

# Nepal



## Map



## Background

- **Land and Climate:** Nepal is bordered by the People's Republic of China and India. It is a landlocked, predominantly mountainous, country about the same size as Wisconsin. The Himalayas in the north contain some of the world's highest peaks, including Sagarmatha (Mount Everest) at 29,034 feet. The middle hills comprise the native lands of the famous Gurkha foot soldiers and are home to the capital, Kathmandu. To the south lies the Terai, the cultivated fields and subtropical jungles that form the northern rim of the Gangetic Plain. The south is heavily urbanized. Elevation primarily determines Nepal's climate. 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 June and September.

## People

- **Population:** Nepal's population is approximately 29 million. Kathmandu has about one million residents. Most Nepalese (85%) live 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. About 800,000 Nepalese live abroad. Nepal is ethnically diverse, but caste (social level) separates people more rigidly than race does. About 50% of Nepalese are Indo-Aryans. These include the two highest Hindu castes, the Brahmins (traditional priests) and Chhetris (warriors), as well as the lowest caste, the Shudras (farmers and traders). The Vaisyas (merchant and artisan caste) are non-Aryans and are socially above the Shudras. Some ethnic groups living in Nepal include: Newar, Tharu, Indians, Tibetans, Gurung, Magar, Rai, Limbu, Thakali, and Sherpa, among others.
- **Language and Greeting:** As many as 20 major languages are spoken with many different dialects. Nepali is the official language; almost 60% of the population speaking it. It is the primary language of about 20% of the population. Nepali script is called Devangari. Other languages include: Hindi, Nepal Bhasa (Newar), and English. All languages spoken in Nepal can be used for official purposes. *Namaste* is the traditional greeting and parting gesture, in which 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. Some 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 khanu 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.
- **Religion:** About 81% of the population is Hindu, and other religions include: Buddhist (11%), Muslim (4%), Kirant (3%), Christian, etc. Except those in the upper castes, Hindus and Buddhists share customs and worship at each other's shrines. Among Hinduism's many gods, three are supreme: *Brhama* (creator), *Vishnu* (preserver), and *Shiva* (destroyer). The caste system has been abolished officially but remains widely in practice, especially in rural areas.
- **General Attitude:** In general, Nepalese are religious, family oriented, modest, warm and hospitable. Physical purity, spiritual refinement, and humility are highly valued. Wealth and education are admired. Personal privacy is not part of the culture; it may be considered strange to want to spend time alone. Hindus believe that being kind to strangers can enhance their status in the next life. Some people accept incidents as the will of fate or *karma* (consequences of past deeds). Those who rebel

against tradition or caste are sometimes frowned upon. Some believe 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 food are offered to pacify the spirits and planets. A rooster or male goat may also be sacrificed.

- **Personal Appearance:** 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.

## Lifestyle

- **Diet and Eating:** Nepalese generally eat two meals and an afternoon snack. In some homes, men and any guests are served first, followed by children and women. People usually eat food with the right hand and sometimes with 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. Generally, higher-caste Hindus will not eat food touched by those outside their caste or religion. Water cooked or food prepared by any caste lower than one's own can be considered *jutho*, or impure. Only *roti* (flat bread) can be prepared by a lower-caste person. *Jutho* is less important among northern Buddhists. People rarely eat in restaurants. Diet varies according to religion 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. Some middle castes eat goat or chicken when available, and 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. Sherpas and Tibetans eat more meat than other groups. Hill people sometimes eat *dedo* (mush made of cornmeal, millet, or buckwheat).
- **Recreation:** Nepal is a country of many festivals and celebrations. Singing and dancing are common during these times. Men often play cards. Movie theaters are popular in cities; people like Indian and Nepalese films. Popular sports include soccer, volleyball, and badminton. Children fly kites. Many adults consider games and sports only for children.
- **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* holiday (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. During this time, married women may go home to their parents. *Holi* (Feb./Mar.) is a lively social event during which Nepalese drink heavily, dance in the streets, and throw colorful powders on each other. Another popular festival is *Bhoto Jatra* (Apr./May). 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 and Currency:** Agriculture employs 80% of the labor force. Forestry and tourism are also important industries. The incomes of more than four million Nepalese working in India are a major source of the economy. Underemployment is high. The currency is the Nepalese rupee (NPR).

## Society

- **Transportation and Communication:** 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 *tempos* (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 Nepalese have radios than televisions. Rural areas lack electricity.
- **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 drinkable and diseases such as meningitis, typhoid, hepatitis, tuberculosis, malaria (in the Terai), and encephalitis are widespread. Dysentery and parasitic ailments are common. Children often die of dehydration from preventable diarrhea.