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The Security Logic of Multilingual State Governance: The Evolution and Challenges of Nepal's Language Policy

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Abstract: This paper discusses the changes in language policies in Nepal, a multilingual nation, and the security logics that underpin language governance, as well as the challenges associated with this. It traces the historical trajectory of the formation of Nepal's multilingual society and issues regarding language identity, linking this to contours of language policy development at constitutional, educational and local autonomy levels, and showing the inherent tensions between national unity and ethnic identity in language policy. Additionally, the paper suggests that the trend to securitize language has left minority language groups open to marginalization and exclusion, aggravating social tensions and jeopardizing national unity. Nepal's experience demonstrates that multilingual nations need to balance national unity with respect for linguistic justice in language governance by protecting —rather than excluding— linguistic diversity through institutional innovation and inclusive policies to ensure political coherence and social consolidation. Notably, this article provides important references and considerations for governance practices in multilingual states.

Keywords: multilingual governance; language policy; security logic; national identity; language conflict

1. Introduction

A nation-state that is multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and landlocked, the shifting language policy in Nepal exemplifies not only the complexities of national governance, but also illustrates the security and identity issues that linguistic diversity raises for these multi-ethnic citizens living in a modern nation-state. Language can be viewed not simply as a communication tool, but as an expression of cultural identity and political power [1]. There are historical tensions in Nepal regarding the tension between political unity and the existence of diversity, which are evident in the language policy environment, which has served as a political tool for fragmentation and social conflict [2]. From a unitary singular language policy to attempts at a more inclusive multilingual governance structure, Nepal has changed several times with each of these changes including a constitution, changes in language policy in the educational policies, and changes to local government policies. However, the ‘securitization logic’ enacted in language policies often ignores or excludes minority languages and eventually contributes to ethnic tensions, insecurity and national instability [3]. This study aims to review the historical persistence and sidelining of language policies in Nepal to provide an overview of how language is securitized in national multi-lingual governance, how it shapes national identity, and potential pathways towards multi-lingual language rights [4].

2. The Historical Construction of Nepal’s Linguistic Landscape and National Identity

2.1. The Formation and Characteristics of Nepal’s Multilingual Society

Nepal is a multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic state with long historical processes of language and ethnicity with great significance and complexity. Nepal has over 120 languages in the country including Nepali, Magar, Tharu, Tibetan and others languages of various ethnic groups as commonly referred to by the term, national

languages [5]. The historical complexity of ethnic groups' historical migration, settlement and survival explains the diversity of languages as Nepal's linguistically rich experiences are formed through diverse social and historical contexts. It is important to understand language will represent the diversity of ethnic cultures and reflect the different social identities of the groups [6]. In Nepal, relatively, the multilingual phenomenon is an expression of social culture and a challenge for governance, specifically in education, administration and participation where language differences relate to social integration and equity [7]. The understanding of mechanisms and characteristics of forming the multilingual society of Nepal is the basis for in depth exploration for further studies of the language-public policy evolution, and constructing a national identity. As shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1

Formation and Characteristics of Nepal's Multilingual Society

Aspect	Details
Country Type	Multi-ethnic, multilingual
Number of Languages	Over 120 (e.g., Nepali, Magar, Tharu, Tibetan)
Causes of Diversity	Geographic complexity, historical migration and integration
Functions of Language	Cultural expression, group identity
Social Impact	Rich cultural diversity and governance challenges
Key Challenges	Education, administration, and political participation

2.2. Language and National Construction: Language Suppression

Under a Unified Narrative

Language has served as an important instrument of national unity and ethnic identity in the evolving national construction of Nepal. In the context of western influences and methods of governance of the nineteenth century, Nepali started its evolution to that of an official tongue, and a representation of a

unification/consolidation of political functions intended to present the idea of a ‘unified nation’. Yet, this linguistic assimilation has assailed many of the minority social structures, usurping their ability to foster a sphere of cultural independence. The often-unified narrative that comes from these methodologies often centers around multilingualism and multiculturalism as a divide between population and opportunities through language assimilation as a fundamental way to achieve national security. This security rationale underling language policies has contributed to central authority repression of marginalized groups, which has exacerbated the marginalization and exclusion of some languages as well as certain ethnic groups [8]. Where the exclusion of languages and groups often ignites conflicts around cultural identity, exclusion is often at the core of the cause of social tensions and political instability. As shown in **Table 2**.

