

CIRDIS LECTURE

The Kathmandu Valley, Nepal and the eastern Himalayas

Ethnogenesis and ethnolinguistic prehistory

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Who are the peoples of Nepal? Which languages do they speak? What is their provenance and ethnolinguistic prehistory? The term Nepal originally designated the Kathmandu Valley. After the Gorkha Conquest of the Kathmandu Valley (1767–1769), a redefined Nepal emerged as an expansionist nation state by the mid 19th century. This new Nepal was surrounded by the monastic state of Tibet, the kingdoms of Sikkim and Bhutan and East India Company territory, but all such polities are historically recent constructs. To answer the above questions, we must delve into a more distant past on the basis of languages, genes and culture. Indo-European and Trans-Himalayan, the world's two most populous language families, meet in Nepal, but the Eastern Himalayas are also home to Dravidian, Austroasiatic and Kradai populations and the language isolate Kusunda. The language communities and the chronology of branching of their respective language families tell us stories of the past. Archaeology sheds light on the historical period and the prehistoric past. The distribution as well as the chronology of spread of Y chromosomal haplogroups is correlated with language families. This Father Tongue correlation is ubiquitous globally, but the pattern is neither perfect nor universal. Autosomal and mitochondrial DNA render our view of the past more complex. Ancient DNA findings have further enhanced our understanding of prehistory and ethnogenesis. On the basis of these three distinct domains of empirical evidence, our current state of understanding of the ethnolinguistic prehistory of Nepal and surrounding regions will be presented, and in that context some recent insights will also be shared.

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