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REVIVAL OF THE KUSUNDA IDENTITY IN NEPAL

Timotheus A. Bodt and Uday Raj Aaley

Abstract: The mother tongue constitutes an important part of a people's identity. For some indigenous groups, such as the Kusunda of Nepal, the language is the primary remaining marker of their unique identity. The Kusunda are a small, 161-member strong indigenous ethnic group who used to speak the eponymous language isolate Kusunda. They were a nomadic hunter-gatherer group inhabiting the middle hills and inner valleys of western Nepal. In the course of history, there has been a gradual decline in the number of Kusunda people, and since the mid-1800s their community became increasingly fragmented. In this article, we describe how, encouraged by socio-economic and socio-political changes occurring in Nepal since the turn of the century, the Kusunda are also reasserting their identity. Among the various aspects of their culture, the revitalization of their language has become the major focal point of these efforts. Despite the progress made in this respect, we conclude by reiterating the Kusunda's idea of an integrated settlement as the best way to preserve their identity for posterity.

Keywords: Kusunda; language endangerment; ethnic revival; language revitalization; Nepal; integrated settlement

Introduction

Over the past century, languages everywhere have come under an increased threat. It is now estimated that by the end of the 21st century, half of the world's currently known 6,000-odd languages will have become extinct (UNESCO 2011). A few dominant languages, such as English on a global scale, Hindi as a regional language in South Asia, and Nepali as the national language of Nepal, continue to expand at the expense of a multitude of other, smaller languages. These major languages dominate global, regional, and national platforms and institutions, and may lead to linguistic homogeneity. But there is a clear significance of preserving and promoting linguistic diversity and minority languages: Language is not only a tool for communication, but also the cornerstone of culture, identity, and heritage. Each language encapsulates the essence of a distinct culture, traditions, knowledge systems, histories, and worldviews that enrich the human experience, fostering respect for cultural differences and mutual understanding among diverse communities. In 1921, the linguist Edward Sapir already stated that "Language is the most massive and inclusive art we know, a mountainous and anonymous work of unconscious generations" (Sapir 1921: 235).

While conducting our research and language revitalisation work on Kusunda, we were told on numerous occasions about the importance of *gipən* 'the

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[Kusunda] language' for the identity of the *myəheq* 'the [Kusunda] people' as an indigenous ethnic group. The last speakers, the community elders, the community representatives, the student and adult learners of the language, and the Kusunda people in general, all expressed their regret for having lost so many aspects of their unique culture and traditions. The general feeling was that the language – even though almost extinct – was basically the last remaining marker of their unique identity. In this paper, we examine this relation between language, culture, and identity, in more detail.

1.1. Minority languages and identity

The relation between minority languages, ethnicity, and identity was discussed in detail in, for example, Fishman's seminal sociolinguistic work since the 1960s (Fishman 1989). Especially for speakers of minority languages, cultural identity finds its most profound expression in language, serving as a key marker of group membership and social identity. For speakers of such languages, linguistic heritage embodies a tangible connection to their roots, ancestors, history, cultural heritage, and community. It is the language that serves as the only means for transmitting cultural practices, oral traditions, and collective memories across generations. The preservation of these minority languages is, therefore, indispensable for safeguarding diverse cultural identities. In addition, the assertion of linguistic identity transcends mere cultural preservation, and is intricately linked to universal human rights. In Article 2, the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights[1] grants every human being the rights and freedoms of the Declaration without distinction of any kind, including a distinction by language. But for many speakers of minority languages, this universal right continues to be infringed upon. Olko and Sallabank (2021: 4) write that language endangerment and loss are inextricably linked to the marginalization of indigenous and minoritized peoples and their cultures. Advocating for linguistic rights is therefore one of the ways in which minority language communities assert their unique identity, autonomy, dignity, self-expression, cultural affirmation, and right to self-determination, which will ultimately foster inclusive societies where all voices are heard and respected.

Indeed, for many communities that speak minority languages, their language is one of the primary markers, if not the most important marker, of their unique identity. One early descriptive example are the Jewish vernaculars (Fishman 1989: 67–96). The significance of the mother tongue is even more prominent in small, close-knit hunter-gatherer societies that have very distinct and unique cultural practices and shared cultural values that are expressed through the oral transmission of this language. For such communities, the mother tongue often becomes a strong marker of a distinct ethnic identity, acting as a bonding agent that fosters a sense of group membership, belonging and shared cultural identity (Hewlett/Roulette 2016). The shared language contributes to the delineation of a distinct ethnic identity,

of separating the "own" from the "other", such as the example of the Hadza of East Africa shows (Marlowe 2010: 47–49). While loss of the mother tongue often results in an erosion of the ethnic identity, language revitalization plays a pivotal role in empowering minority language speakers to reclaim this identity (Olko and Sallabank 2021: 4). As was described, among others, for the Caribou Inuit of Canada (Burch and Csonka 1999: 60), the Ainu of Japan (Martin 2011), and the San of southern Africa (Crawhall 2002), language revitalization and ethnic revival are intricately linked.

1.2. Research methodology

In this paper, we aim to provide an example of the importance of language for shaping and asserting the unique individual and collective identity among the speakers of a highly marginalised minority language, the Kusunda of Nepal. We base ourselves on information that we collected during a long association with the Kusunda people. Starting in 2008, Uday Raj Aaley has traced and visited all the Kusunda families, households, and individuals in Nepal on request of the Nepal Kusunda Development Society and the Nepal Language Commission. He has used various methods to locate and identify the people who self-identify as Kusunda, but also those who no longer identify as Kusunda, but, because of their ancestry, could be considered Kusunda. Aaley visited these Kusunda in the villages where they normally reside, meticulously compiling field notes in Nepali of the informal, in-depth discussions he held. Among the people he interacted with are the few elderly Kusunda people who remembered living the nomadic hunter-gatherer life in the forest and the Kusunda shaman who still performed curative rituals; but also young adolescents and children who had no more than a rudimentary sense of being Kusunda; the Kusunda men and women who had married spouses of other ethnicities and assimilated to their partner's language and culture, adopting a non-Kusunda identity; and other Kusunda's who had purposely and voluntarily accepted a different ethnic identity. In 2018, Tim Bodt joined Aaley, and in 2019, we invited the then last two speakers of Kusunda to Kathmandu, where we recorded over 20 hours of audio and 20 hours of video recordings that have been stored in repositories on Zenodo[2]. We are currently in the process of transcribing, translating, and annotating these recordings. We have also been interacting with the Kusunda people, both children and adults, who have been following classes in the Kusunda language, and we are in close contact with the grassroots Kusunda community organisation, the Nepal Kusunda Development Society. In this article, which represents the accumulation of 15 years of data and experience, we have incorporated several statements of experiences, ideas, and opinions by our Kusunda interlocutors. These quotes, translated from Kusunda or Nepali, are indicated by the interlocutor's name, the location where the interview was held, and the date of the interview.

1.3. Outline of the paper

In section 2.1, we very shortly describe the background of the Kusunda people. We then discuss the nomenclature and context of tribe, caste, ethnicity, and indigeneity in Nepal and the position of the Kusunda within this context (section 2.2). While we recognize that this summarised section merely scratches the surface of the complex identity matters in Nepal and in South Asia in general, we make mention of the most relevant issues from the perspective of the identity formation of the Kusunda people. We then discuss the socio-political changes that have occurred in Nepal since the turn of the century (section 2.3), including the linguistic developments that have taken place (section 2.4). We describe the impact of the socio-political changes on the Kusunda in section 3.1, while we discuss the need for socio-economic development of the Kusunda in section 3.2. We describe how the Kusunda reimagine their cultural identity (section 3.3), but also how, in view of the near-complete loss of their traditional culture, they consider language revitalization as the primary aspect of their identity revival (section 3.4). In section 3.5, we discuss a proposal that has been floated repeatedly by the Kusunda themselves, namely, how a separate Kusunda "homeland", an integrated settlement, would contribute to the revival and maintenance of their ethnic identity. We end with a short conclusion in section 4.

