

Chapter III

ETHNICITY AND RELIGION

A. Introduction

Although small in size, Nepal is a multiracial, multireligious and multilinguistic country. Racially, the Nepalese population derives principally from two distinct races, viz., the Indo-Aryan and the Tibeto-Mongoloid, although small minorities of Austro-Asiatic and Dravidian origins have also been reported. The censuses have also enumerated five major religious groups: Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Christian and Jains. The 1952/54 census reported as many as 58 diverse language groups, but the most important languages are Nepali, Maithili, Bhojpuri, Tamang, Tharu, Newari, Awadhi, Magar, Rai Kirati, Gurung and Limbu, which together are spoken by about 94 percent of the total population.

The multiplicity of races, religions and languages has largely been attributed to the mountainous nature of the country which has

"provided shelter and security for a large number of migrants from different places in the south and north of Nepal. The successive waves of migrants, comprising different races, and representing separate ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, have settled down in different places all over Nepal. Remaining isolated for centuries, each community, which have preserved their own traditions, culture and language, evolved relevant ecological adaptations to the altitude, climate and topography of the territory they occupy. Apparently, the influences of quite diverse climatic and environmental conditions among the mountains, hills and Terai and between the east and west of Nepal, the low rate of literacy, the lack of communications

and the feudal system which had, for a long time, been dominating Nepal, were the main factors contributing to the survival of the manifold languages and dialects of minor communities and to the slowness of the cultural assimilation of the country."¹

B. Racial and Ethnic Composition

As noted earlier, the people of Nepal originated from two racial branches, namely, the Mongoloid or the Tibeto-Burman branch and the Indo-Aryan branch

Chronologically, the people of Mongoloid origin appear to have been the first to migrate into Nepal. They came into the country across the high Himalayan passes from the north and established themselves in the sub-Himalayan region. The broad Mongoloid subfamily today consists of a number of clans including the Tamangs, Gurungs, Limbus, Rai-kiratis, magars, Tharus, Sunwars, Sherpas and Bhotas.

"There is a striking similarity in physical structure of small groups of the mongoloid peoples with people living in the hills and plain of Kathmandu Valley. Most probably, migration of the mongoloid to the mid-lands and inter-marriage with the indigenous people might have brought about this resemblance."²

The largest clan in the Mongoloid subfamily is the Tamangs who, according to the 1971 census, numbered about 555,000 persons. The majority of the Tamangs are tenant farmers, porters, domestic

¹ Government of Nepal, *The Analysis of the Population Statistics of Nepal* (Kathmandu, Central Bureau of Statistics, 1977), pp. 38-39.

² *Ibid.*, p. 39.

servants and woodcutters. The Tharus, who constitute the second largest of the Mongoloid sub-family clans with a population in 1971 of about 496,000 persons, are exclusively farmers. The third largest clan is the Newars with a population of about 455,000 persons. Being craftsmen and traders, the Newars have migrated in all directions; however, they are mainly concentrated in the Kathmandu valley where they constituted 46 percent of the population in 1971.³ With a population in 1971 of about 388,400 persons, the Magars are the fourth largest of the Mongoloid subfamily clans. The majority of the Magars are farmers but a significant proportion of them are craftsmen. The Gurungs, with a population of about 171,000 persons, rank fifth among these clans.

As noted in the introduction, the Indo-Aryan group entered Nepal from India over 2,500 years ago and inhabited the plains and low altitude hills. In recent history, the Hindus from India migrated into Nepal are refugees during the period of the Muslim conquest. Today, the Indo-Aryan group, which has assimilated a large section of the mongoloid subfamily, constitutes over 80 per cent of the total population of Nepal. This group contains a number of subgroups, clans, castes and tribes, including the Nepali, Maithili, Abadhi, Bhojpuri, Rajbanshi and the Urdu speaking Muslims.

The Austro-Asiatic subfamily comprises two small communities, the Satar who numbered 18,840 persons and the Santhali who numbered 10,645 persons in the 1961 census. In 1971, these two communities were classified under the category "other linguistic groups". These two communities are concentrated in Jhapa and Morang districts in the far-eastern Terai.

³ The proportion of Newars to the total population of Kathmandu valley declined from 55 per cent in 1952/54 to 46 per cent in 1971. this decline may have been due to the out-migration of Newars to other districts or to the migration into Kathmandu of other races and clans.

