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**LITERACY WATCH COMMITTEE OF NEPAL
BULLETIN NO. 10**

**Special Issue on *Problem of Illiteracy Among Ethnic Groups*
1999 June**

Editor-in-Chief: Mr. T. M. Sakya

Editorial

; Dkfslo

Nepal is a multicultural, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual language country. According to the National Census of 1991 about 48 % percent of the Nepali people speak their mother tongue, a language different from the Nepali language. But Nepali language is the medium of instruction in schools and in literacy classes. According to various researchers and social thinkers, this is one of the most serious reasons why the literacy rate is so low among the non-Nepali speaking population of Nepal. Those who are illiterate are also those living below the poverty line. The government of Nepal has set goals to alleviate poverty through its Ninth Five-Year Plan. These objectives cannot be achieved if we are unable to educate people, to train them and build their self-confidence. For these objectives to be achieved, there must be a concerted effort in providing a level of education in the various ethnic groups' mother tongue. One of the basic principles in education theory is that people learn better and faster when taught in their mother tongue. After initial education in the mother tongue, people can be gradually provided education in the official language, the Nepali language. Adopting the use of teaching ethnic groups in their own languages before they learn in the Nepali language medium, will be one of the most effective ways to indirectly alleviate poverty in Nepal. I hope this issue of the Bulletin will encourage policy makers, leaders and administrators to consider this very significant issue of ethnic languages and it's role in education and poverty alleviation in Nepal.

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Literacy Status among Various Ethnic Groups

Landlocked Nepal is divided into three geographical regions, the mountains, the hills and the plains (Terai). Only 25 percent of Nepal's lands are cultivable, the rest are mountains and hills. In Nepal, the Government spends about 14 percent of its budget raising taxes from the poors for Education, but the result is very dismal.

Nearly 60 percent of the country's 20 million population are still illiterate. The literacy rate in the rural areas is generally even lower. In rural areas, the literacy rate in 1991 was 37, and 67 percent in the urban areas. Similarly, the literacy rate is lower in areas where the majority of ethnic minorities live, mostly in the mountain and Terai regions.

Nepal's population consists of multiple languages and ethnic groups. According to the 1981 census, about 56

different dialects are spoken in Nepal. Although the official Nepali language is not the mother tongue of about 48 percent of the population, it is still the only medium of instruction in primary and other levels of education. Other literacy programs are also mostly conducted in Nepali language.

Many enlightened people and researchers are of the opinion that this is one of the most serious reasons why illiteracy and poverty persists in Nepal. The so-called high caste people and other fortunate groups enjoy higher educational and higher income, while keeping the majority of the population under the yoke of illiteracy and poverty. A recent study done by Devendra Chettry in 1996 demonstrates literacy rates among different ethnic groups as shown in the following chart :

Literacy Rates Among Ethnic Groups :

According to Mr. Chettry (1996) 15 ethnic groups out of 29 ethnic groups are found to be disadvantaged in terms of their literacy status. These ethnic groups are as follows: Musahar, Dhunsadh, Chamar, Mallah, Muslim, Kewat, Dhanuk, Sarki, Kurmi, Kami, Yadav, Tharu, Tamang, Damai and Kushwa. These groups make up 6.4 million people, which is about 34.6 percent of the total population of Nepal.

The literacy rates among these groups vary from 4.2 percent to 28.4 percent.

The educationally disadvantaged ethnic populations are not uniformly distributed all over the country. Landless and marginal farm holders can be considered the most disadvantaged group. Among these illiterate ethnic groups, social status, health, safe drinking water and other necessities are also found to be at a very low level.

Literacy is unequally distributed among the various caste and ethnic groups. The high caste groups and a few of the small ethnic groups such as Newars and Brahmin are located in the

upper literacy ranges while the lowest caste groups such as the Kami, Damai and Sarki are relegated to the bottom of the literacy hierarchy.

