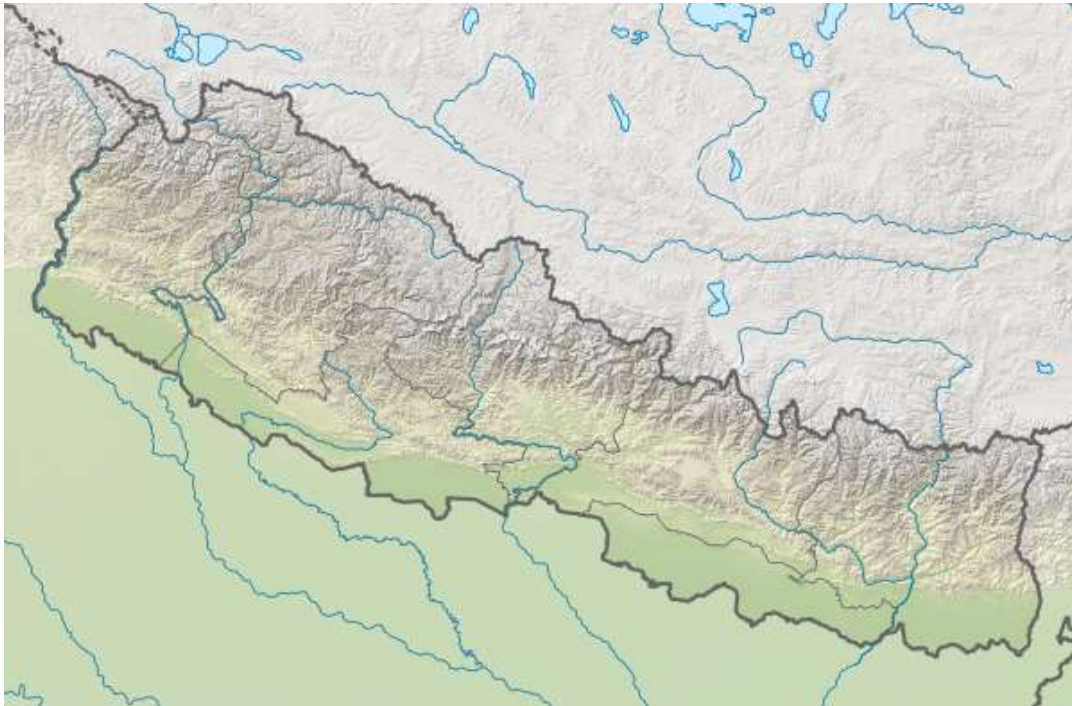


Nepal – A quick glimpse to its history, society and politics

Presentation in Meran and Bozen/Bolzano (November 2022)



Nepal geographically: the plains in the South (Terai), the hilly midlands and the high mountains (Himalaya)

1. Nepal's history

Nepal is about the size of Switzerland and Austria combined and has almost 30 million inhabitants. Although Nepal's history has always been linked to that of India, the country has many peculiar facets. When most of northern India was Buddhist 2000 years ago, so were the many small principalities in what is now Nepal. The birthplace of Siddhartha Gautama, Lumbini, located in southern Nepal, today is an important pilgrimage site. Later, Nepal has been largely hinduised, especially under the Malla dynasty since the 14th and 15th centuries. In 1768, the Shah dynasty from Gorkha forcibly united the different kingdoms, and thus for 240 years Nepal formed the only Hindu kingdom in the world (1768-2007).



13 2 The first king of the Shah dynasty: Prithvi Narayan Shah

The "modern and united kingdom of Nepal" begins with the royal house of Shah in 1768. Although Nepal fought a short war against the British in 1814, it was never colonised, but came to terms with England and was able to remain independent. Nepali Gorkha fighters later served in the British army in both World Wars, 250,000 soldiers in World War 2 alone.

After World War II and India's independence in 1947, the time would have come for democracy in Nepal as well, but the Shah kings managed to outmanoeuvre the parties and maintain an almost absolute monarchy. It was not until 1991 that the first free elections were held and King Birendra had to introduce a

parliamentary (constitutionally) monarchy with a multi-party system. However, the birth pangs of this young democracy continued for at least another 20 years.