In the absence of direct questions on ethnicity in the censuses, an attempt has been made to identify the ethnic groups on the basis of the mother tongues spoken. Although the main objective of collecting data on the linguistic composition of the population was to obtain a supplementary indicator of ethnic origin, the classification by mother tongue was not uniform in the three latest censuses of Nepal.

"While information on 35 languages has primarily been collected in 1952/54 census, only 24 were tabulated. Similarly, 1961 census has collected information on 52 languages and later were reduced in tabulation to 36. the 1971 census included tabulation on 17 languages leaving an unstated residual of 487,060 persons."⁴

The numerical and percentage distribution of the population by mother tongue in the censuses since 1952/54 is shown in table 15. it will be seen from the table that, of the large number of languages listed, only 11 were each spoken by 1 per cent or more of the total population in 1971, and these 11 languages together were spoken by about 94 per cent of the total population. However, Nepali is the most important language being the mother tongue of nearly 52 per cent of the total population⁵, followed by Maithili and dialects spoken by over 11 per cent of the population, while Bhojpuri is the third most important language, being the mother tongue of about 7 per cent of the total population.

It will also be noted from table 15 that the variation from one census to another in the number of persons by mother tongue has been

⁴ Government of Nepal, op. cit., p. 43.

⁵ The original home of Nepali is western Nepal. This language, which uses Sanskrit script, was made compulsory by law in administration and education in 1905 by Prime Minister Chandra Shumshere Rana. As the national language of the country, Nepali has been increasingly gaining importance in terms of either the total number of persons reporting Nepali as their mother tongue or the proportion who can speak it as a secondary language.

more marked in the case of certain languages or dialects. For instance, while no information is available in regard to the number of persons who used Abadhi as their mother tongue in 1952/54, this language was reported to be the mother tongue of 447,090 persons in 1961 and of 316,950 persons in 1971. It is probable that in the 1952/54 census, the Abadhi language might have been included in the "unknown" or "other languages" category. Similarly, the Morang and Hindi languages spoken by a significant number of persons in 1952/54 and in 1961 have been omitted in the 1971 classification.

"Overlapping, particularly among languages sharing common ancestral descent is a strong possibility for causing these differences in the presentation of the linguistic composition. Hindi, for example, has been the rallying point of Maithili, Bhojpuri and Abadhi languages predominantly spoken in the Terai. Most probably transfer of persons across Hindi to Maithili, Bhojpuri and Abadhi or their dialects is the acceptable explanation for

Table 15. Numerical and percentage distribution of the population by mother tongue, 1952/54, 1961 and 1971

Languages	1952/54		1961		1971	
	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent
Nepali	4013567	48.7	4796528	51.0	6060785	52.4
Maithili and dialects	918211	11.1	1130402	12.0	1327242	11.5
Bhojpuri	16335	0.2	577357	6.1	806480	7.0
Tamang	494745	6.0	528812	5.6	555056	4.8
Abadhi	n.a.	-	447090	4.7	316950	2.7
Tharu	359594	4.4	406907	4.3	495881	4.3
Neeari	383184	4.7	377727	4.0	454979	3.9
Magar	273780	3.3	254675	2.7	288383	2.5
Rai	236049	2.9	239749	2.5	232264	2.0
Gurung	162192	2.0	157778	1.7	171609	1.5
Limbu	145511	1.8	138705	1.5	170787	1.5
Bhote Sherpa	70132	0.9	84229	0.9	79218	0.7
Morang and dilects	106569	1.3	83986	0.9	n.a.	-
Hindi	80181	1.0	2867	0.0	n.a.	-
Rajbansi	35543	0.4	55803	0.6	55124	0.5
Urdu	32545	0.4	2650	0.0	n.a.	-
Sunwar	17299	0.2	13362	0.1	20380	0.2
Satar	16751	0.2	18840	0.2	20660	0.2
Chepang	14261	0.2	9247	0.1	n.a.	-
Thami	10240	0.1	9049	0.1	n.a.	-
Danuwar	n.a.	-	11624	0.1	9959	0.1
Santhali	n.a.	-	10645	0.1	3193	0.0
Other language and dialects	848390	10.3	54964	0.6	487060	4.2
All languages	8235079	100.0	9412996	100.0	11555983	100.0

Source: Government of Nepal, *The Analysis of the Population Statistics of Nepal* (Kathmandu, Central Bureau of Statistics, 1977).