Human Development by Caste and Ethnicity 1996

<u>Caste</u>	<u>Adult literacy ratio (1996)</u>	<u>Human poverty Index</u>
Nepal	<u>36.72</u>	<u>0.325</u>
Brahmins	58.00	0.441
Chhetri	42.00	0.348
Newar	54.80	0.457
Gurung ; Magar ; Sherpa ;		
Rai, Limbu	35.20	0.299
Muslim	22.10	0.239
Rajbansi ; Yadav ;		
Tharu, Ahir	27.50	0.313
Occupational Caste (Untouchable)	23.80	0.239

Source : Human Development Report 1998

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Poverty among Ethnic Groups

The growing poverty in Nepal is the outcome of illiteracy and a faulty social and economic structure. In 1997, the National Planning Commission (NPC 1997) defined the poor as individuals whose income/consumption level falls below the physiologically required level. NPC has also defined poverty in terms of basic needs (NPC 1985). Around 9 million Nepalis or 45 percent of the population, are defined as poor, an increase of nearly 9 percentage points from the level in 1977. In 1977, the proportion of households falling below the poverty line was estimated to be 33.7 percent (34.3 percent in rural areas and 19.9 percent in the urban areas).

However, there was significant variation across ecological regions. Incidence of poverty was highest in the Hills (47 percent of households and 50 percent of the population), followed by the Mountains (36 percent of households and 44 percent of the population), then the Terai (33 percent of households and 35 percent of the population). (*Nepal Human Development Report 1998*)

Among the development regions, the worst poverty is found in the far-western

region, followed by the mid-western regions and finally the central development region.

At the sub-regional level, the far-western mountains recorded the highest incidence of poverty, followed by the far-western hills and mid-western mountains. The variation in incidence of poverty across regions is worsening over time. In 1997, incidence of poverty in the rural areas was 2.2 times higher compared to that of the urban areas. Poverty is not merely an economic issue, it is also an issue related to human dignity. Hence, the economic definition of poverty has to be linked with the broader spectrum of socio-economic parameters. This subsection attempts to identify the poor in terms of various socio-economic variables such as caste, location, occupation, sector of employment, education level, composition of income and family size. It is expected that this will help trace the correlates of poverty and various caste/ethnic characteristics and locational attributes.

Incidence of Poverty among Different Ethnic Groups

(1) Selected Characteristics Caste/ Ethnicity	(2) Proportion	(3) Proportion of poor in sample	(4) Proportion below line	(5) Relative incidence of poverty [Column (3)/(2)]
Chhetri	17.71	19.48	50	1.10
Brahman	14.85	11.33	34	0.76
Mgar	6.48	8.28	58	1.28
Tharu	8.24	8.74	48	1.06
Newar	4.98	2.74	25	0.55
Tamang	4.10	5.35	59	1.31
Kami	4.76	7.16	68	1.50
Ydav	4.26	3.79	40	0.89
Muslim	5.50	4.64	38	0.84
Rai	1.39	1.74	56	1.25
Gurung	2.70	2.70	45	1.00
Damai	1.50	2.22	67	1.48
Limbu	2.20	3.44	71	1.56
Sarki	1.48	2.13	65	1.44
Other*	19.82	16.27	37	0.82

Educational attainment is a valuable safety net to neutralize the burden of poverty. The illiterate population is much more prone to poverty. However, data shows that the achieved level of education does not necessarily reduce the severity of poverty proportionately,

particularly at the lower levels of education. Incidence of poverty is higher among households whose heads have completed primary level education than among those whose heads are simply literate.

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Problem of Illiteracy and Language Policy

Nepal is a multi-lingual developing country. The people are socially segmented along levels of caste, sub-caste and ethnic and sub-ethnic groups. Such groups cannot be stated with sufficient precision partly because it is dependent on the definition employed by various researchers. The 1991 census has recorded more than 60 such language groups of whom 20 are major language groups.

The National Ethnic Groups Development Committee has identified 61 such groups and the National Language Policy Advisory Committee has listed 60 living languages of Nepal. In particular deep social rifts and distance has separated the high caste groups from the lower caste groups regarded as untouchables, not only in relation to ritual domains but also in their access to power and economic privileges.

Despite the legal abolition of discrimination on the basis of caste and ethnicity, such discrimination is still very strong in the rural areas, although it is declining in the urban areas. Caste and ethnicity continue to function as universal and salient social and cultural classificatory categories in rural areas. Besides having different caste and ethnic discrimination there are linguistic belts (hills and plains) of the country. Mostly the hills and mountain areas are inhabited by a majority of language groups like the Tamang, Rai, Limbu, Gurungs.

