Introduction

Despite its geo-strategically important position in the Himalayas between India and China and its popularity as an exotic tourist destination, Nepal has not normally loomed large in the consciousness of the average educated person in the English-speaking world. This changes briefly when the spotlight of media attention falls on the country, as during the 'People's Movement' for democracy in 1990 or with the massacre of the royal family and the intensification of the Maoist insurgency in 2001. Sudden and violent political change has indeed been a recurrent part of the country's history but should not distract attention from less dramatic, long-term processes affecting conditions of life for the majority of its people. These remain even today primarily dependent on subsistence agriculture, though they also rely increasingly on supplementary income from other activities.

Nepal as a state emerged in its present form only in the late eighteenth century when the small hill kingdom of Gorkha, some eighty miles west of Kathmandu, brought much of the Himalayan foothills and an adjoining strip of the North Indian plain under its control, and the kingdom's Shah dynasty moved its court to the Kathmandu Valley. From 1846 to 1951, though the Shahs remained on the throne, effective political power was in the hands of the Rana family, who as hereditary prime ministers were in a roughly analogous position to the Japanese shoguns before the Meiji restoration. The Rana system was eventually brought down by an alliance between the monarchy and modernising intellectuals, with decisive backing from newly independent India, and a policy of seclusion from the outside world that the country had followed throughout most of its modern history was finally abandoned. After experiments with parliamentary democracy in the 1950s, party politics were banned and power centralised in the royal palace from 1960 until the mass protests of 1990 brought about a return to the multi-party system and rule by elected governments. However, the failure of the new system to provide stable government at the centre was

compounded by the growth of 'Maoist' insurgency from 1996 onwards, and deep-seated economic and social problems remain to be solved.

In order to understand a country's present, what matters is often not just the past as such, but rather the way in which that past is now understood and interpreted. Nepalese naturally differ among themselves in their interpretations, these differences often reflecting current political controversies. As in many parts of the world, however, the dominant view, enshrined in school textbooks, sees the creation of the modern state as the political unification of a people and a territory which in some sense already belonged together. A key theme of subsequent history is then the determination of the nation as a whole to preserve its unity and independence, with individual political leaders being viewed as heroes or villains to the extent that they embodied or frustrated this national will. The choice of the word 'unification' rather than 'conquest' to describe the expansion of Gorkhali power is one example of this approach, as is the eagerness of some scholars to claim the Butwal *Ramopithecus*, a primate that ranged what is now the Nepalese Tarai 11 million years ago, as a direct ancestor of early man in Nepal.

Another manifestation of this nationalist approach is a wish to date as far back as possible the beginnings of the political connection between the Kathmandu Valley, to which the name 'Nepal' originally referred,[1] and the much wider territory covered by the modern state. It is thus frequently claimed that the Licchavi dynasty which ruled in the Valley in the early centuries AD also controlled the hills up to or even beyond Nepal's current borders. This is in fact highly unlikely, but it is true that the Kathmandu Valley, with its urban civilisation and situation on a major trading route made it the only political unit of major importance in the hills between Assam and Kashmir. It is Kathmandu that looms largest in references to the area in ancient Indian and Chinese sources, and events there also tend to dominate modern histories of the country. Any history of Nepal has to be 'Kathmandu-centric' to some degree, but it is important to focus also on what was happening elsewhere, including the Tarai plains in the south where half the total population now live.

Underlying the history of both hills and plains is the complex relationship between human beings and their physical environment. The middle hills offered early settlers a refuge from the enervating heat and the greater risk of infection on the plains, factors which later led the British in India to flock to their 'hill stations'. More recently, population pressure in the hills and improved technology have made the Tarai plains more attractive. The linked problems of overpopulation and environmental degradation should

not be seen simply as a product of 'modernity' undermining a supposed unchanging 'traditional' state in which people lived a simple life in harmony with nature. In fact, human pressure on the environment began long before Nepal 'opened up' in the 1950s, much of the deforestation in the hills, for example, dating back to the period of Gorkhali expansion around 1800. In addition, rapid erosion and loss of topsoil, often portrayed as a recent development, are natural consequences of the geology of the mountains and predate the arrival of any human inhabitants. Population growth began to accelerate some time before 1950 and is often attributed to the lowering of the death-rate with the reduction of internal conflict and the first effects of modern medicine. Others, however, argue that the high birth-rate is itself a natural reaction to poverty resulting from oppressive social and economic structures and from the accelerating incorporation of the hills into the subcontinental and global economy. The present situation is, in fact, the result of multiple factors and the hunt for a single cause is a misguided one.