the decline in Hindi speaking persons from

80,181 in 1952/54 to 2,867 in 1961.¹⁶

The proportionate distribution of the population in each region by major languages is shown in table 16. An interesting demographic feature in Nepal is the concentration of the different linguistic groups in specific regions of the country. Although Nepali is increasingly spoken in every region, it is the mother tongue of the majority of the people living in the eastern and western hills. People who speak Maithili and Bhojpuri are settled mostly in the eastern and east inner Terai. The Newari-speaking population

form the majority of the Kathmandu inhabitants while Tharu and Abadhi are the important mother tongues of the inhabitants of the west, mid-west and far-western Terai. It will also be noticed that over the years there has been a systematic increase in the proportion of the population speaking Nepali in almost all regions.

Broadly speaking, the Mongoloid stock are concentrated in the mountainous and hilly districts of eastern Nepal, and some in western Nepal too.

Table 16. Percentage distribution of the population of regions by major language, 1952/54, 1961 and 1971

Regions	Nepali	Maithali	Bhojpuri	Tamang	Abadi	Tharu	Newari
Eastern hills							
1952/54	51.2	-	-	14.0	-	-	4.5
1961	57.3	-	-	12.9	-	-	3.4
1971	59.3	-	-	11.7	-	-	4.0
Kathmandu valley							
1952/54	39.3	-	-	4.7	-	-	55.0
1961	41.3	-	-	5.0	-	-	52.1
1971	45.7	-	-	6.5	-	-	46.2
Eastern and East inner terai							
1952/54	9.4	46.1	0.1	2.2	-	1.7	0.6
1961	10.3	47.0	23.9	1.7	-	4.1	0.7
1971	16.5	40.9	21.2	2.1	0.1	3.0	0.7
Central terai							
1952/54	37.9	-	-	33.1	-	11.7	5.2
1961	46.9	-	-	31.4	-	10.0	5.5
1971	45.9	0.1	2.9	16.4	7.2	12.5	4.0
West, mid- west and Far- western terai							
1952/54	7.0	-	-	-	-	40.0	0.4
1961	8.1	-	-	-	58.0	33.0	0.3
1971	22.3	-	10.1	-	26.7	32.2	0.4
Western hills							
1952/54	83.6	-	-	3.5	-	0.4	1.7
1961	85.1	-	-	3.5	-	0.8	1.1
1971	86.5	-	-	3.1	-	0.1	1.0

Source: Government of Nepal, *The Analysis of the Population Statistics of Nepal* (Kathmandu, Central Bureau of Statistics, 1977).

The Indo-Aryan Stock speaking Nepali have their homes in the western hills and mountains. Comparatively more recent arrivals of the Indo-Aryan stock speaking Maithili, Bhojpuri and

Abadhi are settled in the Terai areas near the Indian border.

C. Religious Composition

As noted earlier, the population censuses of Nepal enumerated five religious: Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity and Jainism. These major religious groups are further subdivided into sects. For example, the Hindus are subdivided into five sects, namely, Shiva, Viashnawa, Shakta, and worshippers of Ganesh and the Sun God. The Buddhists are subdivided into three sects, namely, Heenayan, Mahayan and Bajrayan, while the Muslims can be subdivided into Shiya and Sunni. Some communities like the Rais and Limbus of the eastern hills follow their tribal religious practices which resemble neither the Hindus nor the Buddhist religion. Nevertheless, they have been classified as Buddhists or Hindus on the basis of the resemblance of their birth and death rituals to Buddhist or Hindu practices.

Officially, Nepal is a Hindu Kingdom, and this circumstance is of course reflected in its religious composition which has remained more or less stable over the three census years. It will be noted from table 17 that nearly 89 per cent of the people are Hindus; Buddhists constitute about 8 per cent of the population and Muslims another 3 per cent. The Christians and Jains form only a very insignificant proportion of the total population. In Nepal, "there is much intermingling of Hindu and Buddhist beliefs, and many of the persons regarded as Hindus in the census could with much justification be called Buddhists. Neither is an exclusive faith, and many Nepalese regard the country as being about equally divided between Hindus and Buddhists."⁷ The Hindus and Buddhist are interspersed in all regions and fraternally acquiesce. Religious tolerance has been deeply imbibed in the national character of the Nepalese, and followers of both religious visit each others temple and worship each other deities.⁸

In Nepal, there is strong association between mother tongue and religious. A vast majority of Nepali speakers are Hindus; those who speak Maithili, Bhojpuri and Abadhi are also entirely

Hindus except for a negligible fraction of Muslims. The Magars and the Tharus are one hundred per cent Hindus while the Tamangs and Bhote Sherpas are one hundred per cent Buddhists. The Rai Kiratis and Limbus might have been mostly enumerated as Buddhists.

