



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate. Nepal, a predominantly mountainous country, is about the same size as Wisconsin. It covers 54,362 square miles (140,800 square kilometers). The Himalayas in the north contain some of the world's highest peaks; six are over 26,000 feet (8,000 meters), including Sagarmatha (Mount Everest) at 29,034 feet (8,850 meters). The middle hills comprise the native lands of the famous Gurkha foot soldiers and the site of the capital, Kathmandu. To the south lies the Terai, the cultivated fields and subtropical jungles that form the northern rim of the Gangetic Plain.

Elevation primarily determines Nepal's climate. While temperatures are fairly moderate around 5,000 feet (1,500 meters), they reach extremes of hot and cold at lower and higher elevations, respectively. Soils and vegetation are quite diverse and may vary within a short distance. The cool summers and harsh winters of the north contrast with the subtropical climate of the south. Monsoons from the Indian Ocean bring abundant rainfall to the sub-Himalayan regions between the months of June and September.

History. Various legends surround the ancient history of Nepal. It is known, however, that by the sixth century B.C., the Kirati (of the Rai and Limbu tribes) ruled the land. Buddha was born in 563 B.C. around present-day Lumbini. The rule of the Mallas (10th–18th centuries A.D.) in the fertile Kathmandu Valley is known as Nepal's golden age of arts, a time when most of Nepal's temples and palaces were constructed.

King Prithvinarayan Shah, a Gurkha, defeated the Malla rulers and other principalities to unite Nepal in 1769. An invasion attempt by the British East India Trading Company failed to conquer the country in the early 1800s. The British were so impressed with the courage and tenacity of the Gurkha soldiers

that they allowed Nepal to remain a sovereign nation; Nepal never became a British colony. In 1846, the first of the Rana rulers took control of the government and became prime minister. The Ranas ruled with an iron fist, reducing the authority of the Shah kings and making the position of prime minister hereditary.

The Shah monarchs received sovereignty again when supporters of King Tribhuvan overthrew the Ranas in 1951. Soon after, Nepal opened to the outside world for the first time. For introducing democratic principles, King Tribhuvan is known as the "father of the nation." After several unsuccessful experiments with coalition governments and parliaments, in 1960 King Mahendra inaugurated a party-less system of government controlled by the monarchy.

Demonstrations for democracy in 1990 led King Birendra, son of King Mahendra and Nepal's ruler since 1973, to cancel the ban on political parties. He dissolved the government, became a constitutional monarch, and allowed free elections in 1991. The Nepali Congress Party (NCP) won, but the new government soon found it difficult to meet the voters' high expectations. Economic difficulties led to strikes and other unrest. Elections in 1994 brought a Communist-led coalition to the helm. In 1995, that coalition gave way to another, led by the NCP. By 1996, the political atmosphere had become highly tenuous and combative. In 1997, power changed hands three times, and the resulting instability brought governance and economic progress to a halt. In 1994, a Maoist insurgency began to gain support and recruits among the rural poor. Their attacks soon spread; the conflict has left thousands dead.

In June 2001, Crown Prince Dipendra shot and killed the king (his father) and eight other members of the royal family

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before killing himself. King Gyanendra, the late king's brother, was crowned a few days later. The tragedy deeply shook Nepal's fragile political situation and morale. Although the government and Maoist rebels agreed to a ceasefire in January 2003, peace talks broke down in August, bringing a resumption of violence.

THE PEOPLE

Population. Nepal's population of 26.5 million is growing annually at 2.3 percent. The Kathmandu Valley is densely populated. Kathmandu has about one million residents. Approximately half of the population lives in the Terai. Most Nepalese (86 percent) live in rural settlements near water sources; few towns have more than 10,000 inhabitants. Many groups seasonally shift from one elevation to another to take advantage of varying climates. Others, especially in mountainous districts, periodically go to India for temporary employment, to purchase supplies, and to trade goods. Slightly fewer than 800,000 Nepalese live abroad.

