

Exploring the roles of languages in social cohesion and inclusion in minority ethno-linguistic communities in Nepal

Ambika Regmi Banjara

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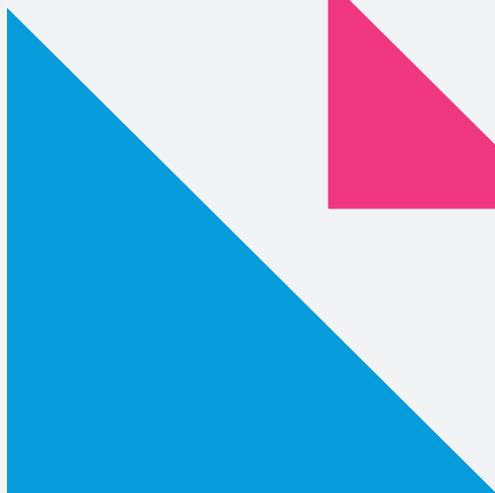
Ambika Regmi Banjara, PhD.

Language Expert

Language Commission, Nepal

Editor:

Hamish McIlwraith





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Background

This paper explores the roles as well as challenges of languages in achieving social cohesion and inclusion in minority ethno-linguistic speech communities in Nepal, and suggests some strategies to beat those challenges. Before democracy, social cohesion ('shared values and commitment to a society' by all its members) was forcefully maintained through a deliberate linguistic and cultural assimilation policy. Social cohesion was mainly shaken by the armed conflict of Nepal (1996–2006) and it was further aggravated by political uprising and violence in the Tarai belts. In the Civil War, more than 15,000 people were killed and untold amount of property was destroyed. The political uprising of 2016 badly disturbed social cohesion among Madeshis, Tharus and Pahadi communities in Nepal.

In recent years, people from the minority ethno-linguistic communities have moved from their original places to urban areas of hilly and Terai regions for safety, employment, quality education and health services. The trend of such migration is gradually increasing. The members of such speech communities are facing inequalities in civic participation, justice and information. The migrated people are discouraged to take part in the local politics and their voices against inequalities are not properly heard by other communities. Moreover, children are deprived of quality basic education in such migrated areas due to lack of

mother-tongue education. To achieve social cohesion, education is a most important tool and language is essential for education. In the present context, addressing such cross-cutting issues can be made only through education in mother tongues. To date, no comprehensive study has been available on the roles of languages in social cohesion and inclusion in the minority ethno-linguistic communities in Nepal.

This paper is organised into seven parts. The second deals with ethnicity and languages in Nepal. In the third there is an analysis of the social cohesion and inclusion in minority ethno-linguistic communities in Nepal. In the fourth part, the role of languages in social cohesion and inclusion is discussed while in section five there is an exploration of the challenges in maintaining social cohesion and inclusion through languages. Part six sets out recommendations of some strategies to beat the challenges following a final concluding section.

¹ Informal interviews together with the proponent's experiences identify the lost of their traditional local music, as these are almost no longer sang/performed and passed on by the members of the community aside from two popular ones – Manang Biday and Pamulinawen.

Language and ethnicity in Nepal

According to the Constitution of Nepal, 2015, all the languages spoken as mother tongues are the languages of nation in Nepal. According to the Census, 2011, Nepali is spoken as mother tongue by 44.6 per cent of the total population. In Nepal, around 30 languages have sustainable orality

and around 50 languages have a smaller amount of such orality (Regmi, 2017). In Nepal, out of 123 officially recognised mother tongues, more than 56.9 per cent, that is 70, are commonly categorised as the minority languages.

Social cohesion and inclusion in Nepal

In Nepal, minority ethno-linguistic communities constitute more than 55 per cent of the total population (CBS, 2012). There is discrimination against indigenous peoples, women, Madhesi, Dalits and other marginalised communities in terms of caste, ethnicity, language, religion, sex, class and geographical territory in Nepal (Gurung, 2009). There is also social exclusion in the political, economic and social fabric of Nepal (ADB, 2010). There is a wide gap in the degree of social inclusion between the most and least included groups in almost all spheres of human development in Nepal (Gurung et al., 2014). There are prolonged tensions between the communities in a post-conflict environment in Nepal (UNDP, 2017).

Nepal is facing a number of problems in maintaining peaceful and cordial relationship among the community members. After the Peace Agreement signed in 2006, both the governmental and non-governmental organisations have been conducting a number of programmes in those problematic areas. However, in ethno-linguistic communities in Nepal, poverty, illiteracy and gender inequality still persist. In remote areas, people do not have access to quality basic education, knowledge

of climate change and partnership for development. There is a lack of equal access to education in mother tongue with textbooks in mother tongue containing respective cultural content. Most of such communities are still marginalised and excluded from most of the development processes of the nation. Thus, mother tongues have to be facilitated by framing an education policy to play the vital roles in social cohesion and inclusion in such communities in Nepal.

The role of languages in social cohesion and inclusion

Languages are one of the tools for promoting social cohesion and inclusion. Lack of planning for addressing linguistic diversity in the minority communities is one of the major causes for social disharmony and tension. Languages, especially languages-in-education, promote social cohesion in minority speech communities (Lo Bianco, 2013). Social cohesion and inclusion are of utmost importance for further addressing cross-cutting issues such as poverty reduction, quality education, gender equality, reduced inequalities and climate action, especially in such ethno-linguistic communities.

