

NEPAL - INFORMATION

BACKGROUND

Whilst the lands of Nepal have been occupied for centuries, it only became a country about 300 years ago. It was ruled by independent hill states until the late 18th century when Prince Prithvi Narayan Shah united what is now known as Nepal. Nepal became a monarchy in 1950 and a dictatorship in 1958. Widespread demonstrations in 1980 resulted in democratic elections, but still the country is rife with corruption and ineffectual government. Maoist rebels in the west have been at war with the government since the mid 1990s and Nepal remains a country of stark contrasts between rich and poor.

LANGUAGE

As many as twenty languages are spoken with many different dialects. However, Nepali, an Indo-Aryan language related to Hindi, is the official language. It is the linking language between all the country's ethnic groups. The majority of the people speak Nepali to some degree, but more readily use the native tongue of their ethnic group. The Newars of the Kathmandu Valley, for example, speak Newari and there are other languages spoken by the Tamangs, Sherpas, Rais, Limbus, Magars, Gurungs and other groups. Because many private schools and colleges use English as the medium of instruction, especially at the post-secondary level, the ability to speak English is associated with better education and higher social status. The overall literacy rate is 53.74 percent.

RELIGION

Nepal is the gateway to Kailash Mansarovar, the mythical abode of Lord Shiva and is the only official Hindu state in the world. However, many religions like Islam, Christianity and Bon are practised there. Some of the earliest inhabitants like the Krats practise their own kind of religion based on ancestor worship. The Tharus practise animism. Over the years, Hinduism and Buddhism have been influenced by these practices, which have been modified to form a synthesis of newer beliefs. Hindus and Buddhists often share customs and worship at each other's shrines. There are 5% Buddhists and 3% Muslims.

RELIGIOUS and SPECIAL FESTIVALS

NATIONAL DAY - 18 February

DASAIN-DURGA PUJA FESTIVAL - September/ October, is the longest and the most important. After the monsoon season it is a "day of Victory over Demons".

TIHAR-FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS - November (2 days)

CONSTITUTION DAY - *Mahendra Jayanti* 16 December

KING BIRENDRA'S BIRTHDAY - 28 December

Several of the festivals of Nepal last for days. Other festivals include Buddha Jayanti (the celebration of the birth of Buddha) the Maha Shivaratri festival of Lord Shiva and during Maha Shivaratri festivities, some people consume excessive drinks and smoke charas. Sherpas, mostly located at higher altitudes and in the Everest region, celebrate Mani Rimdu,

for *the good of the world*. Most festivals include dancing and music and eating all kinds of local delicacies. A variety of foods is consumed during festivals and on special occasions. If one has to taste Nepali food, [Newa cuisine](#) is a must have; a festive meal, like one served during a [marriage](#), includes vegetarian as well as non-vegetarian dishes.

ETHNIC MAKEUP

The ethnic composition is:

- 58.4%, Nepalese (native Mongolian)
- 18.7% Bihari (including Maithiri and Bhojpuri)
- 3.3% Tharu
- 3.5% Tamang
- 3% Newar.

SOCIAL CUSTOMS

Physical purity, spiritual refinement, and humility are highly valued. Nepalese usually ask permission before taking leave of others and are religious, family-oriented, and modest people. They are generally punctual, rational, pragmatic, and fair and are proud of their own traditions.

CHILD REARING PRACTICES: Mothers provide most childcare, helped by older siblings, cousins, and grandparents. Neighbours may cuddle, instruct, and discipline children. Parents make a chopping motion with their hand to express anger at their children. Authority in households depends on seniority, therefore the relative age of siblings is important and children are addressed by birth order. Rituals mark the child's development. There are rituals for the first taste of rice and the first haircut. When a girl reaches puberty, she is prohibited from seeing male family members. Children are expected to work around the house. Both girls and boys are entitled to schooling, but if a family needs help at home or lacks money, only the sons are sent to school. It is believed that education is wasted on girls, who will marry and take their wage-earning abilities to another household.

With limited access to early childhood development and educational services, dropout and repetition rates are high in Nepal and there are limited childcare facilities. Organisations, such as PLAN, work to develop home and centre-based early childcare, improve school programs and support school management committees. PLAN Nepal also provides scholarships to girls to try and increase opportunities and participation. Universities are underfunded and the Nepalese respect degrees gained overseas or in India. The political reforms of the 1990s have permitted a more open and critical intellectual environment.

CUISINE

Nepal being a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic nation, diversity in eating and drinking habits is observed. However, a typical hill-region staple consists of *Dal-Bhat* (lentil soup and cooked rice) with *Tarkari*, that is vegetable curries. This is consumed twice daily, generally in the morning, and shortly after sunset. Between these main meals, during mid-day, snacks like *chura/Baji* (beaten rice) and tea are consumed. Sometimes, meat, eggs, and fish preparations are also consumed. Most of the Nepalese prefer eating with their right hand, though some people have started using spoons, forks and knives. While eating with hands, lentil soup is poured over cooked rice, a little amount of vegetable curry is added, and the chunk so prepared is taken in the right hand for eating. Millet, maize, wheat bread (roti) are also consumed as staple food in certain areas.

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