

International
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Nepal Himalayas

Ramesh Chandra Bisht

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INTERNATIONAL ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF HIMALAYAS

[FIVE VOLUMES]

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VOLUME-FOUR

Nepal Himalayas



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Preface

Covered almost three-fourth in area by the Himalayas, Nepal is a true Himalayan kingdom. Home to nine of the world's fourteen highest peaks, the Nepal Himalayas are one of the highest, remotest and most rugged and different terrain in the world.

Considered an important national subdivision in the classification of the Himalayan ranges, the Nepal Himalayas offer some of the most bountiful,. The Himalayas, awe-inspiring Himalayan landscape. The Himalayas, or 'The Abode of Snow' as it is known in Sanskrit, comprise one of Nature's most breathtaking creations, and it is in this Hindu Kingdom of eco-friendly people that it finds its true home.

The Northern region of Nepal is almost entirely covered by the Great Himalayan Range, the loftiest and highest mountain ranges in the world. With an average of 4570 m peak range, this perennially snow covered area is home not only to the Everest, the highest mountain peak in the world, but other dizzying heights like Kanchenjunga, Chobse, Makalu, etc. Covered in the South by intermediate mountain chains containing ranges such as the Mahabharat and the Churia, the Himalayan land in Nepal ultimately trickles down to the swampy Terai region, which is an extension of the Great North Indian Plains.

This book chronicles the history, geology, ecology and sociology of the Nepal Himalayas. Carving into the heart

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>v</i>
1. Introduction to Nepal Himalayas	1
2. Historical Background	12
3. Geographical Features	23
4. Himalayan Mountains of Nepal	39
5. Biodiversity	68
6. People	114
7. Customs and Traditions	146
8. Government and Politics	184
9. Economy	197
10. Agriculture	214
11. Tourist Destinations	248
<i>Bibliography</i>	272
<i>Index</i>	274

Introduction to Nepal Himalayas

The Himalayas is in fact the youngest and highest mountain system in the world. It extends over 2,400 kms as a vast south-facing area between the Indus and Brahmaputra rivers with Nanga Parbat (8,125 m) and Namcha Barwa (7,755 m) as its terminal high points. Fully a third of 800 kms of its central section traverses Nepal and is known as the Nepal Himalayas. Here congregate more than 250 peaks that exceed 6,000 m in height—a unique concentration of lofty dazzling summits. Of the thirty one Himalayan peaks over 7,600 m, twenty-two like in Nepal Himalayas including eight of the world's fourteen highest giants. These are:

Sagarmatha (Mt. Everest)	8,848 m
Kanchenjunga	8,586 m
Lhotse	8,516 m
Makalu	8,463 m
Cho Oyu	8,201 m
Dhaulagiri	8,167 m
Manaslu	8,163 m
Annapurna	8,091 m

The Himalayan range within Nepal fits into a geographic pattern as the culmination of a series of parallel ranges. The main mountain region, represented by the eternal

ranges, lies about 90 kms north of the Mahabharat Lekh. The intervening space between the two parallel ranges is made up of the lower belt of the low hills (Pahar) and the higher belt of elevated ridges (Lekh) that provide the first intimation of the high snow continuous range but rather a chain of lofty ridges separated by deep gorges. Each of these mountain chains or Himals in turn sends out a maze of spurs studded with numerous peaks.

In the western and central Nepal, there is yet another mountain range that defines the boundary between Nepal and China. This border range has elevations ranging from 5,000 to 6,000 m with comparatively less rugged relief but a harsh climate. Between the main Himalayan range and these border ranges lie some of the elevated Bhot Valleys.

Much of the high country above 5,000 m is under the realm of snow and ice although the permanent snow line may vary according to aspect and gradient. Winter snowfall occurs up to an elevation of 2,000 m and is much heavier in the western part. While winter is harsh and bitter, summer is the season of alpine flowers and is the time of the year when the high pastures teem with grazing animals from lower valleys. For the mountain communities, it is the time for harvesting their main crop before their winter migration to warmer climates.

The country of Nepal can be divided into three parallel bands running from the northeast towards the southwest. Along the north of Nepal runs the Great Himalayan Range, the highest mountain range in the Himalayan system. This range has an average altitude of about 4,570 m (about 15,000 ft) and remains perpetually snow-covered. On this range rise some of the loftiest mountain peaks in the world — Mount Everest, Kanchenjunga, Lhotse, Makalu, Cho Oyu, Dhaulagiri, Manaslu, and Annapurna.

