term with the dramatically widening gap between rich and poor nations and people.

One aspect of globalization that has important implications for educators is the increasing movement of people from one country to another. Population mobility is caused by many factors: desire for better economic conditions, the need for labour in many countries that are experiencing low birthrates, a constant flow of refugees resulting from conflicts between groups, oppression of one group by another, or ecological disasters. Economic integration within the EU also encourages the free movement of workers and their families among EU member countries. The fact that travel between countries is now fast and efficient [most of the time] obviously facilitates population mobility.

A consequence of population mobility is linguistic, cultural, "racial", and religious diversity within schools. To illustrate, in the city of Toronto in Canada, 58% of kindergarten students come from homes where standard English is not the usual language of communication. Schools in Europe and North America have experienced this diversity for many years but it remains controversial, and educational policies and practices vary widely between countries and even within countries. Neo-fascist groups in a number of countries promote overtly racist policies in relation to immigrant and culturally diverse communities. Other political parties and groups adopt a somewhat more enlightened orientation and search for ways to "solve the problem" of diverse communities and their integration in schools and society. However, they still define the presence of diverse communities as a "problem" and see few positive consequences for the host society. They worry that linguistic, cultural, "racial" and religious diversity threaten the identity of the host society. Con-