



The Evolution Of The Nepali Language: A Brief History

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Abstract: The Nepali language, also known as Gorkhali or Khas Kura in its early stages, is one of the major Indo-Aryan languages of South Asia. Spoken by millions in Nepal and by significant populations in India, Bhutan, and the global diaspora, Nepali has evolved through a long historical process shaped by migration, political change, cultural contact, and literary development. This journal attempts to trace the evolution of the Nepali language from its ancient roots to its modern standardized form. The paper discusses linguistic origins, historical phases, influences from other languages, the growth of literature, and the role of Nepali as a national and transnational language. The study aims to provide a concise yet comprehensive overview suitable for academic reference. In Nepali, "Objectives of Evaluation" translates to मूल्यांकनका उद्देश्यहरू (Mulyankanka Uddeshyaharu), and these generally involve measuring learning, providing feedback, guiding instruction, and judging the effectiveness of programs, all aimed at improving educational outcomes and accountability, as highlighted in various Nepali context studies focusing on learner-centered approaches and policy implementation. These objectives work together to create a comprehensive picture, moving beyond just testing to truly understanding and enhancing the educational process in Nepal.

Keywords: Nepali language, Khas Kura, Indo-Aryan languages, linguistic evolution, Nepal, history of Nepali

1. Introduction

Language is a dynamic cultural institution that evolves in response to social, political, and historical forces. The Nepali language is no exception. As the official language of Nepal and one of the constitutionally recognized languages of India, Nepali holds a unique position in the linguistic landscape of South Asia. Its evolution reflects centuries of migration, state formation, literary creativity, and intercultural interaction.

The purpose of this journal is to examine the historical development of the Nepali language in a systematic manner. By dividing its evolution into distinct phases—ancient, medieval, and modern—this study highlights the major linguistic, political, and cultural factors that shaped Nepali. Understanding this evolution is essential not only for linguists but also for historians, sociologists, and students of South Asian studies. The Nepali language truly originated from a specific Prakrit or Apabhramsha, a brief discussion of Nepal's history is necessary. The present-day Nepal, bounded by the Mechi River in the east and the Kali River in the west, cannot be considered very ancient. This identity is considered to be just over a hundred years old. Six hundred years ago, the land on which this kingdom is now established consisted of many fragmented states. The ancestors of the Magar and Gurung people lived in the western part of present-day Nepal. The ancestors of the Newar people inhabited the Nepal Valley. Only the inhabitants of the Nepal Valley were exposed to the light of civilization. The other inhabitants lived independently in the mountainous regions surrounded by dense forests.

2. Objectives:

In Nepali, "Objectives of Evaluation" translates to मूल्यांकनका उद्देश्यहरू (Mulyankanka Uddeshyaharu), and these generally involve measuring learning, providing feedback, guiding instruction, and judging the effectiveness of programs, all aimed at improving educational outcomes and accountability, as highlighted in various Nepali context studies focusing on learner-centered approaches and policy implementation.

3. History & Evolution of Nepali Language :

The Nepali language also originated from Sanskrit. Prakrit, used by the common people, which was a modified spoken form of Sanskrit. Significant differences were observed among the Prakrit languages used in different parts of the country. Four forms of Prakrit—Maharashtri, Magadhi, Shauraseni, and Paishachi—are well-known. Over time, these Prakrit languages also underwent changes, gradually giving rise to Apabhramsha. It is believed that the aforementioned languages, including Nepali, originated from these Apabhramsha languages.

To understand whether the Nepali language truly originated from a specific Prakrit or Apabhramsha, a brief discussion of Nepal's history is necessary. The present-day Nepal, bounded by the Mechi River in the east and the Kali River in the west, cannot be considered very ancient. This identity is considered to be just over a hundred years old. Six hundred years ago, the land on which this kingdom is now established consisted of many fragmented states. The ancestors of the Magar and Gurung people lived in the western part of present-day Nepal. The ancestors of the Newar people inhabited the Nepal Valley. Only the inhabitants of the Nepal Valley were exposed to the light of civilization. The other inhabitants lived independently in the mountainous regions surrounded by dense forests. 'When Chittor was defeated by Alauddin Khilji in 1303 AD, Ratnasimha's brothers and sons were scattered. His brother Kumbhakarna's descendants went to a mountainous region called 'Palla' and focused on expanding their kingdom there. Prithvi Narayan Shah thus established his dominance in Nepal.' - Udaipurko Itihas - Volume 1

