A Multitude of Mountain Voices

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The greater Himalayan region sustains over 150 million people and is home to many of Asia’s most endangered languages. Moving across the region, Afghanistan boasts 47 living languages, Bangladesh is home to 39, Bhutan has 24, China 235, India 415, Myanmar 108, Nepal 123, and Pakistan 72 (Ethnologue 2005, online edition).

The Himalayan region is included in the 34 biodiversity ‘mega centres’ or ‘hotspots’ of the world. But since this stretch of mountainous Asia is also home to one-sixth of all human languages, it should be thought of as a linguistic and cultural ‘mega centre’ as well.

According to the most conservative projections, at least half of the world’s 6,500 languages will become extinct in the next century. While the documentation of endangered mother tongues has traditionally been the domain of academic linguists and anthropologists, international awareness about this impending socio-cultural catastrophe is growing, and development organisations are becoming involved in the struggle to preserve spoken forms. The death of a language marks the loss of yet another piece of cultural uniqueness and inalienable heritage from the mosaic of our diverse planet, and is therefore a loss for all of humanity. Language death is often compared to species extinction, and the same metaphors of preservation and diversity can be invoked to canvas support for biodiversity as well as language documentation and preservation programmes.

Over the last two years, ICIMOD’s Culture, Equity, Gender and Governance (CEGG) Programme has been investigating the interrelation between linguistic diversity and biodiversity, and how these issues correlate to the Centre’s mandate to improve the sustainable livelihoods of mountain peoples in the extended Himalayan region. In this short article, I provide an overview of the three main language-related projects in which CEGG has recently been engaged.

Mapping linguistic diversity

Recent international research points to an intriguing correlation: language diversity appears to be inversely
related to latitude, and areas rich in languages also
tend to be rich in ecology and species. Both biodiversity
and linguistic diversity are concentrated between the
tropics in inaccessible mountainous environments such
as the Himalayas, while diversity of all forms decrease
in deserts.

Building on ICIMOD’s strengths in mapping and in
conceptualising all forms of diversity, we prepared an
interactive digital atlas of endangered languages of
the Himalayan region to test the above hypothesis.
Do endangered languages indeed cluster in areas of
geographical inaccessibility? Which districts of the
Himalayan region are most linguistically diverse?
And how does ethno-linguistic diversity correlate with
biodiversity hotspots?

Working with publicly available data on the distribution
of Himalayan languages and their alleged levels of
endangerment, we constructed a database of all
mother tongues used in the Himalayan region with
less than 100,000 speakers. This process isolated 415
languages which lie at some point on the continuum
between comparable safe and moribund. With support
from MENRIS, an interactive digital mapping tool
using Scalable Vector Graphics (SVG) was designed
and developed. The tool allows the users to search
and retrieve data on endangered mother tongues
spoken in the Himalayan region. The central interface
is a scalable, zoomable map of all mountainous
administrative units of the ICIMOD member countries,
on to which cities and rivers can be overlaid. Users
can select from a list of language families, or from
individual languages, and see in which districts they
are spoken. More information about each language
and its distribution, the number of speakers, and its
endangered status are provided in colour tabs. We hope
that this visually-rich language mapping tool will help
those involved in development, advocacy, and policy to
get an accurate picture of the distribution of endangered
minority languages in the region. The CD is presently
in production, and the online version will be hosted at

Linguistic Diversity and the Preservation
of Endangered Languages: A Case Study
from Nepal

The first addition to ICIMOD’s Talking Points series in
2007 will be a short monograph with the above title. The Talking Points series contains short presentations
of topical, controversial, or problematic themes where
general consensus has not yet been reached or where
action may be appropriate. The series is intended to
stimulate thought and discussion.

The discussion paper situates language in its social
context, specifically within Nepal, but in general
across the greater Himalayan region. Language rights
and access to education in one’s mother tongue are
fundamental aspects of sustainable livelihoods, all the
more so when the languages and communities who
speak them are under threat. In this issue of Talking
Points, I begin by discussing the linguistic diversity of
Nepal in the frame of wider debates about diversity of all
forms, and move on to situate language in the context
Death of a language marks the loss of a piece of cultural uniqueness and heritage from our diverse planet and is therefore a loss for all of humanity.

of ecology, the state, the legal system, the national census, the media, the education sector, gender, the Maoist insurgency, and finally, culture. The last section is devoted to comparative examples from other states in the Himalayan region and to an analysis of government institutions and non-government organisations that are supporting linguistic rights in Nepal. Throughout, the frame of reference has been to position language in the context of wider social and cultural issues.

It is intended that policy makers will benefit from an increased appreciation of the complexity of the ethnolinguistic fabric of modern Nepal on the ground, and that scholars will pause for a moment to reflect on the formation and implementation of suitable policy. Alongside a print edition, this paper will be available for download from: http://www.icimod.org/home/pub/publications.php?pcid=2

A linguistic survey of Sikkim

In collaboration with the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, and with financial and institutional support from ICIMOD, we are conducting the first modern linguistic survey of the State of Sikkim. The survey has three main objectives:

(i) to compile an inventory of all of the languages spoken in Sikkim
(ii) to determine the geographical distribution of each language spoken as a mother tongue in this Himalayan state through a 30-question survey form distributed to school children at every secondary school in the state
(iii) to estimate the number of speakers of each language on the basis of disaggregated census data, roof counts and on-site field investigation, and to collect accurate GPS readings of the locations where languages are spoken

A baseline linguistic survey of a state is an essential requirement for planning language policy in education, media, and the public sphere. Detailed linguistic surveys have been conducted in Nepal (1986) and Bhutan (1991), the findings of which have augmented rudimentary data already available from national census bureaus. Building on data already in the public domain, the linguistic survey field team travelled to the four districts of Sikkim to visit local schools and administrative offices in order to better understand the complex linguistic reality of the Sikkimese state. While the detailed results of this survey will be published at a later date, four preliminary findings can already be made.

First, the spread of Nepali is far more extensive than expected, and aside from several Lepcha and Bhutia students from more traditional families, the vast majority of students now speak Nepali in almost all situations.

Second, the issue of self-ascribed mother tongue is politically charged and, in certain circumstances, may be more of an ancestral ethnic label than an indication of spoken competence or fluency. In some cases, students offered a language which they themselves did not even speak as their mother tongue.

Third, the mother tongues of the communities whose ancestors came from Nepal are particularly under threat: most of their descendants no longer speak Gurung, Newar, and Tamang, only Nepali.

Fourth, the teaching of local vernaculars as subjects in school is very encouraging and helps give symbolic value to the mother tongue, even if this does not ensure spoken proficiency.

Through these interlinked research projects, ICIMOD’s CEGG programme is exploring ways to introduce a layer of programmatic support for projects focused on linguistic and cultural diversity. Only by understanding and embracing diversity at all levels will we be able to build sustainable mountain societies that enhance equity and empower marginalised mountain people across the Himalayan region.

Dr. Mark Turin is a linguistic anthropologist and was a visiting scientist at CEGG in 2005-2006. He is the Director of the Digital Himalaya Project (www.digitalhimalaya.com) and fieldwork coordinator of the Chintang and Puma Documentation Project (CPDP) based at Tribhuvan University in Nepal.