2. Research background

The Kusunda are one of the many recognised indigenous ethnic groups[3] and castes of Nepal, and they used to speak a unique language isolate. Their population, however, is very small and marginalized, and due to various developments discussed elsewhere (Aaley/Bodt 2024), there is only a single speaker of their language left. Nepal has undergone major socio-political changes since 2000, and as we will see in section 3, this has had marked impacts on the identity of the Kusunda people as well.

2.1. The Kusunda of Nepal

The indigenous ethnic group of Nepal that is commonly known to outsiders as Kusunda[4] used to speak the eponymous language Kusunda. The Kusunda once roamed a wide geographical area of the Middle Hills and the Śivāliks[5] of western and mid-western Nepal[6] in between the Bhērī-Karṇālī and Būḍhīgaṇḍakī-Triśūlī river systems, as is illustrated in Figure 1.

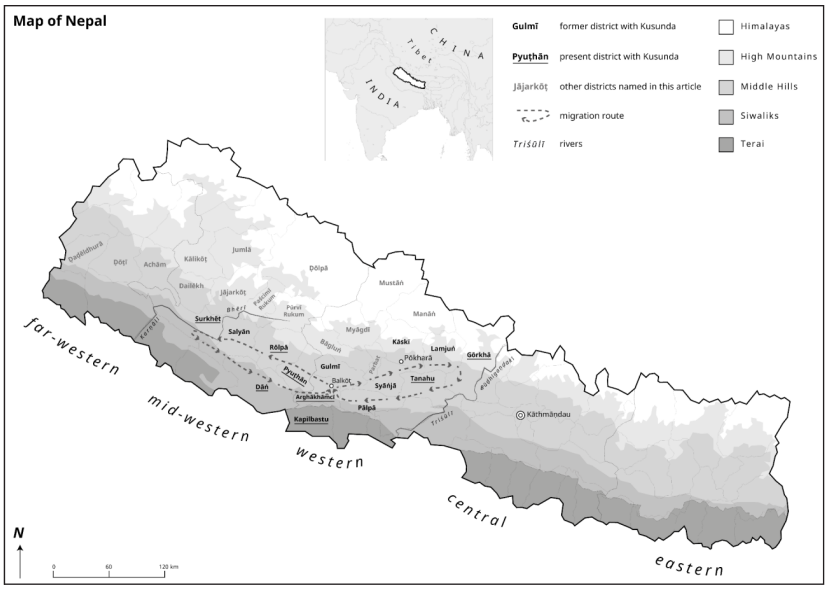

Figure 1. Location of Nepal and the original Kusunda home range and migratory routes (Bodt/Aaley/Sotrug, 2023).

The Kusunda were nomadic hunter-gatherers who were endogamous as an ethnic group but were divided in exogamous clans (Aaley/Bodt 2024). At least at the onset of the 20th century, the Kusunda moved around the forests in two distinct bands, as is also illustrated in Figure 1. While never numerous, their population gradually declined as a result of both internal and external factors. These factors include their earlier existence as nomadic hunter-gatherers and reliance on the forest for sustenance; their clan system and marriage customs; inward migration by other ethnic groups and gradual displacement of the Kusunda; the imposition of the Hindu caste system and the national integration policies of Nepal as a nation-state; stigmatisation and discrimination; decreased livelihood opportunities; and a lack of alternative options (Aaley/Bodt 2024). At present, there are only 161 people, 68 males and 93 females, who ethnically identify as Kusunda. Like the majority of the Nepalese population, the Kusunda community is also relatively young. Almost 40% of the Kusunda falls in the age cohort 0-15 years, 55% in the cohort 16-50 years, and only 5% of the Kusunda is 50 years or older.

The Kusunda are concentrated in the Inner Tarāī Valleys of Surkhēt and Dāṅ, and in the Middle Hills of Pyuṭhān district, as is summarised in Table 1. These data were collected from the field by Aaley in close consultation with all the Kusunda people, and therefore represent an exhaustive and correct list of Kusunda in Nepal.

TABLE 1. PRESENT-DAY KUSUNDA POPULATIONS (ADAPTED FROM AALEY 2022).

band	district	municipality	ward/village	households	population
eastern	Tanahuṁ	Vyās	10	1	2
	Gōrkhā	Gōrkhā	Tēhrakilō	2	6
		Ajirkōṭ	2/Bhāccēka	1	5
western	Dāṅ	Ghōrāhī	18	4	22
			12	1	6
			14	1	5
			10	1	1
		Tulsīpur	4	1	10
		Rājpur	7	3	17
		Gaḍhavā	2	2	9
	Arghākhāṁcī	Sandhikharka	6	1	4
	Surkhēt	Gurbhākōṭ	5/Sahārē	3	16
		Bhērīgaṅgā	2	1	2
	Rōlpā	Ruṇṭigaḍhī	Sarpāla	1	3
	Pyūṭhān	Sumārānī	6/Tirām	1	24
		Svargadvārī	2	2	18
		Airāvatī	6/Bijulī	1	9
	Kapilvastu	Vāṅgaṅgā	5/Kōpā	1	2
Total				28	161

Table 2, on the other hand, presents the data from the Census of Nepal 2021.

TABLE 2. PEOPLE IDENTIFYING AS KUSUNDA (ADAPTED FROM NATIONAL STATISTICS OFFICE 2023).

province	**district**	**total**	**male**	**female**
Bāgmatī		72 (+15)	*37 (+8)*	*35 (+7)*
	Kathmandu	47	25	22
	Bhaktapur	10	4	6
Gaṇḍakī	*?*	*44*	*16*	*28*
Lumbinī		104 (+29)	45 (+12)	59 (+17)
	Pyuṭhān	31	16	15
	Dāṅ	44	17	27
Total		**253 (+33)**	**115 (+17)**	**138 (+16)**

Curiously, there is no known record of people identifying as Kusunda in Kathmandu and Bhaktapur district in the Bāgmatī province of Nepal. Moreover,

the data from the individual districts do not tally with the provincial total, with 15 unaccounted people. Similarly, there is no district-wise breakup for the 44 Kusunda of Gaṇḍakī province (which includes Gōrkhā and Tanahuṁ districts), and the population of Pyuṭhān and Dāṅ districts does not add up to the total of Lumbinī zone, with 29 unaccounted people. Even when taking the numbers for these three provinces as a given, this still results in 33 people from the national total that are not accounted for. It may be clear that these census data, with a total of 253 Kusunda speakers and 23 mother tongue speakers, are not reliable, a point that was also noted by Gyanwali (2021: 20) who at the time enumerated a total of 151 Kusunda. Aaley's survey represents an exhaustive enumeration of Kusunda people and Kusunda speakers. In the official census, either people have unjustly claimed identification as Kusunda, perhaps in order to claim socio-economic benefits, such as monthly allowances and sponsored slots in government-run schools, or data have been made up or blindly copied from previous censuses. Finally, district-wise and provincial-wise data may have been incompletely and incorrectly transported from the original census lists to the aggregate lists.

The Kusunda call themselves simply *myəheq* 'people', or also *gilaŋdei myəheq* 'people in/of the forest' (Aaley 2017: 93), which is often shortened to *gimyeq* (Aaley 2017: 92). Kusunda who no longer knew their own language commonly referred to themselves as *van rājā* 'kings of the forest'. The exonym Kusunda carries strong derogatory and pejorative connotations (Aaley/Bodt 2024).

Hodgson (1848; 1857; 1874) was the first to describe the Kusunda and their language to western science. One hundred years later, several Nepalese and Western ethnographers published ethnographic notes on the Kusunda (Hermanns 1954; Yōgī 1954, 8–9; von Heine-Geldern 1958; von Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1959; Bista 1967). In the late 1960s, Reinhard published ethnographic notes (Reinhard 1968; 1969; 1976) and, together with Toba, a linguistic description (Reinhard/Toba 1970). In 2000, Toba went back and collected some additional data (Toba 2000). In 2004, Watters cooperated with his Nepali counterparts and the last two remaining speakers that had been identified to document and describe Kusunda, resulting in the first grammatical description of the language (Watters 2005; 2006). Since 2013, Donohue and Gautam have published several articles on the Kusunda language of these same speakers (Donohue/Gautam 2013, 2017; Donohue/Gautam/ Pokharel 2014; Gautam/Donohue 2014). There are other publications on the Kusunda, their language and their history (for example, Pokharel 2005, Bandhu 2012, Pōkharēl 2015; Ācārya, Udāsī and Aaley 2018; Adhikārī 2020; Gyanwali 2021, 2024), including a dictionary (Aaley 2017), materials for the revitalisation of the Kusunda language (e.g., Aaley 2021; Aaley/Bodt 2022) and descriptions of the process of revitalisation (e.g., Aaley/Bodt 2023, 2024). A more detailed overview of the existing literature on the Kusunda and their language, history and culture can be found in Bodt/Aaley (forthcoming).

