



## **Need For Promotion Of Literature For Children Of Indigenous Nationalities In Nepal**

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**Abstract:** Nepal is inhabited by 59 officially recognized indigenous nationalities and ethnic groups who speak 92 languages recognized by state officials. Some languages have rich literature while others do not have it at all. It is unfortunate to note that a few languages are on the verge of being extinct for a number of reasons. Nepal offers an opportunity for preservation of cultures and languages of indigenous nationalities. Very recently, a number of positive developments including the recognition of these languages by the state and efforts to produce text books in their native languages for children of indigenous nationalities have taken place. Such efforts call for all out support from all of us.

**Key Words:** Indigenous Nationalities, Literature, Promotion, Children.

### **Introduction**

Nepal is situated between China in the north and India in the south, east and west. It is a country of amazing extremes and also the home of the mighty Himalayas including the world's highest mountain, the Mount Everest and the forested plains where the lordly tigers and the great one-horned rhinoceros trundle at ease.

Nepal is one of the least developed countries in the world with approximately 38% of the population living below the poverty line. Agriculture provides a livelihood for over 80% of the population and accounts for over 40% of its GNP. Over 85% of the total population lives in rural areas of the country. The literacy rate is estimated to be at 53% and life expectancy is 62 years.

The people of Nepal are made of different races and ethnic groups living in different regions with diverse cultures, languages and dialects. The wide mosaic of variety of races and ethnic groups has given to Nepal a distinct character and culture of its own. According to 2001 national census, there are more than one hundred different ethnic groups in Nepal, who speak more than 92 different languages. Among them, the Government of Nepal (GoN) has recognized 59 ethnic groups as Indigenous Nationalities. These ethnic groups comprise approximately 38% of the country's total population of over 24 million.



## **Languages of Indigenous Nationalities**

The number of languages spoken in Nepal is officially reported to have been 95. However, some linguists claim that the total number of languages spoken in Nepal is 126. In terms of development, they vary. Some have a treasure of rich literature while others do not have it at all. Some have their own scripts whereas others are just orally spoken. It is very discouraging to mention here that a few languages are on the verge of being extinct for a number of reasons such as the marginal number of speakers, use of Nepali language, a lingua franca, in education, administration and mass media and so on.

The major languages of Nepal (percent spoken as mother tongue) are Nepali (51%), Maithili (12%), Bhojपुरी (7%), Tamang (5%), Newari (3%), Magar (2%), Tharu (1%) and others (19%).

For a number of reasons, some indigenous nationalities and ethnic groups have been economically deprived, culturally suppressed and politically excluded for centuries. This has adversely affected the development of their cultures, languages and literatures. Keeping in mind the limitations of this paper, three cases of indigenous nationalities are cited here.

The people who speak Newari language, one of the languages spoken by indigenous nationalities have been enjoying, in comparison to others, the access to economic resources and share in power structures with the result that they have been able to preserve their script, language and literature. Even there are a number of books for children in this language.

The Tharu language is spoken by 1 per cent of the total population and this ethnic group constitutes one of the socially and economically excluded ones with little access to resources. A few non-governmental organizations working for their welfare and development have been engaged in promoting their cultures and literatures. A few books to promote their folk stories and folk songs have been published by these organizations, not by the native speakers. However, it is an irony that they have been published in the Nepali language but not in their own language.



The case of Kusunda is the worst. People belonging to this indigenous nationality have been living a nomadic life for generations without any land to cultivate and without any access to other resources and education. For a number of reasons, the Kusundas are on the verge of being extinct. It is reported that there are only eight (8) speakers of this language and only 1,000 words have been preserved. This presents a very gloomy picture. But, at the same time, this offers to us an opportunity to preserve, promote and develop their language and literature.

Since language is the most unique gift for human beings, all out efforts are required to preserve and promote the languages of indigenous nationalities in Nepal. Very recently, a number of positive developments including the recognition of these languages by the state, efforts to produce text books in their native languages for children of indigenous nationalities and so on are being made though they appear inadequate compared to the massive needs that are to be met. It is quite encouraging to find the people from these nationalities getting organized themselves and making efforts for preservation of their own identities, cultures and languages.

It is well recognized in Nepal that it calls for concerted and consistent efforts to be made collectively by a number of organizations, be it governmental and non-governmental organizations or corporate sector or even by individual members of such nationalities by themselves. Similarly, short term as well as long term measures are to be taken by all institutions concerned.

### **Role of Nepal Society for Children's Literature (NESCHIL)**

Against this backdrop, Nepal Society for Children's Literature (NESCHIL) has certainly a role to play in preservation and promotion of the cultures and languages of these nationalities in Nepal. It has been, since its inception in 1987, engaged in developing reading habits into children, producing literature for them and encouraging them to write books based on their cultures and folk tales. It has been making efforts constantly to generate awareness among these people encouraging the old folks to hand



down to their children their cultures including folk tales and younger generation to write books with illustrations in their own languages.

In addition, NESCHIL has been organizing workshops, seminars and trainings programmes with a view to encouraging children to read and make teachers and parents aware of the importance of developing reading habit into children. It also publishes books for children, a journal, and a newsletter as well as reading materials for children.

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Taking into consideration such a gloomy situation of languages and literatures of indigenous nationalities and minority groups and books for their children, NESCHIL with generous support from the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) is undertaking project that aims at promoting the books for children in three languages of Tamang, Tharu and Magar nationalities. As reading materials depicting the distinct cultures of these ethnic groups are hardly available because of the lack of their access to state resources to develop their own languages and literatures, the proposed project aims will go a long a way in preserving their folk tales and creating reading materials for the children of these ethnic groups.

### **Conclusions**

The constant and painstaking efforts being made by NESCHIL will for certain go a long way in preservation and promotion of diversity of cultures and languages in Nepal. Being fully aware of the gigantic nature of the tasks that lie ahead, NESCHIL is committed to it and calls upon all to extend their generous support in promoting this cause. Since our efforts alone are not sufficient to meet the tremendous needs of the indigenous nationalities and create books for their children, NESCHIL takes this opportunity to urge all concerned to extend their helping hands in our noble efforts



directed towards meeting the needs for promoting literature for children of indigenous nationalities in Nepal.

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