2Nepal's Parliament in Kathmandu (once also the place of its Constituent Assembly)

Right from the start, democracy suffered from permanent party strife and changes of government, and fell into deep crisis when the Maoists began their insurgency, the so-called People's War, in 1996. On 1 May 2001, almost the entire royal family was assassinated by the heir to the throne: the so-called Royal Massacre heralded the beginning of the end of the monarchy. In May 2002, Nepal's king again seized all power, while the Maoists took control of large parts of the country. Only after the peace agreement in 2006 was the monarchy finally abolished in 2007 and Nepal proclaimed a Federal Democratic Republic on 28 May 2008.

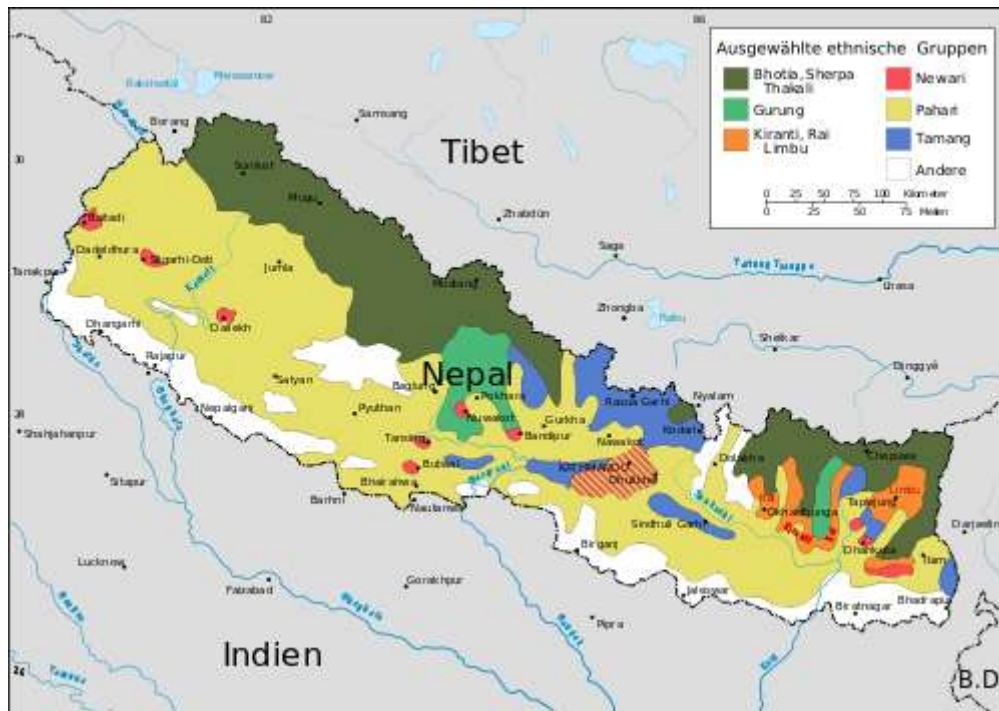
2. Nepal: a multi-ethnic country



4 A nepalese folk dancing group. Photo: Sigismund von Dobschütz, WIKIPEDIA, CC BY-SA 3.0

Nepal is a multicultural and multiethnic country, home to 125 distinct ethnic groups, speaking 123 different mother tongues and following a number of indigenous and folk religions in addition to Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity. While the main group of Indo-Aryan Nepali-speaking Nepalis are mainly divided into castes, there are also numerous indigenous peoples with an estimated share of 38% of the total population of around 30 million. From trekking tours, we are familiar with several of these ethnic groups from the high valleys, such as the Gurung and Tamang in the central mountains, the Sherpa, Rai and Limbu in the east, the Magar and Thakali in the west. In the south, the Madhesi and Tharu form strong minorities, and in the Kathmandu Valley the Newar. They all have their languages, traditions,

characteristics and areas of life, and were discriminated against as ethnic groups during the monarchy. This was one of the reasons for the Maoist uprising in the 1990ies.