Since Shafer (1954: 10–12), the Kusunda language has generally been considered an isolate (cf. van Driem 2001: 258, 261; Watters 2006: 20): a language with no know affiliation to the main linguistic phyla of the region, Trans-Himalayan (Sino-Tibetan/Tibeto-Burman), Indo-European, Dravidian, and Austro-Asiatic, or for that matter, to any other language or language family of the world. Despite the lack of a proper description of Kusunda until 2005, there have been several early and more recent attempts to link Kusunda to other languages. Examples are the examinations of the possible links with Tibeto-Burman (Forbes 1881; Rana 2002); with Tibeto-Burman but with a Munda substratum reflected in the pronominalisation system (Grierson 1909 III (I): 273, 399–405); with Burushaski and the languages of the Caucasus (Reinhard and Toba 1970); with Yenisseian (Gurov 1989); with Nihali (Fleming 1996); and with Nihali and 'Indo-Pacific' (Whitehouse 1997; Whitehouse et al., 2003). Van Driem later suggested that Kusunda may be related to Yenisseian and Burushaski (van Driem 2014: 80). None of the proposals listed here has gained much ground, and, most recently, Gerber (2013, 2017) found little evidence for a relation between Kusunda, Burushaski, Yenisseian, and Na-Dene. For the Kusunda, the scientific debate about their possible genetic and linguistic affiliation is not a matter of great relevance. They consider themselves the oldest and original inhabitants of their homeland.

2.2. Tribe, caste, ethnicity, and language in Nepal

Previously, the Nepali words *jāt* and *jāti* were translated as 'caste' and the Nepali word *janajāti*, a combination of *jana* 'people' and *jāti* 'caste', as 'tribe'.[7] However, in this article we refer to a certain social division as 'caste' only when it refers to a group of people within the traditional Hindu *Caturvarṇāśram* (i.e., a *varṇā*), which are the *Brāhmaṇ*, in Nepali *Bāhun*, the *Kṣatriya*, in Nepali *Chētrī*, the *Vaiśya* and the *Śūdra*, and the associated *avarṇā* or cast-less group, sometimes called *Dalit* (literally 'broken' or 'scattered'), also 'untouchables'. This traditional division still exists among the *Madhēśi* Hindu groups in the region along the southern border. Among the *Pahāḍi* or Hindu Hill populations of Nepal, the distinction is less rigid, and the caste system differentiates between the *dvija* 'twice born' groups of *Bāhun* and *Chētrī*, which includes the *Ṭhakurī*, and the *avarṇā* groups, which are the *Kāmī*, *Damāiṁ*, *Bādī*, *Sārkī* and *Gāīnē*. Almost all the *varṇā* and *avarṇā* groups in Nepal are exclusively speakers of various Indo-Aryan languages, and followers of Hinduism. As a noted exception, we find a similar distinction in castes among the Hindu-Buddhist *Nēvār* or *Nēvā* of the Kathmandu valley, who speak a Trans-Himalayan language.[8]

With *ādivāsī janajāti* 'indigenous ethnic group', literally 'aboriginal tribe', we refer to any social and ethnolinguistic group of Nepal outside this Hindu caste system. These are mostly speakers of Trans-Himalayan languages, but also includes speakers of Indo-Aryan languages such as the *Thāru*, speakers of Austroasiatic

languages such as the Santhal and Munda, Dravidian speakers such as the Kurukh (Oraon), and the Kusunda. The appellate 'indigenous ethnic group' follows the national official terminology used in present-day Nepal. The Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (*Nēpāl Ādivāsī Janajāti Mahāsaṅgha*) defines *ādivāsi janajāti* as a community which is "not a part of the Hindu *varṇā* system, have own ancestral territorial land, religion, culture, and history, with their primary mother tongue language, traditional customs and rites, cultural identity, and social structures' (Nēpāl Ādivāsī Janajāti Mahāsaṅgha 2006: 1).[9] While, since the Kusunda language lacks equivalent terminology, the Kusunda earlier referred to themselves with the Nepali terms *mūlvāsī* 'native' or *ādivāsī* 'aboriginal', they have now accepted the official term *ādivāsi janajāti*.

The Census of Nepal 2021(National Statistics Office 2023) shows the ethnic makeup of Nepal as summarised in Table 3. The traditionally empowered high castes make up 31.93% of the total population, while the historically deprived indigenous ethnic groups constitute 34.17% of the population. This is apparently down from 37.19% in the 2001 census, and 36% in the 2011 census.

TABLE 3. SUMMARIZED RESULTS OF THE CASTE AND ETHNICITY DATA OF THE CENSUS OF NEPAL 2021 (ADAPTED FROM NATIONAL STATISTICS OFFICE 2023).

major group	language family	population	%
ādivāsī janajāti	Trans-Himalayan	7,372,927	25.28%
	Indo-Aryan	2,475,387	8.49%
	Austroasiatic	60,899	0.21%
	Dravidian	60,586	0.21%
	Kusunda	253	0.00%
	subtotal	**9,969,955**	**34.17%**
high caste (*Brāhmaṇ* and *Kṣatriya*)		9,315,974	31.94%
middle caste (*Vaiśya*)		3,427,310	11.75%
low caste (*Śūdra*)		942,204	3.23%
Dalit (*Avarṇā*)		3,893,181	13.35%
others (incl. Muslims, foreigners, etc.)		1,611,421	5.53%
not stated		4,436	0.02%
grand total		**29,164,578**	**~100%**

Under the national integration policies that maintained the official Nepalese version of the Hindu caste system dating from the mid-19th century and the higher castes' predominant role in all aspects of life,[10] anyone who attempted to promote the concerns and position of the indigenous ethnic groups and their languages and cultures was accused of being both 'divisive' and 'anti-national' (Bennett/Sijapati/

Thapa 2013: 77). Advocating for anything that may challenge the Hindu, caste-based socio-political system of the country would naturally affect the power base and influence of the high caste Hindus (mainly *Bāhun* and *Chētrī*) who completely controlled politics from the highest level, the monarchy, down to the local governments and the bureaucracy. The easiest way for those in power to counteract such challenges was by questioning the loyalty to the nation of those who posed them and using national laws to suppress them. This extended into the linguistic domain, where "language loyalty" to the national language Nepali was seen as a means for all citizens to show loyalty to the nation Nepal, and the mere use, let alone promotion, of other mother tongues was effectively seen as anti-nationalist.[11]

The effects of the national integration policies, and the control that the Hindu, Nepali-speaking high castes held over society, can be illustrated when we compare Table 3 to Table 4. Table 4 summarises the mother tongue data from the 2021 census. While people belonging to Trans-Himalayan indigenous ethnic groups make up 25.27% of Nepal's population, only 16.58% of Nepal's population consider themselves mother tongue speakers of Trans-Himalayan languages. Similarly, while in terms of population the Magar are the largest indigenous ethnic group, constituting nearly 7% of Nepal's population, only slightly over 3% of the country's population speaks one of the Magaric languages Magar Dhut, Magar Kham, or Dura. Even that figure may be an overestimate, as we know, for example, that there are no speakers of the Dura language left (Schorer 2016), despite a mother tongue speaker population in the census of 1,991 people.[12] Among the Magar, as among many other indigenous ethnic groups, there has been a massive shift from the Magaric languages to Nepali as mother tongue, Aaley is living proof of that shift. The extent of this shift can also be observed from the fact that while the *Pahāḍi* caste groups (*Bāhun*, *Chētrī*, *Kāmī*, *Damāiṁ*, *Bādī*, *Sārkī* and *Gāīnē*) form 38.76% of Nepal's population, their native language, Nepali and it's various dialects, is spoken as the mother tongue by 48.40% of Nepal's population. Indeed, when the various Indo-Aryan tongues spoken in the *Madhēś* region and by indigenous ethnic groups and others is included, this language family accounts for 83.07% of all mother tongue speakers in the country.