Further south runs a complex system of intermediate ranges at an altitude of 8,000-14,000 ft. Prominent ranges in this mountain system include the Mahabharat and

Churia ranges. High mountain ranges are interspersed with broad inhabited river valleys. The third and southernmost region is the Terai, a swampy terrain which is the northern extension of the Indian plains.

A country of amazing extremes, Nepal is the home of the World's highest mountains, historic cities and the forested plains where the lordly tigers and the great one-horned Rhinoceros trundle at ease. The country can be divided into three main geographical regions:

Mountain Region. The Mountain Region (called Parbat in Nepali) is situated at 4,000 metres or more above sea level to the north of the Hill Region. The Mountain Region constitutes the central portion of the Himalayan range originating in the Pamirs, a high altitude region of Central Asia. Its natural landscape includes Mount Everest and the other seven of the world's ten highest peaks, which are the legendary habitat of the mythical creature, the yeti, or abominable snowman. In general, the snow line occurs between 5,000 and 5,500 metres. The region is characterised by inclement climatic and rugged topographic conditions, and human habitation and economic activities are extremely limited and arduous. Indeed, the region is sparsely populated, and whatever farming activity exists is mostly confined to the low-lying valleys and the river basins, such as the upper Kali Gandaki Valley.

In the early 1990s, pastoralism and trading were common economic activities among mountain dwellers. Because of their heavy dependence on herding and trading, transhumance was widely practiced. While the herders moved their goths (temporary animal shelters) in accordance with the seasonal climatic rhythms, traders also migrated seasonally between highlands and lowlands, buying and selling goods and commodities in order to generate much needed income and to secure food supplies.

Hill Region. Situated south of the Mountain Region, the Hill Region (called Pahar in Nepali) is mostly between

1,000 and 4,000 metres in altitude. It includes the Kathmandu Valley, the country's most fertile and urbanised area. Two major ranges of hills, commonly known as the Mahabharat Lekh and Siwalik Range (or Churia Range), occupy the region. In addition, there are several intermontane valleys.

Despite its geographical isolation and limited economic potential, the region always has been the political and cultural centre of Nepal, with decision-making power centralised in Kathmandu, the nation's capital. Because of immigration from Tibet and India, the hill ranges historically have been the most heavily populated area. Despite heavy out-migration, the Hill Region comprised the largest share of the total population in 1991.

Although the higher elevations (above 2,500 metres) in the region were sparsely populated because of physiographic and climatic difficulties, the lower hills and valleys were densely settled. The hill landscape was both a natural and cultural mosaic, shaped by geological forces and human activity. The hills, sculpted by human hands into a massive complex of terraces, were extensively cultivated. Like the Mountain Region, the Hill Region was a food-deficit area in the early 1990s, although agriculture was the predominant economic activity supplemented by livestock raising, foraging, and seasonal migrating of labourers.

The vast majority of the households living in the hills were land-hungry and owned largely pakho (hilly) land. The poor economic situation caused by lack of sufficient land was aggravated by the relatively short growing season, a phenomenon directly attributable to the climatic impact of the region's higher altitude. As a result, a hill farmer's ability to grow multiple crops was limited. The families were forced to adapt to the marginality, as well as the seasonality, of their environment, cultivating their land whenever they could and growing whatever would survive.

Tarai Region. In complete topographic contrast to the Mountain and Hill regions, the Tarai Region is a lowland tropical and subtropical belt of flat, alluvial land stretching along the Nepal-India border, and paralleling the Hill Region. It is the northern extension of the Gangetic Plain in India, commencing at about 300 metres above sea level and rising to about 1,000 metres at the foot of the Siwalik Range. The Tarai includes several valleys (dun), such as the Surkhet and Dang valleys in western Nepal, and the Rapti Valley (Chitwan) in central Nepal.

The word tarai, a term presumed to be derived from Persian, means "damp," and it appropriately describes the region's humid and hot climate. The region was formed and is fed by three major rivers: the Kosi, the Narayani (India's Gandak River), and the Karnali. A region that in the past contained malaria-infested, thick forests, commonly known as char kose jhari (dense forests approximately 12 kilometres wide), the Tarai was used as a defensive frontier by Nepalese rulers during the period of the British Raj (1858-1947) in India.

In 1991 the Tarai served as the country's granary and land resettlement frontier; it became the most coveted internal destination for land-hungry hill peasants. In terms of both farm and forest lands, the Tarai was becoming Nepal's richest economic region. Overall, Tarai residents enjoyed a greater availability of agricultural land than did other Nepalese because of the area's generally flat terrain, which is drained and nourished by several rivers. Additionally, it has the largest commercially exploitable forests. In the early 1990s, however, the forests were being increasingly destroyed because of growing demands for timber and agricultural land.