Nepal is ethnically diverse, but caste (social level) separates people more rigidly than race does. One cannot rise above or marry outside of the caste one is born in. About 50 percent of Nepalese are Indo-Aryans. These include the two highest Hindu castes, the *Brahmins* (traditional priests) and *Chhetris* (warriors, including the ruling Shah Dynasty), as well as the *Shudras* (lowest caste, which includes farmers and traders). The *Vaisyas* (merchant and artisan caste) are non-Aryans and are above the Shudras.

Other ethnic groups descend mostly from various Tibeto-Burmese groups that have migrated over millennia from the north or east into Nepal; these include the Gurung, Magar, Rai, Limbu, Thakali, and Sherpa, among others. Some other major groups, such as the Newar (in Kathmandu Valley, the middle hills, and eastern foothills) and Tharu (in the Terai), are probably of mixed origin. Indians and Tibetans also live in Nepal.

Language. As many as 20 major languages are spoken with many different dialects. Nepali, an Indo-Aryan tongue related to Hindi, is the official language and is the primary language of about 20 percent of the population. While most people speak Nepali to some degree, they more readily use their ethnic group's native tongue. Nepali script (called *Devangari*) is related to Sanskrit. Hindi is spoken in the Terai. Newar dominates around Kathmandu. A growing number of urban residents have some fluency in English. Many private schools and colleges use English as the medium of instruction, so the ability to speak English is associated with better education and higher social status.

Religion. Nepal is the only official Hindu nation in the world. About 81 percent of the population is Hindu. Except those in the upper castes, Hindus and Buddhists (11 percent of the population) share customs and worship at each other's shrines. Hindus have also adopted many local animist traditions. Among Hinduism's pantheon of gods, three are supreme: *Brahma* (creator), *Vishnu* (preserver), and *Shiva* (destroyer). The caste system is integral to Hinduism. Although it officially has been abolished, it remains widely practiced, especially in rural areas.

Muslims (4 percent) enjoy mutual respect with Hindus and Buddhists, but they do not share worship practices. About three percent of the population is Kirant, Christian, or another religion. Proselytizing is forbidden.

General Attitudes. Nepalese are religious, family oriented, and modest. Physical purity, spiritual refinement, and humility

are highly valued. People accept incidents as the will of fate or *karma* (consequences of past deeds). Those who rebel against tradition or caste are frowned upon. Most believe to some extent that *bhoot* (ghosts), *pret* (evil spirits), *bokshi* (witches), and *graha dasha* (a bad position of the planets) can cause disease, crop failures, or accidents. Incense, flowers, and foods are offered to pacify the spirits and planets. A rooster or male goat may also be sacrificed.

Wealth and education are admired. Personal privacy is not part of the culture; it is considered strange to want to spend time alone. Nepalese are warm and hospitable. Hindus believe being kind to strangers can enhance their status in the next life. In general, Nepalese have great pride in their traditions.

Personal Appearance. Nepalese take care to look good in public and wear proper clothing for formal occasions. Men wear Western-style clothing more often than women. Traditional attire for men often is a *dara surwal* (tight, thin cotton pants and a flowing knee-length cotton tunic). Women wear a *sari* (long, colorful wraparound dress) and *cholo* (blouse). Most women wear gold jewelry; some wear nose rings. Married women of Tibetan background wear a wraparound jumper (*bhaku*) and a colorful apron. Women in the Terai and unmarried girls often wear a *kurta surwal* (colorful pants, tight from the calves down, with a matching knee-length tunic), also called *punjabi*. Married Hindu women wear a red *tika* (made from vermilion powder) on their foreheads and vermilion powder in the part of their hair to signify their husbands are alive. Widows do not wear the *tika*, powder, jewelry, or colorful clothing.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings. *Namaste* is the traditional greeting and parting gesture. A person places the palms together (fingers up) in front of the chest or chin and says *Namaste* (or *Namaskar* for superiors and elders). Men (only) then grasp (not shake) right hands; it is customary to first grasp the right hand and then clasp it in the left. Educated men may shake hands with Westerners or each other. An adult does not *namaste* a child unless the child does so first, in which case the adult may reciprocate. Informally, one might raise the right hand in a *salaam* (salute-like) gesture for both greetings and farewells. A common greeting is to ask *Khana khamu bajou?* (Have you eaten your rice already?) as a way of saying "How are you?"