TABLE 4. SUMMARIZED RESULTS OF THE MOTHER TONGUE DATA OF THE CENSUS OF NEPAL 2021 (ADAPTED FROM NATIONAL STATISTICS OFFICE 2023).

language family	subgroup	speakers	percentage
Indo-Aryan	Pahāḍi	14,227,335	48.78%
	Madhēśi	7,077,176	24.27%
	ādivāsī janajāti	2,094,649	7.18%
	others	820,708	2.81%
	subtotal	**24,219,868**	**83.05%**
Trans-Himalayan	Tamangic	1,786,375	6.13%
	Kiranti	976,597	3.35%
	Magaric	904,059	3.10%
	Newaric	897,670	3.08%
	Bodic	170,137	0.58%
	Chepangic	71,564	0.25%
	Bodo-Garo	25,118	0.09%
	Raji-Raute	4,988	0.02%
	Western Himalayish	2,492	0.01%
	Lepcha	2,240	0.01%
	subtotal	**4,841,240**	**16.60%**
Austroasiatic		55,916	0.19%
Dravidian		39,877	0.14%
Kusunda		23	0.00%
others (English, sign language)		7308	0.03%
not stated		346	0.00%
grand total		**29,164,578**	**~100%**

It is important to realise that there is no uniformity in the socio-economic development levels of the various indigenous ethnic groups. While some groups, such as the Thakali and Newa, approach the high caste groups in all aspects of human development and social and political participation and representation, other groups lag far behind and are more like the Dalit groups. The Kusunda are one example of such marginalized groups and like with other indigenous ethnic groups and their languages, the marginalization of the Kusunda, their language, and their culture by the dominant Indo-Aryan, Hindu, Nepali-speaking majority in Nepal was one of the factors contributing to the demise of Kusunda (Tumbahang 2010: 73–74; Bodt/Aaley 2024).

This marginalization was also reflected in the official records. Until the turn of the century, the Kusunda were not recognised as a distinct ethnic or social

group. Hence, they were unable to get citizenship papers in the Kusunda name. Most Kusunda did not even apply for official registration as citizens, and those who did were forced to accept another surname, most commonly Ṭhakurī. As an unintended outcome of the promotion of the Hindu, Indo-Aryan national identity, many Kusunda purposely chose to be registered as Ṭhakurī because of the stigma attached to the name Kusunda. Such a 'change' in caste was relatively easy to do in the past, especially for the Kusunda, because the clan names of the Kusunda and the Ṭhakurī were the same. So, a family of Sēn Kusunda could easily adopt the name of Sēn Ṭhakurī and hence promote their social status within society to a higher level. When the Nepal government started the official registration of its citizens, erstwhile Kusunda became registered as Ṭhakurī, further reducing the 'official' Kusunda population, as was also noted by Gyanwali (2021: 22). This especially seems the case for those Kusunda that started living in villages in the districts closer to the central authority in Kāṭhmāṇḍau and Pōkharā, i.e., in Pālpā, Syāṅjā, Kāskī, Tanahum̐ and Gōrkhā. Gōvind Bahādur Ṭhakurī expresses the considerations he and his siblings made as follows:

> *"Our clan* [Nep. thar] *is Śāhī, like Ṭhakurī Śāhī. That's why I kept the surname* [clan name] *Ṭhakurī while registering my citizenship. My elder and younger brothers also wrote the surname Ṭhakurī. When registering with the administration, I wrote Ṭhakurī, I did not write Kusunda.* […] *I changed to Kusunda only after the state started giving social security allowance."* (Rājpur Bhitrī Sikṭā, 05 May 2019)

Others were given the surname Van Rājā 'forest king', such as the parents of the Chairperson of the Nepal Kusunda Development Society (Bodt/Aaley 2024).

2.3. Socio-political changes in Nepal since 2000

The predominant position of the higher castes, the Hindu religion and the Nepali language all started to change in the last decade of the 20th century, with indigenous ethnic groups feeling empowered by gaining their first official mention and recognition in the 1990 Constitution. Indeed, over the last two decades, big political changes have taken place in Nepal, and the country transitioned from the last feudal Hindu kingdom in the world to a federal republic with a multiparty democracy.[13] While the 1996 – 2006 Maoist insurgency (sometimes referred to as the Nepalese Civil War) ravaged families and communities and resulted in an estimated 17,800 deaths (Douglas 2005: 54), it also spearheaded considerable changes in the set up and governance of the country, providing space for more inclusive approaches to development. The conflict started from the deeply embedded social and economic inequalities (Karki/Bhattarai 2003: xiii; Gurung 2005), and as part of the Maoists' class struggle, demands for ethnic autonomy, an end to ethnic oppression, equality of languages, a secular state, and regional devolution gave a decided voice to the excluded indigenous ethnic groups (Sharma 2005). In this way, by playing the

'ethnic card', the Maoist movement attracted indigenous peoples into their ranks, while the profile of the indigenous peoples' rights movement was considerably elevated and put on the national agenda (Gurung 2005), even though the top brass of the Maoist party has always been Bāhun and the indigenous ethnic groups were mainly relegated to foot soldiers and cannon fodder. With the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2006, the emphasis in Nepal shifted from state reforming to that of state restructuring to accommodate the excluded (Bhattachan 2009).

Nepal's progressive post-2006 approach to indigenous minorities and their rights is also reflected in its ratification of international treaties and conventions. On the 13th of September 2007, the United National General Assembly adopted Resolution 61/295, the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples[14], which was also supported by Nepal.[15] In 2007, Nepal ratified the International Labour Organisation's 1989 Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (No. 169)[16], the only internationally binding treaty on indigenous peoples' rights (Webster and Gurung 2005). Nepal hitherto remains the only country in Asia[17] that has done so.[18]

In late 2008, members of Nepal's first constituent assembly belonging to indigenous ethnic groups decided to cooperate across party lines and establish an Indigenous Peoples' Caucus. This Caucus aimed to analyse how the international human rights framework could be used to promote the recognition of indigenous peoples' rights to culture, language, religion, natural resources, self-determination, and meaningful participation in political processes. But the Caucus was placed under restrictions that made it difficult to operate (Leslie 2015: 355). Adoption of a new constitution was halted because of overt resistance in the political parties towards bringing about fundamental changes that would significantly alter the centuries-old concentration of power and resources in the hands of a small national elite. In particular, there was resistance against the proposals for an ethnicity- or identity-based federal structure of the state, which was seen by the old elites as a carrier of divisiveness and disintegration. A changed political landscape in which the traditional, more conservative parties regained control meant that in subsequent years the indigenous voice in Nepalese politics was further diminished.

Consequently, the Constitution of Nepal promulgated by the second constituent assembly in September 2015 was in many respects "… finalized by the same age-old Caste Hill Hindu Elites without the explicit consent of large sections of the governed." (Ghale 2006: 63). According to many indigenous activists, the progress that was made in including indigenous ethnic and minority rights in the interim constitution of the first constituent assembly was considerably eroded in the constitution that was finally adopted (Ghale 2006: 64), failing to extend the protection of the rights of Nepal's indigenous ethnic groups offered by an international declaration and a legally binding international convention. Some of the provisions in the constitution that do not work in favour of indigenous ethnic groups include: the reduced proportional representation, down to 40% from 45%

in the interim constitution, with no proportionality in armed forces, representatives abroad, constitutional wings, and the judiciary; demarcation of federal boundaries and election constituencies not representative of indigenous populations; secularism while safeguarding the *sanātan dharma* (Hinduism) and protecting the – for Hindus holy – cow as the national animal; freedom of religion while enacting legislation against 'converting a person of one religion to another religion, or disturbing the religion of other people'; the institution of a language commission versus the status of Nepali as national and official language; and the repeated inclusion of the Khas Arya (Indo-Aryan Hindus) as a separate, specifically mentioned group, for example, in proportional representation in the house of representatives and provincial assemblies, the right to equality and social justice, and as target for special provisions by law, while most indigenous ethnic groups are not mentioned that specifically. In all, 29 provisions of the constitution were found to be discriminatory, 49 were found to be exclusionary, and 11 were considered oppressive against indigenous people (Lawyers' Association for Human Rights of Nepalese Indigenous Peoples 2016: 19).