Another key theme running through Nepalese history is the country's status as a cultural contact zone: the kingdom may have tried to close its borders to Europeans for one and a half centuries but over the millennia peoples have arrived from many different regions. Here again reality is more complex than is often realised. Focusing on a straightforward dichotomy between southern, Hindu influences and northern, Buddhist ones belies the country's great ethnic/linguistic variety, with at least seventy mutually incomprehensible languages or dialects among a population numbering only 23 million. Seeing religion in terms of a clear divide also ignores the fact that Hinduism and Buddhism grew out of a shared cultural and religious background and that of the vitality of tribal religions and shamanic traditions which are only lightly influenced by either great tradition.

Another oversimplification, which plays a role in current 'ethnic' controversies, is to regard the 'Mongol' groups, with linguistic links to Central and Eastern Asia, as 'indigenous', and the speakers of Nepali and other Indic languages as recent immigrants. Migration and the assimilation of migrants into existing populations have been going on for thousands of years, and, while the 'Mongol' stratum is on average the older one, some of the groups with cultural links to the north entered what is now Nepal later than those with affinities to the south. Above all, it has to be remembered that the language and culture of particular groups have been shaped by influences both from the north and the south. The prime example is the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley, who speak a Tibeto-Burman language,

but whose urban civilisation in many ways reflects that of Hindu India before the Muslim conquests.

Just as Nepal straddles the boundary between the cultures of the 'Sinosphere' and the 'Indosphere', the modern kingdom has since its foundation had to survive as a buffer state between the much larger states of China and India. Until about the middle of the nineteenth century, the power that the Qing emperors could exert in the Himalayas was roughly equivalent to that of the British East India Company, and Nepal thus had leeway for playing one side off against the other. With the consolidation of British control over the whole of India and the growing enfeeblement of China, this stance was replaced for a century by Nepal's alignment with its southern neighbour. There was a limited reversion to earlier tactics after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and its assertion of authority over Tibet. However, the scope for this was and is limited both because contact on a people-to-people basis is much greater with India and, even more, because it is on India that land-locked Nepal is primarily dependent economically.

A fourth important motif in the history of modern Nepal is the development among its people of a sense of common identity. Without accepting the more extreme claims of nationalist historians, it can certainly be argued that, among at least some sections of the population, this started even before the reception, largely through British India, of Western conceptions of the nation-state. The building blocks were a sense of belonging to the hills rather than the Indian plains; shared cultural characteristics, including a particular brand of Hinduism and what is now known as the Nepali language; and loyalty to the state and to the dynasty that had founded it. These feelings could in the beginning be fully shared only by those most closely (and most advantageously) associated with Gorkha and its ruling elite, and they excluded in particular the people of the Tarai. They nevertheless did form a core that others could later join.

How complete and satisfactory this process of nation-building has been is another contentious issue in present-day Nepal. Even the most radical opponents of the present Nepalese state share with the establishment a sense of 'Nepaleseness' based on separateness from India, just as Irish, Portuguese or Ukrainian nationalism rests to a considerable degree on *not* being English, Spanish or Russian. There is much less agreement on the value of the positive factors listed above, and some, including today's Maoist rebels, argue they should be abandoned in favour of a secular republic affording equal recognition to the country's many languages and cultures. Such controversies shape the way in which history is viewed, as ethnic activists

and others seek to highlight the coercive elements in the foundation and building of the state and to challenge the 'establishment' view emphasising the role of consensus and of peaceful assimilation to the dominant culture.