Among the urban elite, it is polite to address people by their titles (professor, doctor, director) or the suffix *-jye* (or *-jyu*) with the last name. Otherwise, people use terms like *dai* (older brother), *didi* (older sister), *bai* (younger brother), and *bahini* (younger sister) instead of names or titles. For instance, one might greet an older, female coworker with *Namaste, Didi*.

Gestures. It is rude to touch another person's head or shoulders. Men do not touch women in public. Even physical affection between married couples is reserved for home. However, members of the same sex publicly express friendship by walking arm in arm or holding hands. One never points the bottom of the foot at another person or uses it to move objects. If one's foot touches another person, an immediate apology is necessary. One beckons by waving all fingers with the palm down. Pointing with a finger is impolite. Touching the right thumb to all four fingers and tapping the mouth indicates eating. The right hand only is used in gestures, eating, or handling objects. The left hand is reserved for bathroom hygiene.

Nepalese do not whistle inside a home or at night. Winking at someone of the opposite sex is vulgar. Cows are sacred; one

may not point a foot at them or touch them. When passing a temple, a *stupa* (Buddhist shrine), or a banyan tree, a person will walk around it (if necessary) to keep it on the right. A person's right side keeps evil spirits at bay and shows veneration for the temple, *stupa*, or tree.

Visiting. Visiting others is an important social custom, and relatives and friends get together as often as possible. Hosts are patient with late-arriving guests because people are more important than schedules. Even though many Nepalese wear a watch, they think of time more as a series of events or tied to seasons than as a matter of minutes and hours. Visitors are made welcome even if uninvited or unannounced.

Hosts usually offer tea with sugar and milk to guests; it is polite to initially refuse the refreshments before taking them. When entering a home, a Hindu temple, or a Muslim mosque, it is customary to remove one's shoes. Guests invited to a meal may bring small presents for the children, especially during holidays and special occasions. Gifts from guests without a regular income may include fruit or drinks. Presents are not opened at the time they are received. In the south, a person stays with his or her gender group at social gatherings. This voluntary gender segregation while visiting is not as prevalent in the north.

Eating. Nepalese eat two meals and an afternoon snack. In most homes, men and any guests are served first, followed by children; women eat last. People usually eat food with the right hand and sometimes a spoon. Because of the Hindu principle of *jutho* (ritual impurity), food is not shared from the same plate. When one drinks water from a communal container, one's lips do not touch it. Higher-caste Hindus will not eat food touched by those outside their caste or religion. Indeed, water cooked or food prepared by any caste lower than one's own is considered *jutho*, or impure. At social gatherings involving more than one caste, Brahmins cook the food because everyone else is of a lower caste and can eat the meal. Only *roti* (flat bread) can be prepared by a lower-caste person. *Jutho* is less important among northern Buddhists. People rarely eat at restaurants. Men socialize at teahouses; they eat at small restaurants if traveling.

LIFESTYLE

Family. The family takes precedence over the individual. The elderly are respected and cared for by their families. Very often, aunts, uncles, cousins, and other relatives live together and share the same kitchen. Older siblings have authority over younger siblings. Among the educated, it is becoming common for sons to set up separate households after marriage rather than live with the extended family. Land is inherited and divided equally among sons. Women generally have few rights or privileges in society. They are responsible for the household and farming (except plowing) and do not socialize in public as much as men. An increasing number of urban women work outside the home. Rural women often marry before they are 18. They join their husband's extended family at that time and are expected to care for his parents.

Most rural families live in houses made of stone and mud, bamboo, or wood, with a few small windows. An upper level may be used to store food. Urban houses are built from bricks, stone, wood, or reinforced concrete. Urban apartment buildings cannot be taller than five stories. Those who live in apartments often share water and bathroom facilities with others.