Rainfall, winter snow, temperature, aspect and altitude have a profound influence on biodiversity and the composition of the vegetation in Nepal. Nepal has a monsoon climate, dominated by an extended wet season starting in June with the arrival of the South-west Summer

Monsoon. The High Himalaya range retains the moist air masses of the monsoon, increasing precipitation in Nepal and keeping the areas to the north in deep rain shadow. These same mountains also act as a barrier to the cold fronts from central Asia, giving warmer winters to Nepal and northern India. Temperatures can vary widely because of the great altitudinal range, from tropical in the Terai to arctic in the high Himalaya.

Deforestation, industrialisation, and urbanisation have increased temperatures in recent years, as has global warming. Aspect also has important effects, as north-facing slopes receive much less solar radiation than those facing south. The deep river valleys create their own microclimates, and dramatic changes in the vegetation can be seen in relatively small areas with differing aspect and altitude.

Nepal, officially the Kingdom of Nepal, is bordered by China (Tibet) to the north and by India to the south, east and west. More than 80% of Nepalese follow Hinduism, which is higher than the percentage of Indian Hindus, making it the single most Hinduic nation in the world. For a small territory, the Nepali landscape is uncommonly diverse, ranging from the humid Terai in the south to the lofty Himalayas in the north. Nepal boasts eight of the world's fourteen highest mountains, including Mount Everest on the border with China.

Kathmandu is the capital and largest city. The other main cities include Bharatpur, Biratnagar, Bhairahawa, Birgunj, Janakpur, Pokhara, Nepalgunj, and Mahendranagar. The origin of the name Nepal is uncertain, but the most popular understanding is that it derived from Ne (holy) and pal (cave).

After a long and rich history, during which the region splintered and coalesced under a variety of absolute rulers, Nepal became a constitutional monarchy in 1990. However, the monarchy retained many important and ill-defined

powers. This arrangement was marked by increasing instability, both in the parliament and, since 1996, in large swathes of the country that have been fought over by Maoist insurgents. The Maoists, alienated from mainstream political parties, went underground and started a guerilla war against both monarchy and mainstream political parties. They have sought to overthrow feudal institutions, including the monarchy, and establish a republic. This has led to the ongoing Nepalese Civil War in which more than 13,000 people have died.

On the pretext of quashing the insurgents, who now control about 60% of the country, the king closed down the parliament and sacked the elected prime minister in 2002 and started ruling through prime ministers appointed by him. He then unilaterally declared a "state of emergency" early in 2005, and assumed all executive powers. Following the Loktantra Andolan, the king agreed to relinquish the sovereign power back to the people and reinstated the dissolved House of Representatives on April 24, 2006.

Using its newly acquired sovereign authority, on May 19, 2006, the newly resumed House of Representatives unanimously passed a motion to curtail the power of the king and declared Nepal a secular state. As of September, 2006, a complete rewrite of the country's constitution was still expected to happen in the near future.

Nepal is a country with a long historical tradition is an amalgamation of a number of medieval principalities. Before the campaign of national integration launched by King Prithivi Narayan Shah the Kathmandu valley was ruled by the Malla kings, whose contributions to art and culture are indeed great and unique. In 1768 A.D. the Shah dynasty ascended the throne of the unified kingdom. His majesty king Birendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev, was tenth king in the Shah dynasty. The new democratic constitution of the kingdom was promulgated on November 9, 1990. Nepal is one of the founder members of South Asian

association for Regional Cooperation or SAARC, of which the third summit was held in Kathmandu in November 1987.

Nepal has a population of more than 20 million people made of different races living in different regions, with diverse culture, languages and dialects. The Gurungs and Magars live mainly in the west. The Rais, Limbus and Sunuwars inhabit the slopes and valleys of the eastern mid hills. The Sherpas live in the Himalayan region. The Newars constitute an important ethnic group of the capital valley Kathmandu. There are Tharus, Yadavas, Satar, Rajvanshis and Dhimals in the Terai region. The Brahmans, Chhetris and Thakuris are spread generally over most parts of the kingdom. The people are divided into two broad ethnic groups.

(1.) The Indo-Nepalese—which include the Pahari, Newar, Tharu and the people of the Terai, all of which account for nearly 80% of the population.

(2.) Tibeto-Nepalese—who account for the remainder and include the more numerous Tamang, Rai, Limbu, Bhote, Sunwar, Magar and Gurung tribes. The Tibeto-Nepalese are related racially and culturally to the Tibetans.