The study of the past is for many a worthwhile activity in its own right. However, particularly for the general reader, for whom this series is chiefly intended, there is a hope of gaining from a country's history a deeper understanding of its present and of its future potential. I have tried to keep this broader objective in mind and to make allowances for the kinds of conflict of perspective that I have just outlined. I am aware, though, that all writers, foreigners as much as Nepalese themselves, must remain to some extent prisoners of their own particular biases. I can therefore only ask for a critical assessment both of this volume and of the more detailed works to which I hope readers will later turn.

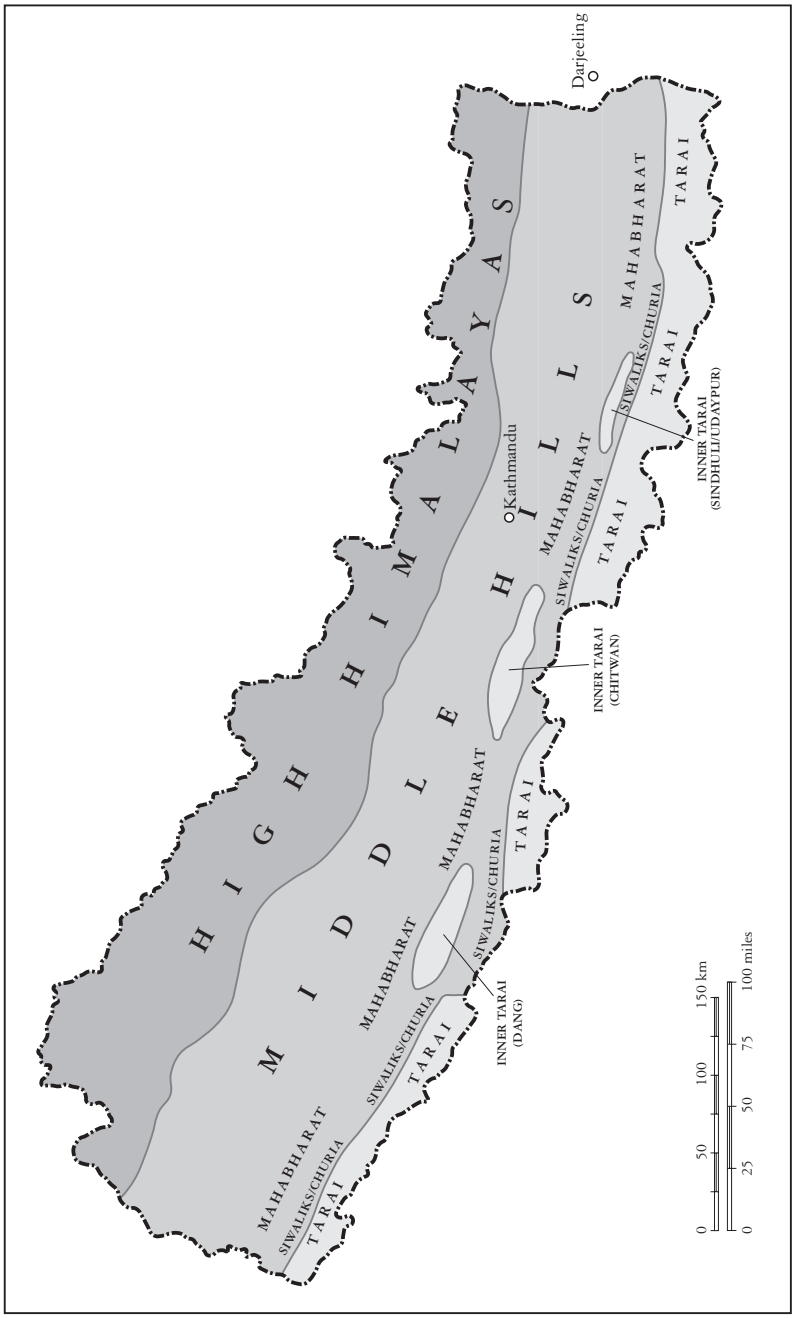
CHAPTER 1

Environment, state and society in the central Himalayas to 1743

THE PHYSICAL ARENA

The history of the Himalayas began with the slow collision of what is now the Indian subcontinent with Central Asia. About 70 million years ago, this forced rock strata upwards to form the mountains along Tibet's southern rim, which are still today the watershed between the Ganges and Tsangpo/Brahmaputra river systems.[1] Between 16 and 10 million years ago, further movements produced to the south the main Himalayan range and, to their south, the middle hills – a confusion of interrupted ridges and spurs, which in Nepal still form the cultural and political heart of the country. At around the same time the Tibetan mountains rose further and then, between 800,000 and 500,000 years ago, the main Himalayan peaks were again uplifted to tower far above them. Subsequent movements produced the Mahabharat hills along the southern edge of the middle hills and the Siwalik (or Chure) range slightly further south along the edge of the Gangetic plain. This shifting of the earth's crust continues today and different sections of the Himalayas are still rising at rates of between 5 millimetres and 1 centimetre per year.

The rise of the Mahabharats and the Siwaliks temporarily dammed some of the rivers flowing south towards the Ganges, forming lakes in the valleys between the two ranges and also in the Kathmandu Valley. The Kathmandu lake may have dried up only 100,000 years ago, by which time its shores were almost certainly inhabited. The mythical account of the draining of the Valley by Manjushri (Buddhist version) or Pradyumna (Hindu version), like the similar myths encountered all along the Himalayas, could just conceivably represent an oral tradition dating back more than 3000 generations. It is, though, more likely that the myth-makers simply drew their conclusion from the lie of the land. By way of comparison, there is a Chinese folk story about a land link between Taiwan and the mainland, which were in fact joined until around 8000 BC, but no folk memory of