The time when Kumbhakarna's descendants entered Nepal from the direction of Kumaon can be considered the beginning of the Nepali language. Kumbhakarna used one of the language groups that Grierson referred to as Rajasthani languages. The Rajasthani language group and the Gujarati language are derived from Shauraseni Apabhramsha. It can be clearly stated that the Nepali language originated from Shauraseni Apabhramsha. People from various parts of India, belonging to different classes, migrated to Nepal. The ancestors of the Brahmins and the Al people came from Kannauj to settle in the mountainous regions of Nepal. The descendants of one of them lived in villages like Arji, Mindhi, Pauri, etc. As a result, different communities such as Al, Sigdyan, Pauryal, etc., emerged. The dominion of kingdoms like Tanahu, Makwanpur, and Palpa was not limited only to the mountainous regions; their influence extended to the plains as well. These kings also had marital relations with Indian kings. A political relationship was established not only with the inhabitants of Rajputana but also with people from other parts of India. In this context, it is also reasonable to assume that some languages from Bihar entered Nepal, and therefore, the influence of Magadhi Apabhramsha on the Nepali language is not an unusual phenomenon. It is natural that the language spoken in the Nepal Valley and the languages of regions like Tanahu and Makwanpur are similar. This is because the inhabitants of these areas use a language derived from Magadhi Apabhramsha. On the other hand, since the descendants of Kumbhakarna in the Palpa region were accustomed to using Shauraseni Apabhramsha, it is natural that there would be a difference in their language. The language of the royal eulogies and the songs of weapon worship (Khanda Jagau ne Geet) sung by the bards of Nepal are presumed to be of the same category, and it can perhaps be said that this language is similar to the language used in the Palpa region. After the Indian Kshatriyas, who were moving westward, first encountered the Magar and then the Gurung people, they exerted their influence on the Gurungs. The people of the Kirati, Rai, and Limbu groups currently live under the kingdoms of Tanahu, Makwanpur, etc., located in the eastern part of the country. The Newar people live in the Nepal Valley. After encountering the newly arrived groups and living together, it is not surprising that over time, the vocabulary of the conqueror's language was adopted and assimilated. To determine the extent of regional language influence on the Nepali language, we need to thoroughly study languages such as Magar, Gurung, Rai, and Limbu. Here are some words that have entered the Nepali language from Newari: In 1768 (1660 Shaka era), Prithvi Narayan Shah conquered the territories in the Nepal Valley. The Newar people referred to the conquerors from the Gorkha kingdom as 'Gorkhali' and their language as 'Gorkhali'. That term 'Gorkhali' is still in use today. Eventually, after the Gorkhali language attained the status of the national language, it became reasonable to call it the 'Nepali' language and the inhabitants of the Nepali state, which was formed from the amalgamation of many small ethnic groups, as Nepalis.

Over time, Prithvi Narayan Shah's kingdom expanded into a vast region. All academic pursuits, storytelling, court proceedings, and the drafting of charters and decrees were conducted in the Nepali language. The subjects belonging to different groups throughout the kingdom referred to the language suitable for conducting the affairs of the entire country as 'Khas Kura'. The languages of communities like the Gurung and Magar must certainly be considered languages; but since the Nepali language was used as the medium of communication for ordinary Nepalis and for conducting state affairs and fulfilling various court requirements, this language was given the status of 'Khas Kura' or the language of the city/capital. In course of time, the word 'Khas' transformed into 'Khas' and everyone started calling it 'Khas Kura'. I do not think that the word 'Khas' has any connection with the ancient 'Khas' tribe.

Previously, the word 'Chahiy' was prevalent instead of 'Chahistha'. This word is a transformation of the Hindi word 'Chahiye'. 'Pau Lappu Bhayo' has transformed into 'Pappu Bhayo' in modern times. Bhanubhakta used this form in a couple of places in the Uttarakanda of his Ramayana - 'Pau Langu Habas Garya Binati Yo Khub Laran Ichchha Bhanga'. Although the extensive use of French words is observed today, it was quite limited in the past. Before the war between Nepal and the British (1814-16), the use of Persian words in the Nepali language was not very common. Currently, Sanskrit words were used in the same way that Persian honorifics are used today. For example, 'Ihanko samachar bhalo chha' > 'Ihanko khabar barhiya chha'. 'Artha vidita bhayo' > 'Artha zahir bhayo'. The validity of this statement will be proven by examining the language of the books written during that era. In the short book 'Krishnacharitra' (1827) by Paramananda's son Basanta, and in Raghunath's 'Sundarakanda', significantly fewer Persian words were used compared to Bhanubhakta's Ramayana.