There are still many other smaller language communities in various pockets of the hills and mountains. These people speak their own language in their homes and communities and they have to use Nepali language for communication with others. Tamangs in the country's hill area are the largest community speaking their

own language. Another languages spoken by large populations are Maithali, Bhojpuri, Tharu and Avadhi languages. They are mainly spoken in many Terai districts of Nepal. Moreover, several other small language groups also in exist in the Terai districts.

Though several languages and dialects are used in Nepal, the Nepali language is slowly becoming a common language of communication among inter-language groups. But there are many problems, for example, if the children from non-Nepali speaking communities go to the school, they have to stay in the school for two to three years before they could learn Nepali language properly. But the children from poor communities have no motivation to stay in this strange situation for so long. Moreover the parents also do not see any use for their children to stay in school without learning any new knowledge besides another language.

Therefore the children from ethnic groups drop out from schools in large numbers. As it stands now, there is no specific government policy or support for the development of local languages nor is there any policy which provides initial education in the local language. It is likely that some of the languages will die out with the passage of time.

The literacy rate among the Tamangs is particularly low. Tamang children have opportunities to learn their native language only at home and in their communities, beyond these locations they have to use Nepali for communication. Because of this difficulty, Tamang also continue to live in poverty. The children of other communities like the Rai, Limbus, Gurungs, Magars, Maithali, Bhojpuris, Tharus and others also have to

face difficulties in their pursuit of an education in schools.

Consequently, the educational achievement levels of those communities are lowest in all subjects of the curriculum. They are facing problems of understanding the subject matter which are taught in Nepali language. Teachers use instructional materials in Nepali language. There is lack of educational materials in local languages. Due to the obstacle of the Nepali language medium, most parents do not get involved in educational activities of their children. The problems of understanding and communicating in Nepali language faced by the non-Nepali speaking children has become a nuisance to their parents. Therefore, it is beyond doubt that the medium of instruction in both formal and non-formal classes is one of the main reasons behind the low literacy rate among various ethnic groups.

Most higher caste people particularly the school teachers and fellow students from high castes harbor and express attitudes and practices which are discriminatory against particular castes and ethnic groups. Negative attitudes and practices make a lasting impression on children belonging to the lower caste groups. Such attitudes and practices also contribute to the high drop-out rates and illiteracy.

Due to the neglect of mother languages in schools, the children whose

mother tongue is not Nepali find themselves to be handicapped learners. Their continuation and performance in schools suffers immensely.

The Constitution of Nepal has stated that all people may receive their education in their own mother tongue but no effective action has been taken by the Government to provide education in their mother tongue to these ethnic groups. If there is a provision of promoting education in their mother tongue 48 percent of non Nepali speaking ethnic groups would have gained an education in their mother tongue.

According to the education theory and psychology, initial education must be in the mother tongue of the children. But Nepali language is introduced as a compulsory medium of instruction right from grade 1 throughout the entire education levels.

Recently, with the promulgation of the constitution of 1990, there has been some relaxation in the use of local languages. Radio Nepal broadcasts news in various local languages. But the language policy in education is still very pedantic. Although the Ministry of Education has recently allowed the use of local languages to explain the lessons, it has not been practiced. Because most of the teachers are not from the local area, hence they cannot speak the local language.

**POOR COUNTRIES NEED NOT WAIT TO GET RICH BEFORE
THEY CAN IMPROVE THE LIVES OF THEIR CITIZENS.**

- A.K. Sen, 1993

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Co-relationship between Literacy and Poverty

Although the National Planning Commission has identified that only 45 percent of Nepalese people are living below the poverty line. The UNDP Human Development Reports say that 70 percent of Nepalis fall below the poverty line. Maybe, the UNDP figure is more accurate because that figure coincides with the illiteracy rate in Nepal

of the population above 15 years old. Actually speaking, poverty and illiteracy are the most severe problems in Nepal. It is already a well-known fact all over the world that poors are illiterate and illiterates usually the poor. Therefore, illiteracy and poverty are two sides of the same coin.

Poverty and deprivation Index
- Worst district

Overall Literacy rate
- Worst district

These two indicators show that literacy and poverty are not uniformly distributed in all districts. But the population that is both poor and illiterate are located almost uniformly in the same

districts. The districts that have high illiteracy rates also have high poverty rates and other indicators like child deprivation, gender discrimination and women's disparity.

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