There are five dimensions of social cohesion. They include belonging, inclusion, participation, recognition and legitimacy (Aturupane and Wikramanayake, 2011). There are two ways to promote cohesion: transmitting knowledge, and

shaping the attitudes of individuals towards diversity and change (Aturupane and Wikramanayake, 2011). Languages, including, mother tongues, official language (Nepali) and international language (English) have to be properly managed in the education systems of the country. In the present context of Nepal, assimilation of languages and cultures is detrimental to social cohesion. Thus, the minority ethno-linguistic communities should be allowed to use their languages in the daily activities freely. Such languages along with official languages (Central and Regional) have to be accommodated in the education system and language policy in education has to be framed on the principles of pluralism and inclusion. The following section is a brief discussion of the ways such languages play the roles in social cohesion in such communities.

The role of mother tongues

There is a great role of mother tongues (that is, minority languages) in promoting social cohesion and inclusion in Nepal. At present, the Education Act has not made mother-tongue education compulsory in Basic Education (Grades 1-8) in Nepal. English is the medium of instruction for all subjects, except Nepali, in private boarding schools in Nepal. In community schools, the medium of instruction is exclusively Nepali, the official language of Nepal. English is taught as a subject from Grade 1 onwards. Textbooks are written in standard Nepali incorporating the mainstream culture of Nepal. Thus, children from minority speech communities neither understand standard Nepali nor the mainstream culture.

Such children are deprived of crucial local life knowledge embodied in the local languages and dialects. They neither know their cultural values nor the values to be shared by the community where they live. Thus, in order to transmit knowledge and shape attitudes of individuals towards diversity and change, the school curriculum, textbooks, teacher development, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, as well as the overall organisation of schools, should be made compatible with the local language and culture. It is this role that a language should be allowed to play, being used as the medium of instruction or as subject in the basic education. Life-crucial knowledge (local technology, sense of co-existence, mutual respect and collaboration) is embodied

in mother tongues and incorporated in the textbooks and reference materials prepared for mother-tongue education. Both the curriculum and textbooks prepared by the local teachers and local representatives with links to the local culture may help to shape attitudes of individuals towards diversity and change. An individual who best understands diversity can feel belonging to the community, which encourages him or her to participate in the

development activities. In addition, mother languages used in education promote and assure inclusion, recognition and legitimacy. Nepali, as a lingua franca, should be taught in the basic level as a second language and subject. A school where two or more two mother tongues are used in education may provide opportunity to understand each other. Such provision of managing languages, including mother tongues and Nepal promote cohesion and inclusion at the local levels.

The role of Nepali and regional languages

To date, except Nepali, no language has been decreed Regional Language in Nepal. However, it would be possible for languages like Limbu, Maithili, Tamang, Gurung, Magar, Newar and Doteli to be regional languages in Nepal. Incorporating such languages as subjects from the basic levels at the provincial level may promote social cohesion. Standard Nepali with main tream cultures taught at the high school level promotes cohesion at the national levels.

In order for all this to happen, the school curriculum and textbooks have to be made compatible with the linguistic situation of the country. In this way young boys or girls may understand better the diversity and change in the country.

The role of international languages

In order to understand international values, an international language like English has to be incorporated in the school curriculum, but not at the cost of mother tongue. An individual with understanding of international values does not normally behave against the shared values of the communities. In Nepal too, global mobility of culturally diverse populations, even in the minority speech communities, has created

problems for shared values, ethics and identities of societies. Thus, international languages with a practical sequencing of mother tongues, regional and official languages have to be incorporated in the curriculum of the schools of Nepal. While doing so, disabled children have to be appropriately included.

Challenges in social cohesion and inclusion through languages

Lo Bianco (2013:5) notes: “The challenge of multilingualism for educational outcomes and social prospects for minority populations is due to the close but complex relationship between language and literacy diversity and education with the opportunities for social, citizenship and economic advancement that societies make available.” There is lack of language policy framed on the principles of pluralism and inclusion. Monolingual ideology still lingers in the implementation of MT policy. In addition, there is a lack of positive attitude towards the importance of mother-tongue education in the minority community. There is also a lack of assessment of sustainable language use in the minority speech community. Furthermore, there is lack of mother-tongue education policy with a specified model of multilingual education.

However, there is strong desire in the communities to get the children educated in the medium of English. It is not an easy process to prepare books compatible with the local languages and cultures. The basic framework to teach Nepali as a second language has not yet been framed in Nepal. There is a big debate as to the criteria for determining the regional languages to be used in education. There has not been agreement on the sequencing of languages as subjects and medium of instruction. It is very difficult to provide trained teachers to teach languages within the principles of transition. Such activity incurs a large amount of cost to manage languages in the basic levels in Nepal. Nevertheless, the most crucial challenge is to change the mindsets of the communities, local bodies, teachers and parents in the minority speech communities in Nepal.

Major strategies for meeting of challenges

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Conclusion

There is a great role of languages used in education in social cohesion and inclusion in minority ethno-linguistic communities. Such communities are marginalised, educationally and socially, because of unsuitable education policy in Nepal. Key factors of social cohesion are the transmission of knowledge embodied in the languages and shaping the attitude of individuals about the diversity and change. Mother tongues, regional languages, official languages as well as an international language like English have to be accommodated in the curriculum of schools to help the individuals to understand the local, regional, national and international values to be shared in the communities. Education policy has to be framed to facilitate these languages to promote social cohesion and inclusion.

To further address the cross-cutting issues such as poverty reduction, quality education, gender equality, reduced inequalities, climate action, especially in ethno-linguistic communities, social cohesion is must. Social cohesion, which is achieved through maintaining languages in education, is needed for the sustainable economic, social, educational and cultural development in ethno-linguistic communities in Nepal.

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