Table 2

Language Suppression under Nepal’s Unified National Narrative

Aspect	Details
Role of Language	Tool for national unity and ethnic identity
Official Language Rise	Nepali became dominant since the 19th century
Policy Approach	Linguistic homogenization under national unity narrative
Impact on Minority Languages	Suppression and reduced space for cultural expression
Policy Logic	Language assimilation as a means of national security
Social Consequences	Marginalization of groups, identity conflict, and political instability

2.3. The Interplay of Religion, Caste, and Language Identity

Religious beliefs, the caste system, and linguistic identity are inherently connected in Nepal, and together, they contribute to a complex social order and cultural identity structure. Nepal is a deeply Hindu country, with the caste system showing tremendous influence on the allocation of social resources and the formation

of identity. The privileged higher-caste groups typically speak Nepali as their first languages and enjoy greater social status than any lower-caste groups or indigenous ethnicities that maintain their own languages and cultural practices [9]. This pattern and distribution of power based on religion and caste also reinforces linguistic identity divisions, leading to the transformation of language from a communication process to that of social class and power relations. The religious and caste-based structure of linguistic identity also informs the formulation of languages policies, which leads to greater linguistic marginalization and more difficulty towards achieving social integration and a unified national identity. As shown in **Table 3**.

Table 3*Interplay of Religion, Caste, and Language Identity in Nepal*

Aspect	Details
Social Structure	Influenced by Hinduism and the caste system
Language and Caste Relation	High-caste groups use Nepali; lower castes and indigenous groups use local languages
Power Dynamics	Language reflects social class and power hierarchy
Policy Influence	Language policies shaped by religious and caste interests
Consequences	Deepened linguistic division and marginalization
Challenge to Integration	Hindrance to social cohesion and national identity building

3. The Evolutionary Path of Nepal's Language Policy

3.1. The Development of Language Policy in the Constitution and Laws

The language policy in Nepal has morphed dramatically, both politically and legally. The early Nepalese Kingdom established a language policy that identified Nepali as the only official language, informed by the need to foster unity in the

country. As the multi-ethnic democratic movement evolved by institutionalizing the new constitutions of 2007 and 2015, the language policy began transitioning towards pluralism. The 2015 Constitution formally recognizes the equal rights of all languages and grants local government the authority to use local languages. Regardless of the legal texts invoking Nepal's commitment to protect linguistic diversity, Nepali's symbolic and practical predominance remains intact, and minority languages continue to experience numerous limitations for inclusion and promotion as 'official language' in formalism. The incongruence between a constitution that embraces linguistic diversity and a significantly lopsided linguistic hierarchy illustrates the arduous transformation of language policy in Nepal [10].

3.2. Language Choice and Exclusion in the Education System

The education sector is a critical area for language policy choice. Nepal's language policies for Education have shifted several times. During most of history, Nepali has been heavily encouraged as the medium of instruction in schools, providing the context in which national identity has the opportunity to be built. Focusing so much energy on this concept has contributed to obstructing minority languages from having a place in education [11]. Many regions, especially in more recent history, support the concept of language rights. Some regions have initiated a practice of mother tongue education, with the aim to build bilingual or multilingual proficiency by using local languages in the classroom, promoting local language copyright and protection. As was seen with Kiranti educators and the difficulties they faced, there are multiple barriers limiting local and indigenous mother tongue education, including insecurity of available resources, insufficient teacher resources, weak enforcement capacities, etc. Choices about language in the education sector provide sites of contradiction, connecting to overlapping views of power distribution and issues of cultural identity, which has left some fragments of language groups feeling excluded and culturally marginalized, generating social unrest and an experience of language securitization.