5 Nepal's most important ethnic groups (Wikipedia)

3. 100 spoken languages

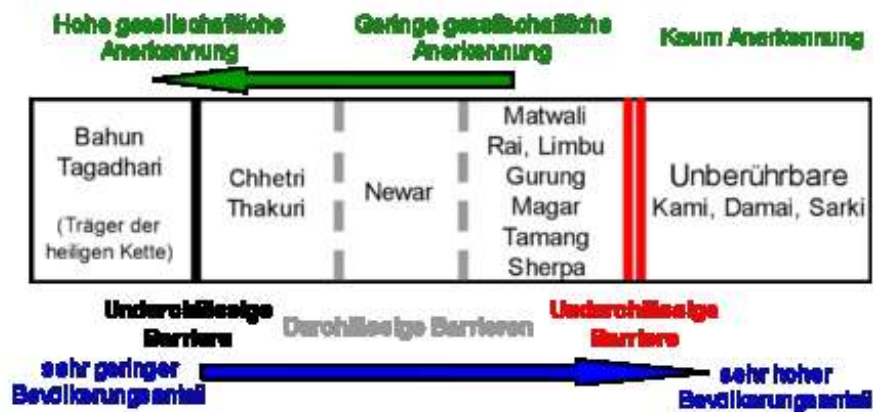
नेपाली

6 The word "Nepali" in Devanagari script

Nepal's ethnic diversity is matched by its language diversity. There are said to be 124 languages still in everyday use. Nepali is the official state language and lingua franca, but is spoken as a mother tongue by only 44% of Nepal's citizens. In this respect, Nepal's linguistic world resembles that of India, where Hindi is a kind of lingua franca for most Indians, although not spoken by a majority as mother tongue. There are at least 6 million Nepali speakers in India as well, especially in Darjeeling and Sikkim. Nepali is related to Hindi, including the second largest language community, Maithili in the south. The languages in the mountainous areas such as Magar, Gurung, Sherpa, Rai and Limbu belong to the Tibeto-Burmese language family. The smaller language communities have had very few minority rights so far, for example in education and the media. This could improve with the new Federal Republic.

4. The caste system keeps its influence

Closely related to Hinduism is the caste system. There are four main castes and many sub-castes: the Bahun, the Chhetri, the Vaishyas and the Sudras. And then also the casteless, the Dalits or untouchables. Here is the caste system in very gross simplification:



7 Nepal's caste systems (schematic, WIKIPEDIA, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The so-called water line separates the pure from the impure castes. The Bahun and Chhetri, the highest castes, also dominate the state and the civil service, the police, the military, the civil service. They also usually own more land than the lower castes, the artisan castes and the casteless. Religiously based castes and social classes, education, upward mobility, wealth and political influence thus go hand in hand. As in India, caste levels were officially abolished a few years ago, but still carry strong weight in social life. For example, many caste members almost only marry among themselves. The Dalits in particular still form the absolute lower class, without education, land ownership or political influence. The Maoist uprising was also directed against the caste system.

5. Two major religious and a few smaller ones



8 Sadhus in Pashupatinath (Kathmandu). Photo: Sebby xy, CC BY-SA 3.0 Wikipedia

What always impresses us during trips to Nepal is the deep religiousness in Nepal, but also the tolerance. Hindus and Buddhists have lived together peacefully here for thousands of years. Today, 81% of Nepalis declare themselves Hindus, 9% Buddhists.

The Shah monarchy since 1768 was a Hindu kingdom with Hinduism as the state religion. However, the mountain peoples, who are related to the Tibetans, remained Buddhist and there are also animistic religions such as

Kiranti. There are also Muslim and Christian minorities, especially in the south.



With the new constitution, Nepal has become a secular state, i.e. there is no longer a state religion. But the image is dominated by Hinduism; in the Kathmandu Valley, people often also cultivate both religions, such as the Newars.

9 Nepal's oldest Hindu temple: Changu Narayan close to Kathmandu

6. The Maoist uprising 1996-2006: why?

The main reason for this conflict was certainly the deep social injustice in Nepal. In 2001, for example, there were 5 million peasants in Nepal without land, and absolute poverty at that time was almost 50%. The upper castes dominated the state apparatus, the state finances were depleted in the water head of Kathmandu, while the remote areas were impoverished. The elite did not understand the state as an instance of development, but as a self-service shop. The "People's War", as the Maoists called their uprising, saw itself as a resistance of the oppressed classes, as a revolutionary movement. The military, police, judiciary and administration were in the hands of the upper classes. The political system remained authoritarian at its core and the new democracy did not seem to be able to create any real change here. From the Maoists' point of view, the parliamentary system took far too long to overcome the deep injustices. The urban middle classes and the political parties put their faith in democracy, but the politicians were unable to create a stable government capable of action.



10 Maoist guerrilla fighters.. Foto: Jonathan Alpeyrie. CC BY-SA 3.0 Wikipedia

In addition, there was ethnic discrimination and discrimination against women. Many hill tribes, especially in the West, felt left out. The population was totally dissatisfied with the results of democracy in the late 1990s and this played into the hands of the Maoists. The Maoists also recruited many women. In a Hindu society, women are still strongly discriminated against, similar to Islam.