However, they can be geographically categorised according to their habitats. A wide variety of ethnic groups occupy the mid-hills. The Sherpas who are of Tibeto-Burman stock mainly occupy the higher hills of eastern and central Nepal. The world's tallest peak Mt. Everest is inhabited by Sherpas. The Tharus are one of the original ethnic groups to inhabit the Terai. The Tharus have their own unique religion and practice animism. They have Mongoloid features and speak their own language.

The diverse geography of Nepal ranging from Himalayas in the north to the southern Terai region renders it home to a wide range of culture. Customs and traditions differ from one part of Nepal to another. A conglomeration lies in capital city Kathmandu where cultures are blending to form a national identity.

Kathmandu Valley has served as the country's cultural metropolis since the unification of Nepal in the eighteenth century by Late King Prithvi Narayan Shah from Gorkha. The Valley comprises cities of Lalitpur, Kathmandu and Bhaktapur. Some parts of the three cities provide a peek into the ancient world of the Valley.

A prominent factor in a Nepali's everyday life is religion. The natives of Nepal still follow age-old customs of Hindu and Buddhist religious practices. Adding colour to the lives of Nepalis are festivals the year round which they celebrate with much pomp and joy. It is said that Nepal has more number of festivals than the days in a year. Food plays an important role in the celebration of these festivals.

Nepal is a patriarchal society. Men usually go out to work while women are homemakers. However in cities, roles can differ. Most Nepalis abide by the caste system in living habits and marriage. Rural Nepal is mostly agrarian, while some aspects of urban life carry glitz and glamour of the ultra-modern world.

Music and dance are favourite pastimes in Nepal. Drums and wind instruments required in religious ceremonies have been preserved from ancient times. Devotional songs with folk and classical elements are an important feature of most religious and family occasions. Muttered chants, esoteric tantrik hymns and Nepalese music, whether it is the twang of a four-stringed saringhi or the plaintive notes of a flute, are very popular. Traditional folk musicians or ganes gather for an evening of singing and socialising, classical dancing and trance-like masked dances enliven the Kathmandu Valley and Bhaktapur regions, while no wedding would be complete without the raucous damais-Nepal's modern ensembles.

Hinduism and Buddhism constitute two major religions of Nepal. A remarkable feature of Nepal is the religious homogeneity what exists, particularly between the Hindu

and Buddhist communities. Apart from the Hindus and Buddhists, Muslim from the third largest religious group. The exquisite medieval art & architecture of the Kathmandu valley vividly reflect the artistic ingenuity and the religious tradition of the people.

Nepal is a poor country; nearly half of its population lives below the poverty line. The capital crunch has affected development. The capital market is in its initial stage. Agriculture sustains 76% of the population and accounts for about 39% of the GDP; services comprise 42%, and industry 21%. Hilly and mountainous terrain in the northern two-thirds of the country has made the building of roads and other infrastructure difficult and expensive. There are just over 4,000 km of paved roads, and one 59 km railway line in the south.

A lack of natural resources, its landlocked location, technological backwardness and the long-running civil war have also prevented Nepal from fully developing its economy. The country receives foreign aid from India, China, the United States, Japan and the European Union. The government's budget is about US\$665 million, with expenditures of \$1.1bn. The inflation rate has dropped to 2.9% after a period of higher inflation during the 1990s. The Nepalese Rupee has been tied to the Indian Rupee at an exchange rate of 1.6 for many years.

The spectacular landscape and deep, exotic culture of Nepal represents considerable potential for tourism, but growth in this export industry has been stifled by recent political events. The rate of unemployment and underemployment approaches half of the working-age population. Thus many Nepalese move to India in search of work, the Gulf countries and Malaysia being new sources of work.

Poverty is acute. Nepal receives US\$50 million a year through the Gurkha soldiers who serve in the Indian and British armies and are highly esteemed for their skill and

bravery. The total remittance value is worth around 1 billion USD, including money sent from Arab and Malaysia, who combinedly employ around 200,000 Nepalese.

Nepal's GDP for the year 2005 is estimated at just over US\$37 billion (adjusted to Purchasing Power Parity), making it the 83rd-largest economy in the world. Per-capita income is around US\$1,402, ranked 163rd. Nepal's exports of mainly carpets, clothing, leather goods, jute goods and grain total \$568 million. Import commodities of mainly gold, machinery and equipment, petroleum products and fertiliser total US\$1.419 bn. India (48.8%), the US (22.3%), and Germany (8.5%) are its main export partners. Nepal's import partners include India (43%), the United Arab Emirates (10%), China (10%), Saudi Arabia (4.4%), and Singapore (4%).