3.3. Local Autonomy Reform and Language Diversity Management

Local autonomy reforms in Nepal offer new institutional avenues for managing language diversity. The 2015 Constitution specifies a federal arrangement with

provincial and local governments given authority over aspects of language management. This enables a new potential to develop policies allowing for local language realities. In the context of local governments, autonomy may mean that elected bodies table languages rights and varied expression of cultural diversity as important, but local governments are subject to the priorities and central policies and limited by resource capacities. In practice, local outcomes vary within and across provinces for effective language diversity governance. Some regions are committed to the official's use of local languages and educational support for those languages, while others are prioritizing Nepali; resulting in varying enforcement of policy actors. Local autonomy reforms illuminate new possibilities for institutions of multilingual governance, while also demonstrating the tensions and contradictions between governance capacity and governance under the umbrella of security.

4. Security Logic and Governance Challenges in Language

Policy

4.1. The Securitization of Language Conflicts and Ethnic Politics

Language-related tensions in a multilingual context are regularly securitized in Nepal and become major focal points in ethnic politics. While a marker of cultural identity, language is a central tenet in the advancement of ethnic rights. In the context of ethnic claims, language can be mobilized to demand political representation and access to resources, but the central governance agent views this as potentially threatening to national unity and attempts to control or repress ethnic demands. The politicization and securitization of language tensions exacerbate ethnic politics, and potentially increases social instability. In the security logic of language policy, the language issue can go from being focused on cultural preservation to is seeking to repress threats from separatist forces seeking to shape public life through a different language. This governance model is successful in protecting national security yet continues to exacerbate ethnic polarization and create mistrust amongst various ethnic groups.

4.2. The Tension Between 'National Unity' and 'Language Justice'



In Nepal's language policy, there is a deep tension between upholding the values of 'national unity' with 'language justice.' National unity entails building social cohesion and political integration under one official language, yet this solidarity has a history of infringing upon minority language rights. Language justice equally represented all language groups' rights to express themselves and use their languages while valuing cultural diversity and recognizing social inclusion. In theory, policymakers are intended to attain language justice or equitable claims to languages while claiming to uphold single, unified linguistic policies above all, which divorces overall multilingualism, favors a select few, and exacerbates the structural marginalization of minority languages (Eurocentric Global North language policies). Whereas downplaying 'the language rights of the minority communities and the continual erasure of their identity and culture rather than the historical narrative of their resistance to current socio-political struggles. Achieving language justice, and therefore user-centered belonging, while achieving national stability will remain the major tensions of Nepal's language governance, signaling the complex trade-offs of governing a multilingual democracy.

4.3. The Governance Dilemma of Language Marginalization and Social Exclusion

Language marginalization remains common in Nepal, and is experienced as social exclusion and inequity. Marginalized language groups have no official support and have limited educational opportunities, leading to the risk of cultural, social participation, political and economic marginalization. The marginalization of language groups is not just about language; it is also a deeper structural social injustice. It is very challenging for governance to balance competing interests of all actors' relationships between all parties under limited resource and power distribution dynamics. The ongoing language-based marginalization, as a result of no effective inclusive policy and mechanisms, dramatically increases the chances of social division and does not help the nation in achieving long-term stability or harmonious development. The challenge of language marginalization and governance issues are therefore important issues of focus in multilingual national security governance.

5. Conclusion

The development of the language policy in Nepal exemplifies the realities of the complexities of security logic in governing multilingual states. While constitutional and legal guarantees for linguistic diversity exist, the political impulse behind increased expectation for a unified language predominates in implementation, which marginalized minority languages and ethnic groups. Education and reforms towards local governance aimed at enhanced opportunities for marked linguistic diversity have been made, a pattern is clearly emergent towards the language insecurity policy. The politicization and securitization of language conflicts has intensified, and may exacerbate ethnic tensions and social infrastructures to present an existential challenge to national stability. To achieve genuine language justice, Nepal needs to pursue institutional innovation at a deeper level in its style of multilingual governance while maintaining national unity, strengthen legal and other protections for minority languages, and bolster inclusive governance competencies. Not only would this assist in resolving the dilemmas associated with language security, but also provide a symbolic examples of governance experience for and insights into the theoretical importance for other multilingual states.

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