The religious composition of the population in the various regions is shown in table 18. In all regions the Hindus constitute the majority of the population, while Buddhists rank second in all regions except the western inner Terai, the western Terai and the far-eastern Terai where Muslims rank second in importance. In all regions, except one, the Hindus constitute over 80 per cent of the population and in a few of these over 95 per cent. The highest concentration of Hindus is seen in the far-western hills, which contain over 80 per cent of Nepali-speaking communities. The next highest proportions of Hindus are seen in the western inner Terai and the far-western Terai, where the Tharu community accounts for the majority of Hindus. The lowest proportion of Hindus, about 67 per cent in 1961, was recorded for the central inner Terai where the highest concentration of Buddhists has also been observed. It is in this region that the Tamangs, who are largely Buddhists, constitute over 30 per cent of the population. The second lowest proportion of Hindus was noted in respect of the Kathmandu Valley where the second highest proportion of Buddhist has been noted. Nearly 50 per cent of the population of Kathmandu valley consists of Newars of whom a substantial proportion are Buddhists.⁹

The Muslims, who constitute about 3 per cent of the total population, are found mostly in the Terai region. Small communities of Muslims are, however, found in other parts of the country; in the western hills, they are called Churetas. The highest concentration of Muslims, about 13 per cent in 1961, is observed in western Terai where they constitute the second largest religious group. They also constitute about 9 per cent of the

population in eastern Terai and 8.5 per cent of the population in far-western Terai.

It may also be noted from table 18 that there are differences in the proportion of the religious group over time. This may be due to two factors. In the first instance, as noted earlier, the

distinctions between Hindus and Buddhists in Nepal are very subtle and meager and this will have produced a lot of confusion in the minds of the enumerators and respondents who were not well informed in this matter. Secondly, migration into or out of the regions would also account for these differences.

Table 17. Numerical and percentage distribution of population by religion, 1952/54 to 1971

Religion	1952/54		1961		1971	
	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent
Hindus	7318392	88.9	8254403	87.7	10330009	89.4
Buddhist	707104	8.6	870991	9.3	866411	7.5
Muslims	208899	2.5	280597	3.0	351186	3.0
Christians	-	-	458	0.0	2541	0.0
Jains	684	0.0	831	0.0	5836	0.1
Total	8235079 ^a	100.0	9407280 ^b	100.0	11555983	100.0

Source: Reports on the Censuses of 1952/54, 1961 and 1971.

a Excludes 21,546 persons inadvertently omitted from the tabulations of personal and economic characteristics.

b Excludes 5,716 persons of "unstated" religion.

Table 18. Proportionate distribution of religious groups by region, 1952/54 and 1961^a

Region	Hindus		Buddhists		Muslims		Unstated	
	1952/54	1961	1952/54	1961	1952/54	1961	1952/54	1961
Eastern hills	81.7	81.9	18.3	18.0	-	-	-	0.1
Eastern inner terai	84.5	83.9	15.5	16.1	-	-	-	-
Eastern Terai	91.1	90.0	0.9	0.9	8.0	8.9	-	0.2
Kathmandu valley	75.7	80.7	23.9	18.8	0.3	0.2	-	0.3
Western hills	91.7	84.6	8.0	15.1	0.3	0.3	-	-
Far western hills	99.2	99.1	0.8	0.9	-	-	-	-
Central inner Terai	58.4	67.1	41.6	32.7	-	0.1	-	0.1
Western inner terai	98.9	98.7	0.1	-	1.0	1.3	-	-
Western terai	88.4	87.1	0.1	0.1	11.5	12.7	-	0.1
Far western terai	92.8	91.5	-	-	7.2	8.5	-	-
Nepal	88.9	87.7	8.6	9.3	2.5	3.0	-	-

Source: Central Bureau of Statistics, 1961 census of Population, vol. II, appendix note, table 5.

a It is not possible to obtain comparable regional data for 1971 because of reorganization of districts in 1962.