Although Nepal's transition to democracy was far from peaceful, and there are continued struggles, one of the major outcomes of the democratisation movement has been that progressively more attention is being paid to the cultural and linguistic diversity of the nation. At least in theory, considerable rights, and the responsibility of the state to secure them, have been enshrined in the constitution, making Nepal perhaps one of the most progressive countries of South Asia in this respect. Section 32 of the Constitution of Nepal[19] assures the 'fundamental right' to language and culture, where every person and community has the right to use their language, participate in cultural life, and promote and protect their language, script, culture, cultural civilisation, and heritage. The role of the state is to promote national unity by developing a multilingual policy, maintaining mutual harmony, tolerance, and solidarity among different languages, and developing cooperative relations among the federal units.

The specific mention of these rights is encouraging ethnic, cultural, and linguistic consciousness among people who were for long marginalised within the traditional caste-based Hindu social structure of the country. They envisage a Nepal where the dominance of the high-caste minority over the highly diverse majority population is curtailed, and the fundamental exclusion of indigenous ethnic communities and others is addressed. While at the national level achieving this vision is a slow process fraught with resistance by those with vested interests (Bennett/ Parajuli 2013: 6), at the local and regional level, ethnicity-based organisations have been proliferating. The Kusunda are no exception. Other examples can be found in the volume edited by Lecomte-Tilouine and Dollfus (2003).

2.4. Language under Nepal's new Constitution

Article 287 of the Constitution calls for the establishment of a Language Commission to study, research and monitor the languages within Nepal and prepare the basis for their promotion, development, and recognition as an official language. Hence, the Nepal Language Commission (*Nēpāl Bhāṣā Āyōg*) was instituted with a national mandate. The Nepal Language Commission has been working to determine the criteria that need to be met for recognition as an official language; to establish a baseline for the work already done on each language; to compile the folklore; and to develop linguistic translation systems (Nēpāl Bhāṣā Āyōg 2020). Work has been initiated in close contact and cooperation with the speakers of the respective languages and the linguistic community. To date, the Nepal Language Commission has recognized 131 languages of Nepal. The commission has also been supporting linguists, including community linguists, to document and describe these languages and their associated cultures. This has resulted in surveys, grammatical descriptions, dictionaries, teaching materials and other outputs (Nēpāl Bhāṣā Āyōg 2020: 113–137).

3. Research findings

The socio-political changes that affected Nepal in the first two decades of the 21st century have had considerable impact on the Kusunda people and their identity as well. Increased awareness and ethnic consciousness, and official recognition of this, has translated into administrative measures to support these marginalized groups and in plans for their socio-economic upliftment and development. For the Kusunda, reasserting their unique linguistic identity through language revitalization is seen as paramount in redefining their ethnic identity. In the words of the Dhan Bahādur Kusuṇḍā, chairperson of the Nepal Kusunda Development Society:

> *"Before, we* [Kusunda] *used to live in the forest. Everything to eat we found in the forest. We used to know exactly which kind of food would be available in which forest at which time, and the same for the medicinal herbs. In the forest, we used to make lean-to's from branches. We used to make bows and arrows, snares, and nettle bags. We had our own songs, dances, and demeanour. Later, we started living in the village. After we started living in the village, our way of life changed. We started farming, we started raising chickens, goats, and cows. Our culture has disappeared. We forgot our own language. We lost the Kusunda identity* [Nep. cinārī]. *We are not able to go and live in the forest. But at least we can learn our language now."* (Ghōrāhī, 29 March 2023).

Ultimately, however, they consider a Kusunda "homeland" as the only way in which their unique identity can be preserved and promoted for posterity.

3.1. Impact of socio-political changes

Starting with the 2001 census of Nepal, the Kusunda were mentioned as one of the 59 officially recognised indigenous nationalities of Nepal (Ministry of Law and Justice 2002: 57–58). In 2004, the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities categorised the Kusunda as the first[20] on the list of 'endangered indigenous nationalities' (Bhattachan 2005: 81). From 2006 onwards, the administration started issuing Nepalese citizenship identity documents to every citizen of the country. The Kusunda living closer to population centres where issuing of identity documents started, such as those in Kapilvastu and Gōrkhā, continued to adopt surnames such as Ṭhakurī or Van Rājā.

The Nepal Kusunda Development Society (*Nēpāl Kusuṇḍā Vikās Samāj*) was established in Ghōrāhī, Dāṅ in 2010. The society aims to represent the Kusunda people in Nepal and uplift their situation. The Nepal Kusunda Development Society is led by the Chairperson Dhan Bahādur Kusuṇḍā who is assisted by seven to eleven board members. The Nepal Kusunda Development Society claims to represent all the Kusunda people in Nepal. One of the first actions of the Nepal Kusunda Development Society was to push with the Nepal Federation for Indigenous Nationalities and the government to not only recognise the Kusunda as a valid indigenous ethnic group, but also to practically implement measures to develop and protect them. One of the first measures was the issuance of identity documents in the Kusunda name. Direct registration as Kusunda only happened for the applicants from Pyuṭhān and Dāṅ districts, whose citizenship papers were processed relatively late, whereas others had to change their surname to Kusunda officially through the Nepal Federation for Indigenous Nationalities and the government. Recently, more ethnic Kusunda with surnames such as Ṭhakurī and Van Rājā have started the process to have their official surname changed back to Kusunda, in part because of the financial incentives provided by the government.

3.2. Socio-economic development

To be recognized as an indigenous ethnic group in Nepal, groups are measured against criteria such as having an own religion, culture, history, mother tongue, customs and rites, cultural identity, and social structures. The Kusunda have lost much of their own traditional religious and cultural practices and social structure after their change from a nomadic existence to a scattered settled existence. Despite this, through the awareness raised by the Nepal Kusunda Development Society and Nepal Federation for Indigenous Nationalities, the Kusunda have been recognised as one of the most marginalised indigenous ethnic groups in Nepal. The official criteria for recognition as an indigenous ethnic group direct the focus of revitalization efforts to aspects of their culture (section 3.3) and their language (section 3.4), while there is also an associated drive for a shared homeland (section

3.5). However, both the Kusunda and the Nepal government have realised that one of the main supporting factors for the formation, preservation and rejuvenation of culture and identity is the need for the bearers of that culture and identity to be able to sustain themselves. In the words of Dhan Bahādur Kusuṇḍā, chairperson of the Nepal Kusunda Development Society:

"The problem is, you can't die of starvation while saving your culture!"

(Ghōrāhī, 26-03-2022)

Basically, all the Kusunda are subsistence farmers. Only 20% of the Kusunda occupy and cultivate *ailānī* 'non-registered' land[21], while the remaining 80% are tenants or sharecroppers on land owned by others. They grow wheat, barley, maize, finger millet, and vegetables. While most Kusunda rear chickens and goats, only some of them own cattle or water buffaloes. The insecure land tenure combined with a lack of funds prevents any form of investment, including the construction of more permanent housing. To address the land ownership and housing issue, the government has provided funds and technical backstopping under the national housing programme to each Kusunda family to build a proper house. But even these improved houses are commonly on small plots that do not include any substantial agricultural land suitable for farming. Any agricultural produce is barely sufficient for own consumption, and there is no excess that can be sold. As the local Nepalese economy has become increasingly monetized, cash has become a necessity to buy essential food items, clothing, pay for children's education, etc. As a result, both those Kusunda that have benefited from the government housing intervention, and those that have not, need to take on paid jobs. But finding such jobs is not easy, and a lack of education and skills is a major impediment.

