

# EXPLORING THE ROLES OF LANGUAGES IN SOCIAL COHESION AND INCLUSION IN MINORITY ETHNO- LINGUISTIC COMMUNITIES IN NEPAL

**Dr. Ambika Regmi Banjara**  
**Language Expert**  
**Language Commission, Nepal**

[ambikaregmi@gmail.com](mailto:ambikaregmi@gmail.com)

*6<sup>th</sup> International Conference on the Inclusion, Mobility and Multilingual  
Education: Exploring the Roles of Languages for Education and  
Development organized in partnership by Asia Pacific Multilingual Education  
Working Group, British Council and Language and Development  
Conference Series held at Amari Watergate Bangkok, Thailand on  
24-26 September 2019.*

“Education is a key instrument in the promotion of social cohesion through the transmission of knowledge and the shaping of attitudes of individuals towards diversity and change.”

(Aturupane and Wikramanayake,2011).

“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. “ (Bianco, 2013)

# Outline

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# Linguistic map of Nepal (SIL, 2011)



# 1. 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 suggest 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 (Regmi,2016).
- In the Civil War, more than fifteen thousand people were killed, untold amount of property was destroyed.
- 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.
- Moreover, children are deprived of quality basic education in such migrated areas due to lack of MT education.
- To achieve social cohesion, education is most and language is essential for education.
- In the present context, proper address of such cross-cutting issues can be made only through education in mother tongues.
- Till the 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.
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## 2. Language and ethnicity in Nepal

- All the languages spoken as mother tongues are the languages of nation in Nepal (Constitution of Nepal,2015).
- According to the Census, 2011, Nepali is spoken as mother tongue by 44.6 percent of the total population.
- In Nepal, around thirty languages have sustainable orality and around 50 languages have a smaller amount of such orality (Regmi, 2019).
- In Nepal, out of 123 officially recognized mother tongues, more than 56.9% (i.e.,70) are commonly categorized as the minority languages.

### 3. Social cohesion and inclusion in Nepal

- In Nepal, minority ethnolinguistic communities constitute more than 55% of total population (CBS, 2012).
- There is discrimination against indigenous peoples, women, *Madhesis*, *Dalits* and other marginalized communities in terms of caste, ethnicity, language, religion, sex, class and geographical territory in Nepal (Gurung,2009).
- There is 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 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 communities members.

- After the Peace Agreement signed in 2006, both the governmental and non-governmental organizations have been conducting a number of programs 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 marginalized and excluded from most of development process 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.

## 4. 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, promotes social cohesion in minority speech communities (Bianco, 2013).
- Social cohesion and inclusion are utmost importance for further addressing cross-cutting issues such as poverty reduction, quality education, gender equality, reduced inequalities, climate action, etc, 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 of attitudes of individuals towards diversity and change (Aturupane and Wikramanayake,2011).
- Languages, viz., mother tongues, official language (i.e., Nepali) and international language (i.e., 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 the 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.
- Language policy in education has to framed on the principles of pluralism and inclusion.
- We briefly discuss the ways such languages play the roles in social cohesion in such communities.

## 4.1 Role of mother tongues

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

- Such children are deprived of local life crucial knowledge embodied in the local languages/dialects.
- Such children 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, school curriculum, textbooks, teacher development, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, the organization of schools should be made in compatible with the local language and culture.
- Such role a language is allowed to play being used as the medium of instruction or as subject in the basic education.
- Life crucial knowledge (local technology, sense of coexistence, mutual respect and collaboration) is embodied in mother tongues is 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 in compatible with 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/her to participate in the development activities.
- Mother languages used in education promotes and assures inclusion, recognition and legitimacy.
- Nepali, as a lingua franca, should be taught in the basic level as second language and subject.
- A school where two or more than two mother tongues are used in education may provide opportunity to understand each others.
- Such provision of managing languages, viz., mother tongues and Nepal promote cohesion and inclusion at the local levels.

## 4.2 Role of Nepali and regional languages

- Till the date, except Nepali, no language has been decided as regional language in Nepal. Languages like Limbu, Maithili, Tamang, Gurung, Magar, Newar and Doteli may be regional languages in Nepal.
- Incorporating such languages as subjects from the basic levels at the provincial level may promote social cohesion at the provincial levels.
- Standard Nepali with main stream cultures taught at the high school level promote cohesion at the national levels.
- For all this, school curriculum and textbooks have to be made compatible with linguistic situation of the country.
- In this ways, young boy or girl may understand the diversity and change in the country.

## 4.3 Role of international languages

- In order to understand international values, international language like English has to be incorporated in the school curriculum but not at the cost of mother tongue.
- An individual who has 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 to 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 aptly included.

## **5.Challenges in social cohesion and inclusion through languages**

- There is lack of language policy framed on the principles of pluralism and inclusion. Monolingual ideology still lingers in the implementation of MT policy.
- There is lack of positive attitude towards the importance of MT education in the minority community.
- There is lack of assessment of sustainable language use in the minority speech community.
- There is lack of MT education policy with specified model of multilingual education.
- There is strong desire in the communities to get the children educated in the medium of English.
- It is not easy process to prepare books in compatible with the local languages and cultures.

- 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 yet been agreed upon 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.
- There incurs a large amount of cost to manage languages in the basic levels in Nepal.
- The most crucial challenge is to change the mindsets of the communities, local bodies, teachers and parents in the minority speech communities in Nepal.

## 6. Major strategies for meeting of challenges

- Immediately, language policy must be framed on the principles of pluralism and inclusion and implemented with operational framework.
- The minority communities must be made aware of the importance of MT education through awareness program.
- Immediately, sustainable language use in the minority speech community must be assessed. Listing of sustainable orality languages must be made.
- MT education policy with specified model of multilingual education must be made.
- With the local involvement, MT education books should be prepared in compatible with the local languages and cultures.

- Basic framework to teach Nepali as a second language has to be framed in Nepal and immediately implemented in the minority languages.
- Regional languages have to be immediately determined and used in education.
- Sequencing of languages as subjects and medium of instruction have to be decided to the linguistic context.
- Teachers to teach languages within the principles of transition have to be trained.
- Latest technology has to be used in the production of teaching materials.
- Government should allocate special budget for the languages to be used in education.
- Mindsets of the concerned stakeholders about managing languages in education have to be changed by relating the knowledge with the economic opportunities.

## 7. Conclusion

- There is a great role of languages used in education in social cohesion and inclusion in minority ethno-linguistic community.
- Such communities are marginalized 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 international language like English accommodated in the curriculum of schools 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 the 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, etc, especially in such 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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