With the expansion of Muslim rule in India, the use of the Persian language in official affairs began. According to Acharya Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, the number of Persian words in the Bengali language is approximately 2500. Later, with the establishment of a large empire in Nepal, the need for the special use of Persian words arose from the intention that the terminology used in official administration should be understandable to foreigners as well. Since the suitability of Persian words in the formation of legal language was proven, even in present-day Nepalese government documents, an abundance of Persian words can be found. Examples include: Sarhad, Muluk, Nizamati, Bharadar, Kisim, Zaheb, Manasir, Manjur, Istihar, etc. Source: A manifesto published in the 'Gorkhapatra'.

Due to the inadequate efforts in discovering the works of ancient Nepalese poets and writers, our knowledge of ancient Nepalese literature is very limited. Little is known about the books written in the Nepali language before the time of Prithvi Narayan Shah. It is certain that various types of songs and poems composed for special occasions from that era must exist. We have not had the good fortune to see any books older than the poems of Basanta Kavi Raghunath and Birshali Pande.

It is necessary to discuss when the printing of books in the Nepali language actually began. A grammar of the Nepali language, written in both Nepali and English, was published in printed form in 1820 by Mr. J.A. Eaton, Professor of Arabic and Persian at Fort William College in Calcutta. I assume this was the first printed book in the Nepali language. The first press established in Nepal was called the 'Pashupati Press' (1816). Before the introduction of printing presses in Nepal, arrangements were made to print Nepali books from Varanasi. Around 1888, a Nepalese Brahmin named Damaruballabh Pokharel established a press called 'Gorkha Yantralaya' in Varanasi. Raghunath's 'Sundarakanda' Ramayana was published from there in 1888. Under the supervision of the late Motiram Bhatta (the biographer of Bhanubhakta), Nepali books began to be published from the 'Bharat Jivan Press' in Varanasi. When Pandit Damaruballabh's business faced difficulties, Pandit Vishwaraj, Harihar Sharma, and others took up the task of publishing Nepali books. However, due to the lack of desired spread of education among the Nepalese people, the work of writing and printing books progressed at a very slow pace. Although little is known about Raghunath's time, the diversity of language he used must be acknowledged. Considering the difficulty in pronouncing conjunct consonants, he simplified words with conjunct consonants following the style of ancient Hindi poets. For example, Lakshman > Lakan, Yatna > Jatan, Vyarthia > Byarath, Priti > Pirati, Shabda > Shabad, Ratna > Ratan, etc. Such a characteristic is not seen in the works of his later poet, Bhanubhakta. In the present age, we use the word 'natra'. Its meaning is 'otherwise' (or 'if not'). Raghunath used a different word in its place:

'Pratit patiko ati chha bhani janiyo tyo gati.

Nahing tar sati sitai kin pathauthyā durmati.'

This 'nahing tar' could be the ancestor of the word 'natra'. Although the word 'nikal' is not used as a verb nowadays, Raghunath used it in 'Shirmani nikali diin'. The word 'katun' is not used to mean 'to bite'. But he wrote - 'Kasle katyo piyari charan'. Because his sentence structure follows the style of the Sanskrit language, it sounds somewhat unusual for a Nepali speaker. Many such novel and unconventional usages can be observed in Raghunath's 'Sundarakanda'.

Bhanubhakta was born in 1814 and died in 1868. Although Bhanubhakta was a resident of Tanahu, he was born into a family that frequented the capital of Nepal. His grandfather, Shri Krishna, had attained proficiency in Sanskrit language and literature. The language of Bhanubhakta's 'Ramayana' is the foundation of the present-day Nepali language. The modern era of the Nepali language began with Bhanubhakta's Ramayana. Although this Ramayana is written in verse, its language is as simple as prose. Since the verbs used by Bhanubhakta are similar to the verbs commonly used in everyday Nepali life, we can call the language of Bhanubhakta's Ramayana the ideal Nepali language. The writers and poets who followed him have followed the path he showed. In some places, Sanskrit words are used in greater numbers, and in royal documents, there is an abundance of Persian words - but the style of the language remains the same. Due to the simplicity of his poetry, even illiterate Nepalis are able to memorize and recite these poems. This Ramayana is very dear to all classes of people, whether they are government employees, businessmen, or farmers. Various Sanskrit meters have been used in this Ramayana. The meters he chose are of long duration. The notable meters include Malini, Shikharini, Vasantatilaka, Andhara, Shardulavikridita, etc.

Since Nepali has become the national language, people from various social classes use it. This has led to variations in spoken Nepali. The same word is pronounced differently in different places. For example, San-Sano, Ayu-Afro, Kanu-Kano, etc. Some words have been distorted. For example, Aaj > Aju, Ab > Aro, Ghar > Ghar, etc. Some people pronounce 'd' as 'n' or 'r', 'y' as 's', and 't' as 't'. For example, Hid > Hin, Ghorā > Ghora.