Both literacy and educational qualifications of the Kusunda continue to be below those of the average Nepalese population. While literacy in Nepali, defined as basic reading and writing skills, among the Kusunda is 100% for those in the age group 10-25 years, this rapidly declines to 40% in the age group 26-50, and of the Kusunda of 50 years and older, only 2% has some literacy in Nepali. There are only two Kusunda who are currently attending a bachelor's degree, while six Kusunda have completed class XII and did not study further, and twelve Kusunda completed class X and did not study any further. In other words, even though in the past decade or so all Kusunda children have attended school and completed their basic education till Class X, only few continue their studies afterwards. The main reasons for not continuing education are a lack of funds, the need to find paid employment, and, for girls, marriage. In the present situation in Nepal, even those with a bachelor's or a master's degree can't find paid employment, leaving those with only a Class X or XII certificate to vie for a limited pool of unskilled job opportunities. All Kusunda have attended government schools, where quality of education is commonly below that of private schools, further reducing their chances of gainful employment.

Because of this lack of education and skills, the general excess of manual labour force in Nepal, and a discrepancy between the demand for labour in urban centres versus the rural areas where the Kusunda live, less than 10% of the Kusunda has a paid job. Such jobs are often temporary and include road and house construction, cook or waiter in a restaurant, shop assistant, driver and handyman, car repair and servicing mechanic, or house cleaner. None of the Kusunda work in government service. In order to diverse the sources of income, the government came up with several initiatives. Kusunda households were provided with goats for goat-rearing. Through the Nepal Kusunda Development Society, the Nepal Federation for Indigenous Nationalities has also organised skills trainings, such as a training as a driver, motorcycle mechanic, tailor or electrician, and trainings to make fibre carrying bags and stuffed toys. In addition, each Kusunda is entitled to 4,000 Nepal rupees (approximately 35 US$) a month in government support, which for most Kusunda households remains the main or only source of cash income. To increase the educational level of the Kusunda, the government provides partial sponsorship, i.e., hostel accommodation and school fees, to 12 Kusunda secondary school students from the mid-western districts in Dharnā, Ghōrāhī, Dāṅ. Because of the benefits accruing to people officially registered as Kusunda, more and more ethnic Kusunda people who had registered their official surname as Ṭhakurī or Van Rājā have tried to change it to Kusunda, a procedure supported by the Nepal Kusunda Development Society.

Criticism of all these efforts and projects of the Nepal government can also be heard. The experience of the Kusunda, and indeed the vast majority of the people of Nepal (e.g., Ghale 2006: 69), has been that the successive governments and the projects that they plan and allocate budget for and execute are plagued by incompletion, delay, corruption, nepotism, and misappropriation of funds. Similarly, the widespread belief is that local governments, contractors, and project implementers, including international agencies, siphon of considerable chunks of the budget, delivering substandard work at high cost and in that way accrue very limited progress to the intended beneficiaries.

3.3. Cultural revival

The Kusunda have long given up on their erstwhile nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyle, and with it, lost much of the associated culture (Bodt/Aaley 2024). They stopped foraging and hunting in the forest, and their knowledge of edible plants and their hunting techniques disappeared. In-depth knowledge of medicinal plants died with the demise of Gyani Maiya Sen Kusunda in 2020, while the Kusunda form of shamanism ceased to be practiced when Lil Bahadur Shahi Kusunda died in 2023. Kusunda shamanism included features such as the expulsion of malevolent spirits that had taken possession of people, causing physical or mental afflictions, and the propitiation of spirits and deities residing in elements of the natural environment,

such as trees, rocks, springs etc. in the forest. The Kusunda *begei* 'shamans' were also renowned for being able to control the weather, including making it rain or stopping the rain. Instead, the Kusunda now follow the Hindu practices common across Western and Central Nepal, with rites of passage such as *nvāran* 'naming ceremony', *annaprāśana* 'first rice feeding' and *chēvar* 'first hair cut ceremony'. While upon her death Gyani Maiya still received a traditional Kusunda burial followed by *kiriyā*, Hindu rituals of mourning by her relatives, the other Kusunda are cremated upon their death. The Kusunda held certain taboos, such as those on hunting, killing and eating hoofed and ground-dwelling animals; the consumption of milk; and the use of cow dung for any purpose. The Kusunda no longer observe these taboos, and they now eat meat of domesticated hoofed animals and drink the ubiquitous Nepalese milk tea like the majority of Nepalese people. The Kusunda stopped wearing their traditional dress and they no longer know how to weave their traditional *amji* 'nettle fibre bags'. The Kusunda have also given up on their old marriage customs, such as marriage at a young age (typically 15 or 16 for boys and 12 or 13 for girls) and ethnically endogamous but clan exogamous, maternal cross-cousin marriage, i.e., within the own ethnic group but with a spouse from a different clan, preferably the child of their father's sister. During the last century, the decreasing number of Kusunda, their nomadic lifestyle and their marriage customs resulted in fewer and fewer opportunities for endogamous marriages. Most Kusunda married with people of other ethnic groups and settled among them, and their erstwhile migration pattern, is still reflected in the present-day distribution of the Kusunda populations. While Kusunda courtship and marriage customs earlier included the compulsory presentation of meat of the *egamba* 'civet cat' and meat and eggs of the *pui* 'monitor lizard', the dowry now consists of whatever cash and gold can be obtained. More details on the erstwhile cultural features of the Kusunda can be found in, for example, Reinhard (1968, 1969), while Gyanwali (2021) describes the relations between the Kusunda and other ethnic groups of Nepal, Gyanwali (2024) writes about the taboos of the Kusunda, and Bodt/Aaley (2024) describe the decline of the cultural features of the Kusunda.

But the reality is also that no Kusunda would ever want to wear their original dress, that caused other ethnic groups to call them *dhusrōphusrō ra nāṅgō-bhutuṅgō* 'shabby and naked'. The Kusunda can never revert to a life in the forest, as no Kusunda will ever be able to learn when to look for which medicinal plants and what ailments they cured, and no Kusunda will be allowed to hunt like they did before. No Kusunda can learn the shamanistic practice anymore, and the understanding of and belief in the deities of the forest is gone.

Hence, Kusunda cultural revival involves the preservation of whatever little can be retrieved, and a reinvention of Kusunda culture adapted to the 21st century. Supported by the local government, the Nepal Kusunda Development Society has collected handicraft and household items such as bows and arrows and nettle fibre

bags. These will be preserved and ultimately displayed in a museum. The Nepal Kusunda Development Society commissioned Aaley to write and publish a booklet describing the history, culture, and language of the Kusunda (Aaley 2022). The Nepal Kusunda Development Society has also supported a modified and modernised Kusunda dress for males and females for cultural events (Aaley 2022: 19). This dress is very much similar to the standard Nepali dress and much less reminiscent of descriptions of the traditional Kusunda dress mentioned in earlier sources.[22] For autumn 2024, a Kusunda Festival is planned to take place in Dang, in which all the Kusunda people in Nepal will be invited to participate. There will be presentations, discussion, language classes, and other activities to forge a sense of unity among the Kusunda and to present themselves to the general public in Nepal.

However, for the Kusunda, none of the aspects of cultural revival has the same importance as the revival of their language.

3.4. Linguistic revival

While previous researchers and academics that worked on Kusunda, journalists, and the general public had already given up the language as moribund or even extinct, the Kusunda community represented by the Nepal Kusunda Development Society was not yet ready to accept this fact (Aaley/Bodt 2023). Still, the Nepal Kusunda Development Society was aware that within the next decade, the unique Kusunda language, culture, and tradition would likely become lost forever. Hence, the Nepal Kusunda Development Society expressed a great interest in the description and documentation of the Kusunda language and culture with the ultimate hope of revitalising it in the near future. For the Kusunda people, there is an intimate connection between their language and their ethnicity. Basically, all the distinctive cultural aspects of Kusunda life in the past, such as the nomadic life, the lean-tos, the taboos, the religious practices, and the food habits, have disappeared. Therefore, the Kusunda feel that their language is the only factor that can distinguish someone who is an 'ethnic' Kusunda, in other words, someone who has Kusunda ancestry, citizenship papers and the surname Kusunda, from a 'real' Kusunda. In the words of Kamalā Sēn Khatrī, the last speaker of the language:

> *"Nowadays, there are no real Kusunda. There are only people who call themselves Kusunda. In the past, the Kusunda used to eat only jungle fowl, monitor lizard and civet cat. Now they also eat pork and buff* [buffalo meat]. *And even the Kusunda language is not there anymore. At least, the Kusunda language should be there."* (Ghōrāhī, 23-03-2022)

and:

> *"The participants* [student learners] *in Dharnā have become Kusunda now, because they know the* [Kusunda] *language."* (Ghōrāhī, 23-03-

2022)

In order to address the imminent extinction of the Kusunda language, the aspirations of the Kusunda community and the goals of the Nepal Language Commission met in a Kusunda revitalization project as part of the Nepal Language Commission's long term project to preserve and promote the indigenous languages of the country through short term skill-oriented trainings. In the year 2019-2020, this project has focused on Baram (Balkura), Tilung Rai and Kusunda. After a one year break due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the project focused on Kusunda, Lungkhim and Dura in 2021-2022. Kusunda is the only language for which several consecutive trainings have been approved and supported, with the fourth session taking place in 2022-2023 (Aaley/Bodt 2023; Bodt/Aaley forthcoming).