Dating and Marriage. Marriage customs vary among different castes. Traditional marriages are arranged by parents, although

sometimes with the consent of the marriage partners. In the Terai, grooms pay a dowry. Marriage is sacred, divine, and considered to endure beyond death. Widows do not remarry. Dating and divorce are rare. For the Nepalese, *sat* (chastity) is the most important virtue a woman brings to marriage. Sherpas might live together before marriage. Weddings, a time of great celebration and feasting, are expensive and may last several days. The bride and groom have separate parties. The bride wears a fancy red *sari* with gold brocade and gold jewelry.

Diet. Diet varies according to region and caste. A typical breakfast and dinner meal is *dal bhaat* (white rice and lentil soup), curried vegetables, and *achar* (chutney). Many high-caste people are vegetarian or eat only goat meat. Muslims do not eat pork. The middle castes eat goat or chicken when available; some eat water buffalo. Hindus do not eat beef; it is a crime to kill a cow. Cows and goats provide milk, yogurt, and *ghee* (clarified butter). Meat usually is eaten a few times a month in small quantities, usually as a side dish alongside *dal bhaat* and vegetables. People eat larger quantities at festivals. Sherpas and Tibetans eat more meat than other groups. Fruits and vegetables are eaten in season as snacks or dessert.

Millet and corn are staple grains, although rice is a staple in the Terai. *Roti* may be prepared with different grains and substituted for rice. Wheat is preferred, but a Brahmin will also eat a corn *roti*. Poorer Nepalese more often eat millet and buckwheat. Hill people eat mush (*dedo*) made of cornmeal, millet, or buckwheat.

Recreation. Movie theaters are very popular in cities; people like Indian or Nepalese films more than U.S. movies. Many upper- and middle-caste families have televisions and video players. Video "theaters" created by families in large cities and small towns show movies to local residents. In rural areas, people most often provide their own entertainment. Nepal is a country of many festivals and celebrations. Singing and dancing are common on such occasions, and men often play cards. Popular sports include soccer, volleyball, and badminton. The youth fly kites. Many adults consider games and sports only for children.

The Arts. Buddhist and Hindu beliefs greatly influence Nepali arts. Religious themes and stories form the basis of popular folk dance and music. Traditional music is played on drums, wooden flutes, and stringed instruments. Most common is the *sarangi*, a four-stringed instrument used to accompany singing and dancing. The *madal* is a double-sided drum; a string is attached and hung around the player's neck so that the instrument hangs at waist height. *Gaines* (a caste of professional singers) perform Hindu songs and tell stories. *Panchai baja* (five-instrument) musical ensembles are popular to accompany special activities and festivals. Young painters are trained in Western and traditional styles. Traditional styles dominate religious work.

Holidays. Nepal has its own calendar (*Bikram Samvat*), with the New Year in mid-April. Dates for religious holidays and festivals are based on the phases of the moon. *Dashain* (two weeks in September and/or October) celebrates the inevitable triumph of virtue over evil; it is a time of gift-giving, family gatherings, feasts, and rituals performed for the Goddess of Victory. During *Tihar* (three days in October and/or November), rows of lights are displayed on every building in worship of the Goddess of Wealth. People also go caroling. *Tihar* provides married women a time to go home to their parents, receive special treatment, ritually purify themselves, and pray for sons. Sons are special because they stay near the mother

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(even after marriage) and care for her in her old age.

Holi (Feb./Mar.) is a lively social event during which Nepalese drink heavily, dance in the streets, and throw colorful powders on each other. *Bhoto Jatra* (Apr./May) is a great festival attended by royalty. The full moon of the month *Baisakh* (Apr./May) marks the day Buddha was born, the day he was enlightened, and the day he passed into *nirvana* (the state of happiness akin to heaven, sought after in Buddhism).

Commerce. Business hours are generally from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Sunday through Friday. Shops and open-air markets are open later and on Saturday, though hours vary by region. Few people shop in modern urban supermarkets. Most consumer items come from India or China. Japanese electronics are available in larger towns.