Uneducated and uncouth people do not adhere to the distinctions of gender, number, and case. Within the Nepalese kingdom, the Nepali spoken in two famous regions called 'Doti' and 'Humla-Jumla' does not resemble standard Nepali. There are also differences in the language of the 'Palla' region.

Many Nepalis live in regions such as Darjeeling, Dehradun, Assam, Shimla, Punjab, and Burma, and are influenced by the linguistic patterns of the local inhabitants. They pronounce 'Ganu' as 'Karnu' and elsewhere 'G' as 'K'. However, pronouncing the 'K' sound as the 'G' sound is the actual Nepali custom. The Nepalis who came to Darjeeling are from the eastern part of Nepal. There are many Newars. Due to the influence of the local inhabitants' spoken language, the immigrant Nepalis do not particularly follow the rules of grammar. They forget that the form of the verb changes according to the gender, number, and case of the subject. For example, 'Ama Ayo', 'Babu Ayo', 'Ma Ayo', etc. (The correct forms of these would be 'Ama Aain', 'Babu Aunnu Bhayo', 'Ma Aaye'. - Translator) The Nepali inhabitants of Darjeeling are influenced by the linguistic patterns of Bengali and Hindi speakers. For example, 'Nerko Bari Bagan', 'Ghar > Kothi', 'Chiya > Cha', 'Bhangta > Baigan', 'Kila Kanti', etc. The language of Kolkata and its surrounding areas is considered the standard spoken Bengali, and books are written in that language. Similarly, to find the standard Nepali language, we must go to Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal. The language used by the educated upper class in urban areas and towns can rightly be called 'standard Nepali'. And it is appropriate that books should be written in this language. In fact, writing is being done in this manner. The language used by Bhanubhakta is also of the same type. It is worth mentioning that English missionaries translated the Bible into the rural Nepali dialect of the Darjeeling area. Currently, education is spreading very rapidly among the Nepali community. As a result, the language of educated Nepalis has gradually attained a refined form through a natural process of purification. The time is almost at hand when we will see that the difference between the 'Sadri' Nepali language and the language of Darjeeling has almost disappeared. Overall progress is possible only through the expansion of education.

4. Linguistic Classification and Origins

Nepali belongs to the Indo-Aryan branch of the Indo-European language family. More specifically, it is classified under the Northern Indo-Aryan languages and shows close affinity with languages such as Hindi, Kumaoni, Garhwali, and other Pahari languages.

The earliest form of Nepali is associated with Khas Kura, the language spoken by the Khas people who inhabited the western Himalayan region. Linguistic evidence suggests that Khas Kura developed from Sanskrit through the intermediate stage of Prakrit and Apabhramsha. Over time, local phonetic and grammatical features distinguished it from other Indo-Aryan varieties.

5. The Khas People and Early Linguistic Development

The Khas people played a foundational role in the development of the Nepali language. Historically, they inhabited regions of present-day western Nepal and parts of Uttarakhand in India. Their language, Khas Kura, functioned as a common medium of communication across a geographically fragmented terrain. During the early period, Nepali existed mainly as a spoken language. Oral traditions, folk songs, and local narratives were the primary means of linguistic transmission. Although Sanskrit was the dominant language for religious and scholarly purposes, Khas Kura gradually gained prominence in administrative and everyday contexts.

6. Influence of Sanskrit and Prakrit

Sanskrit exerted a profound influence on the development of Nepali vocabulary, morphology, and literary style. Many core words, especially those related to religion, philosophy, governance, and culture, are derived directly from Sanskrit. The transition from Sanskrit to Prakrit and Apabhramsha played a crucial intermediary role. These vernacular forms simplified grammatical structures and phonetics, making the language more accessible to common people. Nepali inherited this simplified structure while retaining a substantial Sanskrit lexicon.

7. Medieval Period and Political Expansion

The medieval period marked a significant turning point in the evolution of the Nepali language. With the rise of regional kingdoms in western Nepal, Khas Kura began to be used in inscriptions, royal edicts, and administrative documents. The most important development occurred during the unification of Nepal under King Prithvi Narayan Shah in the eighteenth century. As the Gorkha kingdom expanded eastward, the language of the ruling elite—Gorkhali—spread across diverse ethnic and linguistic communities. This political expansion transformed Nepali from a regional language into a national one.

