

A Nepali Language Feast

by Mark Turin

The Nepali language is more widely-spoken than is often imagined. Aside from being the national language within the Kingdom of Nepal itself, it functions as a *lingua franca* for vast reaches of the central and eastern Himalaya, most notably throughout Sikkim and Darjeeling in India and even in many parts of Bhutan. The niche that the Nepali language has come to occupy is even more intriguing given the socio-linguistic composition of the country whence it came. Home to over 80 languages hailing from four different language families, Nepal has more need of a common tongue than many other countries twice her size. The success of the Nepali language in uniting an otherwise ethnically and linguistically heterogeneous country over the past 200 years must not be underestimated, even if the result has been at the expense of many of the minority languages.

There is good reason to believe that the long-awaited and most recent addition to the Hodder & Stoughton *Teach Yourself* series will soon occupy an important place in the pedagogical literature available to the ever-growing community of Nepal scholars from all disciplines. Entitled *A Complete Course in Understanding, Speaking and Writing Nepali*, it was conceived, devised, written and even recorded (there are accompanying cassettes) by two of the most prominent scholars of the Nepali language and its literature.

Abhi Subedi is Professor of English at the Kirtipur campus of Nepal's Tribhuvan University as well as a prominent intellectual and poet. Michael Hutt, based at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, is Britain's most prolific writer on the literature of Nepal and the language in general. The success of the book may well be attributable to two major factors, the first being the joint nature of the enterprise. In being a collaboration between an English scholar who is a non-native, but fluent, Nepali speaker and a Nepali writer famed for his approachable verse and prose, this book captures the flavour of the language which is sadly absent from other phrasebooks and primers. The results of this co-authoring provide the second strength of the book as a whole. *Teach Yourself Nepali* has a human edge, from the user-friendly grammatical explanations to the real-life conversations and dialogues that the reader encounters in each chapter of the book. The danger of such an approach is, of course, that what is gained in terms of simplicity of explanation is met with a concomitant loss in precision. It is a tribute to the authors that they carefully avoid this trap, and in the process have produced an excellent pedagogical work which fills a genuine gap in the market. *Teach Yourself Nepali* will be read, studied and used by academics, development workers, mountaineers, tourists and linguists alike as it is simply the best book for learning modern Nepali.

The book is divided into 24 chapters, each containing one or more true-to-life Nepali conversations. Whether it be a little gossip about the wealth of Jyoti's father, the pros and cons of village versus urban life or bartering with a shopkeeper at the market, Hutt and Subedi manage to capture and crystallise the essence of an archetypal Nepali discussion. On occasion, the authors include a sidebar on some social or cultural feature of Nepali life, such as an explanation of the concept of pollution (page 110), an aside on Nepali poets (page 133) and even an insightful overview of religion in Nepal

(page 205). These cultural observations are invariably interesting and well-written, and perhaps there could even have been a few more of them on topics such as caste or nationalism.

Whilst the introduction to the Devanāgarī script and Nepali phonology is concise and to the point, it is somewhat surprisingly concluded with three samples of quite terrible Nepali handwriting. On account of the low literacy rate in Nepal, it is undoubtedly the case that many people do not have the most manicured handwriting styles, but to present three equally awful variations in a row does somehow give the impression that no Nepali can master penmanship.

The single greatest shortcoming of *Teach Yourself Nepali* is one which sadly affects the book from start to finish. Whilst every care has been taken to present the grammar of the language both simply and clearly, and with excellent examples, one gets the impression that the proof-reader and copy-editor were on holiday when the book finally went to press. It is literally riddled with simple misspellings, mistransliterations and typographical hiccoughs. The **English-Nepali Glossary**, occupying the final seven pages, is a case in point. In a little over 500 entries, I counted five mistakes of transliteration: the entries for 'bangle', 'cow', 'distant', 'sweets' and 'woman'. There were also two further inconsistencies when spellings were offered in the main body of the text at variance with the one in the glossary. Although not wanting to be pedantic about small mistakes, and also fully recognising that mistransliterations slip into even the most learned of books, the sheer number of mistakes is worthy of note, particularly because the book is intended as a pedagogical aid for those hoping to learn Nepali through self study. Whilst mistransliterations are dotted liberally throughout the whole text, another concentration of errors has afflicted the **Key To Exercises** section towards the end of the book. For example, in **Exercise 54** on page 183, the reader is asked to write Nepali sentences combining the information from two columns, but when one turns to page 276 to check the sample sentences, the answers are all back to front and have no bearing on the questions asked. For a pedagogical language book, such mistakes, together with their frequency, are surprising to say the least.

Overall though, *Teach Yourself Nepali* is a thoughtfully-written, carefully-explained and all-round excellent language book for anyone wanting to learn the language. One can only hope that in the second edition, which must surely come given its success and popularity, the nagging errors and typographical inconsistencies will have been weeded out. Only then will Hutt and Subedi's book be *The Complete Course in Nepali* that we have been waiting for.

Nepali: a complete course in understanding, speaking and writing. By Michael Hutt and Abhi Subedi. 1999. Teach Yourself Books, Hodder & Stoughton, London. 308 pp. + 2 cassettes. ISBN 0-340-71130-2

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