Map 1. Nepal: main physical divisions.

the land bridge between Britain and mainland Europe, which existed until about 7000 BC.

The movement of the earth had other, more lasting consequences. Further north, as the main Himalayan range rose, the force of the rivers was sufficient for them to maintain their course, cutting deeper and deeper down to form the world's most spectacular gorges. Through these flow the headwaters of Nepal's three main river systems: from west to east, the Karnali, the Gandaki and the Kosi. Young mountains are easily eroded so loss of topsoil and its deposition further south formed the deep, rich alluvium of the Ganges plain, covering the bedrock to a depth of almost two miles. A ten- to thirty-mile-wide strip of this plain is now included within Nepal's southern borders and is known as the Tarai (low, marshy ground). Together with the valleys of the inner Tarai between the Churia and Mahabharat ranges, this area now grows most of the country's food and contains almost half of its population. Along the western section of its northern border, Nepal also includes a slice of the arid land in the rainshadow of the main Himalayan peaks.

PEOPLES AND MIGRATIONS

As well as producing wide variation in local climate and soil conditions, the rugged terrain has also worked to preserve cultural differences. Something of the resulting variety is summarised in table 1.1, which shows groups within the population normally regarded as ethnic as well as the castes into which some of these groups are subdivided. Significantly, the distinction between an ethnic group and a caste is not really recognised in colloquial Nepali, which uses *jat* (perhaps best translated as 'descent group') for both.

The Parbatiyas ('people of the mountains'), whose culture has always dominated the Nepalese state, were the original speakers of what is now known as Nepali. This is one of the Indo-Aryan languages, whose speakers make up the great majority of the population of central and northern India as well as Pakistan and Bangladesh. Nepali is about as similar to Hindi, the national language of India, as is Spanish to Italian. There is a particularly close relationship between the more formal, literary styles, as both languages borrow technical terms directly from Sanskrit, the classical language of India.

The Parbatiyas' linguistic ancestors were the Khasas, a people who had entered the subcontinent from the north-west, migrating into the hills either directly from the steppelands of western Eurasia or via the Iranian plateau. The Khasas probably first penetrated the Himalayas west of Nepal