Nepal's state structure was also centralised, with the smaller ethnic groups not having any political power, administrative authority and public finances in their area. This created the breeding ground for strong discontent and eventually for a readiness to resort to violence.

In spring 2006, 200,000 people protested in Kathmandu against the monarchy and for an end to the civil war. In November 2006, a peace agreement was reached between the government and the Maoists. After 10 years of war with 17,000 dead, peace reigned in the country again. The Maoist insurgency of 1996-2006 was a tragic decade that tore deep wounds that have not healed to this day. The crimes of both sides have not yet been dealt with in the judiciary, and the reconciliation process is still ongoing.

7. The difficult becoming of a Democratic Federal Republic

In the last 30 years, Nepal has experienced a profound change. In 2007, the monarchy was definitely abolished and Nepal has been a republic ever since. In 2008, a first Constituent Assembly was elected, which remained unsuccessful. In 2013, a second Constituent Assembly was elected and in 2015, the new constitution was adopted. After a long tug-of-war, the parties agreed on a federal reorganisation and with 85% of the votes in the assembly, Nepal was declared a democratic federal republic. Since 2015, the president has been a woman: Bidiya Devi Bhandari.

Even after the new constitution of 2015, governments continue to change frequently. The local elections of 2017 marked a genuine democratic new beginning, a break with the tradition-bound clientelist caste society. The two full-time positions in a municipality must be held by one woman and one man. On 20 November 2022, Nepal's parliament was newly elected.



12 Nepal's first female president: Bidiya Devi Bhandari

8. A young country burdened with a lot of old problems

The general economic and political conditions in Nepal are rather unfavourable. There is the old caste system, which slows down social mobility; the education system, which has far too few resources; Nepal's fertile land can no longer feed all Nepal's population. There is still too little infrastructure for transport, water and energy supply. The country is struggling with ecological problems, such as over-exploitation of forests and the danger of erosion, also as a result of climate change. There is also the risk of earthquakes: the devastating earthquake of 2015 also left many traces. Economically, Nepal is still one of the poorest countries in the world. It has few raw materials and too little technology and capital, for example, to exploit the enormous potential of hydropower and export it for foreign exchange. So Nepal exports labour and receives remittances (at least 400,000 Nepali are working in the Gulf countries, almost 1,700 have died in Qatar in the last 10 years), receives development aid and derives income from tourism, which, though in crisis due to the Corona pandemic, is now slowly recovering.



13 Heavily polluted Bagmati river in Kathmandu. Foto: Michael Knoblach, Wikipedia, CC BY-SA 3.0 Wikipedia

As a result, Nepal's economy is growing much more slowly than that of its booming neighbouring countries. About a third of the population lives below the poverty line, and life expectancy is in the bottom third of life expectancies in Asian countries. Almost half of all children in Nepal are chronically malnourished. Since the beginning of the 1990s, infant and maternal mortality rates have been reduced considerably, but to date only 55 percent of all births are attended by a doctor or midwife. The Covid-19 pandemic has also hit Nepal hard and especially the poorer classes.

9. What's next for Nepal?

Although Nepal has had to endure crises and hard times and make up for economic weaknesses over the last three decades, there are several issues that are encouraging. In recent years, Nepal has made significant progress in poverty reduction, school enrolment

rates, health care and sanitation. Nepal offers a unique landscape, a young population, a wealth of cultures, languages, religions living peacefully together and hospitable, cheerful and hardworking people. If all the hydropower plants under construction come on stream, Nepal could soon export 407 MW of electricity (78% to India).

Since the new constitution came into force in 2008 and especially since the 2017 elections, political conditions have stabilised somewhat. In the elections of 20.11.2022, the previous coalition under Prime Minister Shah Bahadur Deuba, leader of the Nepali Congress Party, was confirmed by the electorate. A new alternative party, the RSP, which wants to bring a breath of fresh air into the encrusted party system, made gains. In Kathmandu, the young Bale Shah won the mayoral election and is fighting corruption and nepotism with an iron broom. Democracy is more stable today, the state administration less corrupt than before the Maoist uprising. Although many of the country's structural problems will continue to have an impact for a long time, Nepal's young generation claims a real political change.



14. Nepal's children. Photo: Clemensmarabu. CC BY-SA 3.0, Wikipedia

Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nepal#Politics>; Thomas Benedikter (2003), Krieg im Himalaya, LIT Verlag, Berlin