Despite the initial success of the Kusunda classes and the enthusiasm of the learners, it will take considerable time and effort to elevate the learner's proficiency to a level that they can actually use Kusunda in daily life. The classes have hitherto mainly focused on learning vocabulary and simple sentences, rather than on developing conversational skills. Perhaps, the classes should be seen as an initiatory rite, in which ethnic Kusunda and other interested learners obtain knowledge of, and a sense of pride in, the Kusunda language and culture. Within Rubin's five levels of fluency as possible outcomes for indigenous language learning classes (Rubin: 1999: 20), the Kusunda learners seem to be at the passive and symbolic levels, being able to understand common words or phrases and to use common phrases and sentences in formal settings, as symbols of language participation and cultural ownership. The passive and symbolic levels of fluency are characteristic of indigenous language learning at the early stages of language revitalisation (Fishman 2001), with a focus more on cultural empowerment than on the development of language proficiency. Once the sense of pride and basic knowledge has been restored – and the impression is that that has happened, at least for the present generation of learners – a next step would be to increase the competence in the spoken language. However, the continuity of the Kusunda classes is threatened by several factors, including the passing out of students after class 12, limited funds and availability of teachers, and socio-economic pressures on student and adult learners (Aaley/Bodt 2023). In the words of Tēj Bahādur Kusuṇḍā, a Kusunda from Surkhēt district:

> *"I am Kusunda, but I don't know how to speak the Kusunda language. I came to Dāṅ and studied the Kusunda language for 90 hours. My house is in Surkhēt district. Coming to Dāṅ, I really want to learn the Kusunda language. But I have to take care of my family. Dāṅ is far away. There is also a problem of money to come and go."* (Gurbhākōṭ, 29 March 2020).

3.5. A Kusunda "homeland"?

The Kusunda people have realised that their scattered residence and thus absence

of a viable Kusunda community is one of the primary factors in the gradual loss of the language and one of the biggest impediments to their survival as a distinct indigenous ethnic group (Bodt/Aaley 2024). The Kusunda also realise that having a claim on 'own ancestral territorial land' is one of the defining characteristics of an indigenous ethnic community in Nepal. However, as a previously nomadic and now scattered settled group, the Kusunda have a precarious claim to make. No other community in Nepal would agree to the original Kusunda home range as defined in the introduction of this paper as the Kusunda ancestral territorial land. And many Kusunda families continue to live on marginal *ailānī* 'non-registered' land, government land that has not been claimed by any private individual, for which no land revenue or tax has to be paid, and from which they can be evicted by the local community, rich landowners or a local or regional government at any given moment in time.

A proposal to resettle Kusunda families in a single location to preserve their language and culture was floated in a 1987 article written for a Nepali newspaper by Hēmant Rāj Bhaṇḍārī (Van Driem 2001: 261). Ever since its establishment, the Nepal Kusunda Development Society has also proposed creating a village community where the few remnant Kusunda people could settle together in a single defined geographical location. The aim is to obtain five to seven *bigha* (33,860 to 47,404 square meters) of non-registered land, but a minimum of one to two *bigha* (6,772 to 13,544 square meters) is required. There, they could have a primary school that teaches Kusunda as the mother tongue for the lower grades in addition to the standard curriculum in Nepalese and English. There could be non-formal adult education and other programs that would encourage use of Kusunda in daily life. The Kusunda settlers could be provided with plots of land in ownership, which they could use for agriculture purposes, and a community forest could be established that would enable them to reconnect with the forest and its resources. There should be adequate infrastructure (roads and telecommunications) and facilities (electricity, water) and they should also have access to employment and skills training, so it should be located near a major population centre. Providing access to land in full ownership, funds for basic housing, education, and employment would alleviate the often-marginalised conditions in which many Kusunda households live at present. In this way, a Kusunda community could be created that would revitalize both the language and the culture. The site could also be visited by academics interested in the Kusunda and their language and by tourists interested in seeing the Kusunda culture.

Donating land to disadvantaged communities is not without precedent in Nepal. During the 20th century, there was massive migration of people from the hills to the Tarāī. These settlers registered the land that was originally cultivated (but not legally owned) by the people of mainly the Thāru indigenous ethnic group in their name, forcing the Thāru into debt and a system of bonded labour called *kamaiyā*, while their daughters were forced into bonded household labour known as *kamalārī*.

In 2000, this system was abolished, the people freed, and their outstanding debts to their landowners cancelled. The process of rehabilitation of these former bonded labourers, including giving them land ownership and housing and access to facilities, is still an ongoing process marred by political inertia, unwillingness, and inability (Maharjan 2022). Similarly, in 2005, the District Forest Office of Makwanpur district in central Nepal provided six hectares of land to 23 households comprising 89 people of the Bankariya community (Lama 2023). The Bankariya have been recognised as an indigenous ethnic group in Nepal, although the language they speak is a variety of the Trans-Himalayan language Chepang. Like the Kusunda, the Bankariya were a forest-dwelling nomadic tribe, a lifestyle they reportedly continued until the end of the Maoist conflict (United Nations Development Programme Nepal 2021; Gyanwali 2022; Lama 2023). In return for giving up their nomadic existence, the Bankariya were promised land and concrete houses as well as support to start up schools and health facilities on the leased land. However, besides citizenship identity papers and a monthly allowance, and despite repeated requests, these promises have been reiterated, but never materialised. The land was provided on a 20 year lease term, which is now due to expire, and issuing official land ownership certificates is still pending. Moreover, the land on which they are living has been annexed by the adjacent Parsa National Park (Magar 2022; Lama 2023).

Unlike the Kusunda, the Bankariya were already living mostly together in the area that was allotted to them. And the Thāru *kamaiyā* and Bankariya experiences illustrates the multiple problems associated with the idea of rehabilitation of marginalized groups through the provision of land. The question is also where and how much land the authorities in Nepal would be willing and able to allocate for the Kusunda. The Nepal Kusunda Development Society has made this idea public several times (e.g., Śarmā 2018), and while the authorities agree that it is a good idea (Ghimirē 2021), they have not come forward with tangible support. While the Nepal Kusunda Development Society proposed a site in Kulmohar, Lamahī, Dāṅ several years ago, the lack of Kusunda people in the area and the demise of Gyani Maiya halted the project, as the mayor of the municipality argued that providing the Kusunda with land would invariably result in protests from other people in the area. Moreover, the Nepal Kusunda Development Society Chairperson is not convinced that the full benefits of such a project would reach the intended beneficiaries, considering the levels of corruption he perceives affecting many departments. Still, the Nepal Kusunda Development Society has proposed an integrated settlement in Dāṅ district (Ghimirē 2021). As Dhan Bahādur Kusuṇḍā, the chairperson of the Society said:

> *"The Nepal Kusunda Development Society is aiming for an integrated settlement. We are now preparing for a Kusunda festival. This festival will provide a good opportunity for the Kusunda people living in different districts to meet each other. Until and unless there is an*

> *integrated settlement for the Kusunda people, the Kusunda language and culture cannot be saved. In order to save the Kusunda language, the integrated settlement of the Kusunda people is necessary."* (Ghōrāhī, 11 December 2023)

Such an integrated settlement project would involve the relocation of a considerable number of households consisting of multiple individuals. Beyond the question of whether this is practically feasible, there is also the question of whether any wish to revitalise the Kusunda culture and language is worth such profound changes in people's personal lives. However, because the resources that the Kusunda people have in their present locations are so limited and the land they live on is almost invariably non-registered, most will readily volunteer to participate in such a resettlement project.