SOCIETY

Government. Nepal is a constitutional monarchy with King Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev as chief of state. The head of government is the prime minister (currently Surya Bahadur Thapa). The prime minister, appointed by the king, is usually the leader of Parliament's majority party or coalition. Parliament is currently suspended. According to the constitution, it consists of two houses: an elected 205-seat House of Representatives (the lower house) and an appointed 60-member National Council (the upper house). The voting age is 18.

Economy. Agriculture employs 80 percent of the labor force. Including forestry, it accounts for a major portion of Nepal's export earnings. Jute and rice are primary export crops. Subsistence farmers have virtually no cash income. Roughly half of all Nepalese live in poverty, and income distribution is skewed toward higher castes. With little capital or technology, industrial activity focuses on processing agricultural goods. Tourism is the second most important industry, as many trekkers come to Nepal's mountains. However, violence and political instability have limited the tourism industry's growth.

The incomes of the more than four million Nepalese working in India, including the Gurkha soldiers, are a major support to the economy. Private trade across the Indian border helps bring needed goods into Nepal. While unemployment is relatively low, underemployment may be higher than 50 percent. Corruption is institutionalized and people must bribe officials to gain anything from electricity to a job. The eastern and central regions are more developed and affluent than western regions. Future economic development depends on political stability and foreign investment. The currency is the Nepalese *rupee* (NPR).

Transportation and Communications. All major transportation facilities are owned by the state. Roads are better and more numerous in the south. Traffic travels on the left side of the road. Few people own cars, so most travel by foot or bicycle. Due partly to the rugged terrain, walking is most common. Rickshas (bicycle taxis) are available in cities and towns. Buses travel between cities. Kathmandu and other cities have taxis and *tempo*s (motorized three-wheel vehicles). Animals are often used to pull carts.

Upper-caste families have telephones in their homes; others place calls from local shops. The Radio Nepal and Nepal Television stations broadcast to most of the nation, but more

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	143 of 175 countries
Adjusted for women	119 of 144 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$1,310
Adult literacy rate	61 percent (male); 25 (female)
Infant mortality rate	71 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	59 (male); 59 (female)

Nepalese have radios than televisions. Rural areas lack electricity. Most literate people read a daily newspaper.

Education. Primary school education is technically free and education is a major concern. However, facilities often are inadequate. Rural areas do not have enough schools or teachers. Overcrowding is common. Remote rural students might walk miles to school, so attendance depends on weather, health, and family needs. Rural girls generally leave school before age 12 to care for younger siblings or work on the family farm. For girls, marriage is more important than education. Female enrollment in secondary school is less than 35 percent. Secondary schools require fees and are only located in larger towns. The government has been using foreign aid to improve the educational system. Tribhuvan University and Mahendra Sanskrit University are the major universities.

Health. Despite poor sanitation and disease, health conditions have improved in recent years. Public services are slowly expanding. Local municipalities fund health posts where people can see a nurse; a doctor visits periodically. Hospitals are not well equipped, and many people rely on traditional healers rather than go to a hospital. Kathmandu has better facilities, but the sickest often go to India for treatment or surgery. Water is not potable and diseases such as meningitis, typhoid, hepatitis, tuberculosis, malaria (in the Terai), and encephalitis are widespread. Dysentery and parasitic ailments are common. Preventive care is rare. Children often die of dehydration from preventable diarrhea.

AT A GLANCE

Events and Trends.

- Believing the elected government was too weak to achieve peace, King Gyanendra dismissed Parliament and assumed executive powers in October 2002. Opposition parties accuse the king of subverting the democratic process. Student protestors, demanding elections and the restoration of Parliament, regularly clash with police. Meanwhile, fighting continues between security forces and Maoist rebels, who seek to end the king's authority.
- In October 2003, the governments of Bhutan and Nepal reached an agreement to allow 9,000 of the estimated 100,000 refugees living in UN camps in Nepal to be repatriated in Bhutan. The deal may eventually allow all of the refugees to either return to Bhutan or permanently settle in Nepal. The refugees argue they were forced out of Bhutan during a crackdown on ethnic minorities a decade ago.

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