Table 1.1 *Major ethnic and caste divisions*

(1) **Parbatiyas** (Nepali-speaking) (40.3%)			
Twice-born:	**Brahmans**	12.9%	
	Thakuris	1.6%	
	Chetris (formerly **Khasas**)	16.1%	
Renouncers:	Dashnami Sanyasis and Kanphata Yogis	1.0%	
Untouchables:	Kamis (metal-workers)	5.2%	
	Damais (tailors)	2.0%	
	Sarkis (cobblers)	1.5%	
(2) **Newars** (Newar- or Nepali-speaking) (5.6%)[a]			
Entitled to full religious initiation:[b]			
Brahmans	0.1%	Vajracharyas/Shakyas	0.6%
Shresthas	1.1%	Uray (Tuladhars etc.)	0.4%
Other pure castes:	**Maharjans (Jyapus)**	2.3%	
	Ekthariyas and other small groups	0.7%	
Impure castes:	Khadgis (Kasais), Dyahlas (Podes) etc.	0.4%	
(3) Other hill or mountain ethnic groups ('tribes') (speaking other Tibeto-Burman languages or Nepali) (20.9%)			
Magars 7.2%	**Limbus** 1.6%	Bhotiyas 0.1%	
Tamangs 5.5%	**Sherpas** 0.6%	Thakalis 0.1%	
Rais 2.8%	Chepangs 0.2%	Thamis 0.1%	
Gurungs 2.4%	Sunuwars 0.2%		
(4) **Madheshis** (speaking north Indian dialects, including Awadhi, Bhojpuri and Maithili) (32.0%)			
(a) Castes (16.1%)			
Twice-born:	**Brahmans**	1.0%	
	Rajputs }	0.3%	
	Kayasthas } (**Kshatriyas**)	0.3%	
	Rajbhats }	0.2%	
	Baniyas (Vaishyas)	0.5%	
Other pure castes:	**Yadavs**/Ahirs (herdsmen)	4.1%	
	Kushawahas (vegetable-growers)	1.1%	
	Kurmis (cultivators)	0.9%	
	Mallahs (fishermen)	0.6%	
	Kewats (fishermen)	0.5%	
	Kumhars (potters)	0.3%	
	Halwais (confectioners)	0.2%	
Impure, but touchable:	Kalawars (brewers/merchants)	0.9%	
	Dhobis (washermen)	0.4%	
	Telis (oil-pressers)	0.4%	

(*cont.*)

Table 1.1 (*cont.*)

Untouchable:	Chamars (leather-workers)	1.1%
	Dushadhs (basket-makers)	0.5%
	Khatawes (labourers)	0.4%
	Musahars (labourers)	0.8%
(b) Ethnic groups (9.0 %):		
Inner Tarai:	Kumals	0.4%
	Majhis	0.3%
	Danuwars	0.3%
	Darais	0.1%
Tarai proper:	**Tharus**	6.5%
	Dhanukas	0.7%
	Rajbamshis	0.4%
	Gangais	0.1%
	Dhimals	0.1%
(c) **Muslims** (3.3%)		
(d) **Marwaris** (0.2%)		
(e) Sikhs (0.1%)		

Notes and sources: Based on data in the 1991 census (Nepal, Central Bureau of Statistics 1993: II, part VII, tab. 25) and analyses by Harka Gurung (Gurung 1994: tab. 1; Salter and Gurung 1996: tab. 1) and Mark Gaborieau (1978). The largest and/or most important groups are shown in bold. The table excludes the 1.0 per cent of the population who were native to the hills but not placed in any specific category in the census. The subtotal of 32.0 per cent for Madheshis (section 4) includes 3.6 per cent of the population who were recorded as Tarai natives but were similarty left unclassified. There are other small discrepancies in subtotal because of roundings and because groups constituting less than 0.1 per cent of the population have been omitted.

[a] Harka Gurung treats the Newars as a single group. Figures for the main subdivisions are taken from Gaborieau 1978: 198–206.

[b] Shown in parallel columns because there are separate blocks of Hindu (l.) and Buddhist (r.) upper castes, neither of which recognises the other's superior status. See also p. 31.

around 1000 BC and moved through the hills to reach the Karnali basin early in the first millennium AD, displacing or assimilating the existing population. In the centuries after AD 1000, they were joined by a small number of Rajputs, ruling clans from Rajasthan in western India, who fled into the hills to escape the Muslim invaders. The Rajputs were the descendants of the Gurjaras, who had risen to power in India just before the arrival of the Muslims and may have in fact originally come from the hill country. By late medieval times, the ruling families in the hills of central and western Nepal, known as Thakuris, were claiming descent from these Rajput refugees, usually from the dynasty controlling Mewar, whose fortress at Chittaur fell to Muslim besiegers in 1303 and again in 1568.