Despite these practical problems, the creation of a Kusunda community would greatly facilitate the inter- and intragenerational transmission of the language, the continuation of language classes, and the endogamous marriage of Kusunda youngsters. In addition, this idea may contribute to the socio-economic uplifting of the marginalised Kusunda people and the preservation or resurgence of their culture and identity.

4. Conclusion

While there has been an increased focus on indigenous and tribal people's rights globally, this has thus far not resulted in the inclusion of these rights in major policy documents regarding development. For example, the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals for 2030 (A/RES/70/1) refers to indigenous peoples six times, three times in the political declaration; two in the targets under Goal 2 on Zero Hunger (target 2.3) and Goal 4 on education (target 4.5) – and one in the section on follow up and review that calls for indigenous peoples' participation[23]. But the Agenda lacks clear references to self-determination and collective rights in terms of land, health, education, and culture, including, for example, in providing mother tongue education and in securing collective land rights instead of individual land titles.[24]

Like on the global level, indigenous land rights and the right to self-determination are the most pressing unresolved issues for the indigenous ethnic groups in Nepal. Because, in the course of history, most of the indigenous land has been appropriated by other groups or nationalised by the government, indigenous land ownership and control over these lands is considered a paramount concern that has not been addressed in Nepal's Constitution at all. Convention 169 of the International Labour Organisation stipulates as specific objective that signatories should enable the transfer of ownership and management of natural resources, land and services, such as education and health, to indigenous communities (Jones/

Landford 2011: 375). The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples similarly grants indigenous groups substantive and procedural rights over lands, territories and natural resources (Jones/Landford 2011: 384). Despite Nepal being a signatory country of both the ILO Convention and the UN Declaration, the Constitution Drafting Committee's sub-committee on fundamental rights, directive principles of state and commissions decided not to make any provision regarding a pre-emptive right to self-determination for indigenous and local communities to use land and natural resources (Ghale 2006: 73). The explanation given by a member of the sub-committee was that "*all* people should have *equal* right to land and natural resources of the country and [therefore we] decided not to include the pre-emptive right to self-determination in the fundamental rights" (Ghale 2006: 73).

Among all other indigenous ethnic groups, the case of the Kusunda (and maybe the remaining nomadic groups of Raute, Fortier 2003) is perhaps the most precarious. Although they did have a clearly delimitated territorial home range in the past, as a former nomadic community they lack sedentary settlements as a group and live scattered across a wide geographical area on lands to which they lack the title and ownership. A Kusunda homeland, as proposed by the Kusunda themselves, may be the only way in which the rights, culture and language of this unique indigenous group could be preserved for posterity.

Notes

1 https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights.

2 www.zenodo.org.

3 See section 2.2 for an explanation of this and other terms used in this paper.

4 Transliterations and transcriptions of toponyms, names of ethnic groups and castes, Nepali words, and names of Nepalese authors and their works when written in the Dēvanāgarī script are all following the standard Indological transcription unless the Nepalese author has published in English, in which case we use the published (Romanised) name. The only major exception is the name Kusunda itself, where we use the most common Roman transliteration Kusunda rather than its (correct) transliteration Kusuṇḍā.

5 Nepal can be divided into five physiographic regions: the *Tarāī* (plain lowlands), the *Śivālik* (i.e., the lowland Śivālik or Curē hills and the *bhitrī Tarāī uptyakā* 'Inner Tarāī valleys'), the *Madhya pahāḍ* 'Middle Hills' (the lower mountain ranges), the *Uccapahāḍ* 'High Mountains', and the *Himāl* 'high Himalayas'.

6 From 1972 until the promulgation of a new constitution in 2015, Nepal was divided into five *Vikāskṣētra* 'development regions': Eastern, Central, Western, Mid-Western, and Far-Western. In the new constitution, these development regions were replaced by seven *pradēś* 'provinces'. Because of their convenience, we continue to use the old East-West division of Nepal into development regions in this paper.

7 The English terms 'tribe' and 'tribal', with their origins in the British colonial literature, have perpetuated without much questioning in India, despite their inherently implied connotations of 'backwardness' and 'isolation.' These terms are nowadays considered offensive in Nepal.

8 A detailed overview of the historical development of the caste and ethnicity divisions and

their nomenclature can be found, for example, in Burghart (1984: 116–119) and Levine (1987).

9 See for the historical development of the term and its criteria, Ghale (2006: 66–68).

10 See, for example, Bhattachan (2009), Lawoti (2005), Limbu (2005: 41–44).

11 See for more discussion on the concept of "language loyalty", the link to nationalism, and its effect on minority languages, the essays by Fishman (1989: 97–176 and 269–367).

12 There are more examples that indicate that the 2021 census results need to be taken with extreme caution and could at best be used to make broad generalisations about the situation and trends. For example, the 2021 census has 273 people ethnically identifying as Kusunda, 23 mother tongue speakers of Kusunda, 32 people with Kusunda as second language and 87 people who consider Kusunda their ancestral language. Our own extensive research has found only 161 people ethnically identifying as Kusunda, while there is only one mother tongue speaker left.

13 See Lawyers' Association for Human Rights of Nepalese Indigenous Peoples (2020) for a year-to-year overview of the indigenous peoples' movement in Nepal between 2006 and 2020.

14 https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf. Accessed June 15, 2023.

15 https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/609197?ln=en. Accessed June 15, 2023. Notably, self-perceived champions of human rights such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand only endorsed this Declaration in , 2010, 2009 and 2010, respectively, while the United States has hitherto only expressed its support for the Declaration, without actually endorsing it.

16 https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:55:0::NO::P55_TYPE,P55_LANG,P55_DOCUMENT,P55_NODE:REV,en,C169,/Document#:~:text=Indigenous%20and%20tribal%20peoples%20shall,female%20members%20of%20these%20peoples. Accessed June 15, 2023.

17 https://www.survivalinternational.org/law. Accessed June 15, 2023. Only 23 mostly Latin American nations have ratified this Law. Most conspicuously absentees are, again, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, in addition to most other Western countries.

18 See for an analysis of the ratification and early lack of implementation of the convention, Jones/Langford (2011).

19 https://www.mohp.gov.np/downloads/Constitution%20of%20Nepal%202072_full_english.pdf. Accessed April 24, 2022.

20 To what extent this position on the list reflects the Kusunda's categorisation according to the major indicators of literacy rate, housing unit, land holding, and other economic assets and the subsidiary indicators of education level (graduate and above) and population size is unclear.

21 Non-registered land refers to government land that had not been claimed by any private individual. Village communities offered that land to the Kusunda when they settled down permanently. However, these village communities, but also the local government and the state forestry services, can evict the Kusunda from these plots at any time, making the land tenure extremely insecure, preventing any sense of ownership or incentive for investment.

22 "Kusunda men are said to wear few clothes, - usually nothing but a small loin cloth. Some of my informants spoke of banana-leaves serving the same purpose, and mentioned also belts made of banana fibre. An old Newar man claimed that in his youth he had seen several

Kusunda who did not wear any clothes at all. The only ornaments worn by men are brown bracelets said to be made from some plant. The woman, whom the Governor of Gorkha had seen, wore a loin-cloth and carried, suspended on a string round her neck, a skin bag containing a new-born child." (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1959: 79). "In their general appearance as regards dress they wear clothes similar to other tribes in the area, but previously the men wore only a loincloth and a blanket, and the women wore only a skirt." (Reinhard 1968: 97).

23 https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/2016/Docs-updates/backgrounderSDG.pdf, https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/focus-areas/post-2015-agenda/the-sustainable-development-goals-sdgs-and-indigenous.html. Accessed June 15, 2023.

24 https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2016/10/Short-flyer_UNPFII-Substantive-Inputs-2017.pdf. Accessed June 15, 2023.

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