8. Contact with Tibeto-Burman and Other Languages

Nepal is home to a wide variety of Tibeto-Burman languages, such as Newari (Nepal Bhasa), Tamang, Gurung, Rai, and Limbu. Prolonged contact with these languages influenced Nepali phonology, syntax, and vocabulary. Loanwords related to agriculture, food, social customs, and local administration entered Nepali from Tibeto-Burman languages. This linguistic interaction enriched Nepali and contributed to its adaptability as a lingua franca in a multilingual society.

9. Development of Nepali Literature

The growth of literature played a crucial role in shaping and standardizing the Nepali language. Early literary works were primarily religious and poetic in nature, reflecting Hindu philosophical themes and local folklore. Manuscripts written in Devanagari script gradually replaced oral traditions, enabling wider dissemination. Bhanubhakta Acharya, often regarded as the Adi Kavi (first poet) of Nepali literature, made a landmark contribution by translating the Ramayana into Nepali in the nineteenth century. His work not only popularized Nepali among the masses but also demonstrated its capacity to convey complex philosophical ideas. Later writers such as Motiram Bhatta institutionalized literary criticism, while poets like Laxmi Prasad Devkota, Lekhnath Paudyal, and Balkrishna Sama expanded literary genres to include epics, dramas, essays, and modern poetry. The literary movement helped stabilize grammar, enrich vocabulary, and establish stylistic norms. The growth of literature played a crucial role in shaping and standardizing the Nepali language. Early literary works were primarily religious and poetic in nature. Bhanubhakta Acharya, often regarded as the Adi Kavi (first poet) of Nepali literature, made a landmark contribution by translating the Ramayana into Nepali in the nineteenth century. This translation demonstrated that Nepali could serve as a powerful medium for literary expression. Subsequently, poets and writers such as Motiram Bhatta, Laxmi Prasad Devkota, and Lekhnath Paudyal enriched Nepali literature and expanded its thematic scope.

10. Nepali during the Rana and Shah Periods

During the Rana regime (1846–1951), Nepali gained further institutional support as the language of administration, education, and law. Although political freedom was limited, the use of Nepali in official domains strengthened its standardized form. The Shah period and the subsequent democratic movements contributed to the modernization of the language. Print media, textbooks, and newspapers played a vital role in spreading standardized Nepali among the masses.

11. Standardization and Modernization

The twentieth century witnessed deliberate efforts to standardize Nepali grammar, spelling, and pronunciation. Dictionaries, grammar books, and academic institutions contributed to this process. Modern Nepali incorporates technical and scientific vocabulary, often borrowed or adapted from Sanskrit, Hindi, and English. Despite these borrowings, the language has maintained its structural integrity and cultural identity.

12. Nepali as a Transnational Language

Today, Nepali is spoken not only in Nepal but also in India (particularly in Sikkim, West Bengal, Uttarakhand, and Assam), Bhutan, Myanmar, and among diaspora communities worldwide. In India, Nepali is recognized under the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution, granting it official status and institutional support. Migration for employment, education, and military service contributed significantly to the spread of Nepali beyond national borders. This transnational presence has led to regional variations in pronunciation, vocabulary, and idiomatic expressions. However, a shared literary tradition, standardized grammar, and the Devanagari script continue to unify Nepali speakers across borders. Nepali has also emerged as a medium of instruction and cultural expression in diaspora communities, helping preserve linguistic identity in foreign cultural environments. Today, Nepali is spoken not only in Nepal but also in India (particularly in Sikkim, West Bengal, and Assam), Bhutan, Myanmar, and among diaspora communities worldwide. In India, Nepali is recognized under the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution.

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13. Challenges and Future Prospects

Despite its widespread use, the Nepali language faces several challenges in the contemporary world. The increasing dominance of English in higher education, science, and global communication often marginalizes indigenous languages, including Nepali. Urban youth, in particular, show a growing preference for English or mixed codes. Another challenge lies in balancing standard Nepali with regional dialects and minority languages. Over-standardization may threaten linguistic diversity, while lack of standardization can hinder formal communication. At the same time, digital media, social networking platforms, online journalism, and Unicode-based Devanagari fonts offer new opportunities for linguistic growth. Language technology, translation software, and digital archives can play a vital role in preserving and promoting Nepali in the future. Despite its widespread use, the Nepali language faces several challenges. The dominance of English in higher education and global communication poses a threat to indigenous languages, including Nepali. At the same time, digital media, social networking platforms, and online publications offer new opportunities for linguistic growth. Efforts to promote Nepali through education, translation, and technology will be crucial for its future vitality.

Conclusion

The evolution of the Nepali language is a reflection of Nepal's complex history, cultural diversity, and political transformations. From its origins as Khas Kura to its present status as a national and international language, Nepali has undergone continuous change while preserving its core identity.

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